Van Gogh was Really a Punk: The First Afrikaans Graphic Novel

Juanita van Rensburg

Vincent van Gogh is alive and well and living in Hillbrow. The well-known story of the famous painter comes alive in *Hemel op Aarde*, the hilarious first Afrikaans graphic novel that does not only have punk credentials, but provides with its visual impact and narrative drive, entertainment on many levels.

In this article I will attempt to explain:

1) the progression from comics to the graphic novel,
2) the 'language' of comics,
3) why *Hemel op Aarde* will fit into a 'punk' library, yet can be enjoyed on various levels,
4) why it ultimately fails as a challenge to the political *status quo*.

A few tangent points regarding punk and comics:

Punk and comics were, and still are, frowned on by the establishment. Comics were labelled: the marijuana of the nursery; the bane of the bassinet; the horror of the house; the curse of the kids and a threat to the future (McCue 1993:29).

Punk Rock has been described by Frank Sinatra as a 'bad scene'. He asked the question: 'Why does it have to exist when there is so much in life?' (Green 1982:85)

Both art forms thrive on the fact that people are, apparently, easily shocked. This 1954 interview appeared in the book *Dark Knights*. Senator Kefauver is questioning William Gaines:

> Senator K: Here is your May issue. This seems to be a man with a bloody axe holding a woman's head up which has been severed from its body. Do you think it's in good taste?
> Gaines: Yes sir, I do, for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the neck could be seen dripping blood from it and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody.
> Senator K: You have blood coming out of her mouth.

> Gaines: A little.
> McCue comments that 'as persuasive as he was, Gaines was undermined by the Senator ... he quickly discovered that he had been black-balled—no distributor would handle his books' (McCue 1993:31f).

The above mentioned scenario is typical of any new art form. Joseph Witek had this to say about the matter:

> Whether the comic-book form will make good its bid for wider cultural acceptance as adult literature remains to be seen, but it is worth remembering that the major modes of expression of this century, the novel and the cinema, were both first scorned as vulgarities until serious artists demonstrated their potential (Witek 1989:5).

Greg McCue writes in *Dark Knights* (1993) that comic books owe their genesis to the New York newspapers of the 1890s. The newspapers of the day were dominated by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Their mutual hatred and their desire to dominate their industry could only be achieved by boosting sales.

The object was to grab public support and attention. The best way to do this for an audience that was mainly lower class, adolescent and semi-literate was to include pictures, and those preferably coarse and funny. The 'funnies' were born because newspapers had to sell to the common man (McCue 1993:8).

As soon as comic books appeared, they had their critics. In 1940 the *Chicago Daily News* labelled the comic as 'a poisonous mushroom growth' (McCue 1993:28).

Psychotherapist Dr. Frederic Wertham in his book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1955), connected comic books with every kind of social and moral perversion imaginable including sadism, drug abuse, theft, murder and rape (McCue 1993:30).

As a result of this the industry started to regulate itself by adopting the Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America.

After years of declining sales, the comic *Deadman* was drawn in starkly realistic tones and written on an adult level. The comic book community woke up to the serious potential of the medium. Comic book specialist shops began to appear.

Marvel's first attempt to target this market came with the first new comic book term: the graphic novel. 'Graphic novel' is a term used by some comic book intellectuals to denote a new respect for comic books of old, McCue (1993) writes on page 61 in *Dark Knights*.

It meant a very specific magazine-sized book with high quality, glossy paper. McCue (1993:77) concludes that comic art is now a literary medium in transition from mass popularity and cultural disdain to a new respectability as a means of expression and communication.

The shadow of the Deconstructionists loom large over this development. Roger Sabin writes that with the growth of cultural studies in tertiary education and the fashionableness of post-modernist theory

> ... it became increasingly acceptable of 'culture' as including not just the 'high arts'—opera, prose literature, fine art—but also areas such as television, video, rock music and 'pop' culture generally (Sabin 1993:92).

He writes:

> The barrier between 'high' and 'low' culture, it seemed, were, if not breaking down, then leaking badly and there was pressure on the 'arbiters of taste' to expand their horizons (Sabin 1993:92)

The fact that *Hemel op Aarde* (1997) is characterised as a 'graphic novel' is a device to mark the book as something new, to distance it from the childish connotation of the word 'comic'. By the same token it hopefully elevated the book to the status of a novel (Sabin 1993:93).

The story is very simple. Vince has a hard time in Hillbrow. Nobody buys his paintings and the debt collectors are after his blood. Sometimes he loses head or a part of his ear. But luckily there are the prostitutes, even if they laugh at him and his yuppie brother Theo, even if Theo always preaches before giving him a cheque.

Vince's friend is the narrator and events are seen through his eyes. The Van Gogh-like illustration on the cover suggests that the classic tragic story of Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh will be used to tell a story about the real South Africa. The Hillbrow tower can be seen in the background.

The painter Van Gogh was never afraid to go against the grain following his own artistic bliss against considerable odds. Very few of his contemporaries understood his genius. Vince also finds that establishment artists and critics like Trent Read and Linda Givon are indifferent to his art.

Vince and Van Gogh have brothers who support them through thick and thin. M.E. Tralbaut writes in *Vincent van Gogh* (1969:23):

> The links that were forged between Vincent and Theo van Gogh were far stranger than any of the ordinary bands of blood, so that their names always remain inseperable in the history of art.

On page 48 of *Hemel op Aarde* (1997) Vince's yuppie brother Theo is handing out cheques left, right and centre to all the wronged parties Vince attacked when he got one of his 'fits'.

Like his real life artistic counterpart, Vince feels close to the underdog, likes prostitutes, cuts off a piece of his ear and ends up in a lunatic asylum.

Hemel op Aarde (1997) is a fine example of the graphic novel. There are thematic unity, character development, (Vince exchanges his painting brush for a gun), detailed scene setting and the generation of mood—one can almost feel the resignation with which Vince and his friend's turn in a state hospital ward is awaited. In Sabin's words: the graphic novel is to the comic what the novel is to the short story (Sabin 1993:236).

Glimpses of the society South Africa has become are witnessed by the two characters. White and black beggars are standing on street corners with placards and a notice against a state hospital wardroom reads: 'No emergency procedures undertaken without cash deposit' (Horn & Findlay 44).

Yet it is impossible to really appreciate the power of the graphic novel without knowing how comics 'work'.

The conventional signs which indicate the status of verbal text in comics are well known: words in oblong boxes function as a narrative voice. Words in rounded 'balloons' with pointed projections represent direct speech. Cloud-like balloons, with circles leading to a human figure indicate unspoken thoughts, shaded and capitalised letters denote various degrees of emotion and emphasis, and so forth (Witek 1989:22).

Robert Harvey writes that what makes a comic strip art are speech balloons and narrative breakdown. Speech balloons breathe into comics their peculiar life. In all other graphic presentations characters are doomed to wordless posturing and miming. In comics, they speak. Speech balloons are giving the illusion that we are seeing living, breathing and speaking people (Harvey 1996:108).

Dialogue balloons and caption boxes in comic books are almost always hand lettered for two reasons, one practical and one aesthetic. It is much easier with hand lettering to make the required speech fit exactly into the available space in the panels (Harvey 1996:23).

Freehand lettering, no matter how precisely done, always betrays the calligrapher's hand, and thus more closely approximates the nuances of the human voice than does mechanically produced type.

According to Harvey, one litmus test of good comic art is to ascertain to what extent the sense of words depends upon the pictures and vice versa. But when words and pictures blend in mutual dependence to tell a story and thereby convey a meaning that neither the verbal nor the visual can achieve alone without the other, then the storyteller is using to the fullest the resources the medium offers him (Harvey 1996:4).

Example: on page 18 Vince and his friend are attending a party organised by artist Braam Kruger. Kruger is an artist specializing in acquiring and sending up kitsch art. He owned the 'Kitchen Boy' restaurant in Johannesburg and is well known for the

exotic dishes he served there. Although they berate Kruger, suggesting that he paints kitsch, they are blissfully unaware of the disapproving looks the brunette on the left (pouring wine from the box) are giving them. She obviously doesn't like the way they are tucking into the free food and drink.

Another example: a critic judging Vince's work advises him that it is high time he puts finishing touches to his art work in a professional manner. Vince's reaction to this advice is vividly illustrated on page 11. In the second frame he is still all ears. He is listening attentively, with an open mind, if only for his brother's sake.

In the third frame he explodes with rage, forcing the critic to physically retreat. A striking illustration of 'the blending of word and picture for the greatest dramatic economy in narration' (Harvey 1996:8).

The question if pictures do anything for the story that prose could not do just as well is answered on page 57 of the novel. The narrator is pondering Vince's heartfelt conviction that one day he will be surprised to know how great God's mercy is. (Vince's friend sees in his mind's eye how a benign Jesus Christ welcomes four characters resembling Hitler, Barend Strydom, Robert McBride and an APLA soldier in heaven.)

The capacity to vary panel size and position gives the comic book format its most potent means of creating dramatic effect. Large splash panels have a crescendo impact on the course of the story.

Bursting into a packed bar, it is our first encounter with Vince. He is a live wire, gesturing and demanding at the top of his lungs that the television set be switched off. His angry defiance is in sharp contrast to the rest of the bar regulars. They are in a relaxed, half-drunk and jovial mood, their only concern being the rugby match on television.

The powerful opening scene sets the tone for the story to follow: a genius constantly misunderstood and at loggerheads with the rest of society. It indicates that although he may *sound* like one of the 'manne'—he uses three-letter expletives—he certainly *is* not one of them. He is an outsider living according to his own rules and will rather risk physical injury than conform to society's norms.

The above mentioned is typical of a Punk personality. If the essential spirit of punk is provocation and creativity in a suppressive system and is represented by 'underdogs with a sense of vision' (Vale 1995:5) then *Hemel op Aarde* (1997) can be seen as an example of the genre.

Vince and his friend's irreverence is similar to that in Punk. It challenges and sends up the cosy Johannesburg art establishment. Satirising influential art collector and dealer Linda Goodman, Vince mentions that Linda Givon likes his work, but is more interested in black lesbian artists (Horn & Findlay 1997:6).

Trent Read advises that he uses a 'friendlier line' (Horn & Findlay 1997:6). And their comment on Braam Kruger's work: if he does, as he claims, works on a send-up of kitsch, Picasso must have done a send-up of cubism (Horn & Findlay

1997:18). It is interesting to note that Trent Read owns an art gallery in Johannesburg and Braam Kruger a restaurant. These are real, living, breathing characters satirised mercilessly. The unspoken implication is that they too will not recognise art works that are ahead of their time because their only concern is to make money and buy works that are in vogue.

About the godfathers of punk, The Sex Pistols, Jon Savage writes in his book *England's Dreaming*:

> The group were caught in an impossible double-bind: intelligent in a working class culture that did not value intelligence, yet unable to leave that class because of lack of opportunity. The result? An appalling frustration (Savage 1991:114).

Johnny Rotten, lead singer of The Sex Pistols, had this to say about their predicament: 'We were all extremely ugly people. We were outcasts, the unwanted' (Savage 1991:114).

Colin Wilson writes in *The Outsider*:

> The Outsider's case against society is very clear. All men and women have these dangerous, unnamable impulses. Yet they keep up a pretence, to themselves, to others: their respectability, their philosophy, their religion are all attempts to gloss over, to make look civilized and rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational. He is an outsider because he stands for Truth (Wilson 1978:23).

For the Outsider, Wilson writes, the world is not rational, not orderly. When he asserts his sense of anarchy in the face of the bourgeois complacent acceptance it is not simply the need to cock a snook at respectability that provokes him; it is a distressing sense that truth *must be told at all costs*, otherwise there can not be an ultimate restoration of order (Wilson 1978:25).

Johan van Wyk writes in the literary magazine *Spado*:

> If the Sex Pistols sing 'I am an anti-Christ' it is not a metaphysical statement ... it is rather directed against the church as a social institution that is used to keep the working class obedient and passive (Van Wyk 1991:43).

Compare this with Vince's viewpoint on religion: 'The shit began when I told him (his father) that the church knows nothing about love, but everything about hypocrisy' (Horn & Findlay 1997:16). On page 27 he is assaulting his preacher-father, abusing his mother and robbing the church's petty cash.

Punk musicians were regularly involved in fights and street brawls. Some mutilated themselves. Johnny Rotten on the subject: 'I won't have people slag me off for

what I do to my own body. Because it's *mine*. If I want to cut my leg off, I will' (Coon 1988:55).

It is interesting to note that these words echo Vincent van Gogh's reply when questioned by police after shooting himself in the stomach: 'What I have done is nobody else's business. I am free to do what I like with my own body' (Tralbaut 1969:329).

In *Hemel op Aarde* (1997) Vince explains his cutting off of a piece of his ear: 'All I remember is this knife in my hand. There was a fight. I stabbed someone. On the way back I decided to teach myself a lesson. The next thing I woke up in Weskoppies' (Horn & Findlay 1997:35). There were punks who ended up as Vince does, in the lunatic asylum.

The Sex Pistols wanted to make the youth of their day self-reliant. Johan van Wyk writes in *Spado*:

> They wanted the youth to be independent of record companies and social prescriptions. They wanted to demonstrate to society that luxuries and bribes mean nothing to them. They wanted to have their own identities (Van Wyk 1991:35).

Vince and his friend know exactly what it takes to be successful painters. (They have to paint elephants.) They prefer to be poor rather than to conform to the snobbish and prescriptive Johannesburg art circles. Vince tells his brother:

> You really don't understand. I *want* to sell my paintings to ordinary people, not to musea or Sanlam or rich old ladies in Rosebank. But I feel ordinary people deserve better than the shit they get (Horn & Findlay 1997:15).

Hemel op Aarde (1997) is not particularly politically correct. When a black beggar asks Vince's friend for money, he declines, remarking: 'So what's the going rate for Bostic nowadays?' (Horn & Findlay 1997:41). When looking for Vince he wonders 'if somebody has knifed him because he is a settler' (Horn & Findlay 1997:29).

Women are seen as nothing more than sex objects or creatures who love being manhandled by their boyfriends. Johnny Rotten had this to say about love: 'You can't love anything. Love is what you feel for a dog or a pussycat. It doesn't apply to humans, and if it does it shows just how low you are. It shows your intelligence isn't clicking'. What happens then between people who like each other? 'Lust. That's all' (Coon 1988:60).

In Europe one can not be more politically incorrect than to wear a swastika. Yet this is exactly what the Sex Pistols did. In their song *Holidays in the sun* they compare the Jewish concentration camp Belsen with a holiday resort.

Jon Savage writes that the basic punk attitude was that a sharp shock was needed

to get a reaction from dulled reflexes. As well as exhibiting their exciting incompetence, the New York Dolls occasionally used the swastika.

Johansen of the Dolls explains:

> You carve a swastika in a desk. You don't know what Fascism is, it is not anti-Jewish at all. Kids don't care anything about that shit. When you want to make a statement about how BAD you are, that's how you do it (Savage 1991:64).

Hemel op Aarde (1997) sends up the cultural establishment in South Africa. We have also seen that it has points of contact with the punk genre. I believe, however, that a punk sensibility cannot, in any serious manner, challenge the South African political *status quo*. We do not react to violence and discordance the same way than do a trendy British adolescent in a relatively safe environment.

Consider the following scene described by a punk in *England's Dreaming*:

> There was this trendy bar called Pips and I got Berlin to wear this dog-collar, and I walked in with Berlin following me, and people's jaws just hit the tables. I walked in and ordered a bowl of water for him, I got the bowl of water for my dog. People were scared! (Savage 1991:184).

An average South African will find the above mentioned scene mildly interesting, even charming. Over the years he has been exposed to, among others, public lynchings on the news at eight.

Who can forget Maki Skosana being kicked to death and set on fire on newsreel after newsreel. It is doubtful if a person entering a bar with a dog collar on will send anyone here in a flurry.

A member of the punk band The Dils said the following on punk violence:

> Compared to real rebel activity, such as twelve year-old kids fighting cops and burning schools in Soweto, South Africa, or grade school kids organizing strikes in Jamaica, the petty spitting, trashing and throwing is just another fashion imitation (Vale 1995:105).

It is difficult to say if *Hemel op Aarde* (1997) points to a new direction in Afrikaans literature. The profanities in this graphic novel might shock Afrikaans-speaking people on the platteland, but they will not be the people buying the book. It is only for sale in selected book shops, frequented by urban dwellers, used to everything. It will most probably be read by the converted.

CSSALL
University of Durban-Westville

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