

Vittorio Frigerio
Dalhousie University

Castaldi, Simone. *Drawn and Dangerous. Italian Comics of the 1970s and 1980s.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011. 150 p. ISBN: 978-1-60473-749-3

This is a well-documented and well-constructed piece of work that will provide an excellent introduction to the world of late twentieth-century Italian comics. Castaldi focuses his analysis on a certain number of comics magazines that enjoyed a wide distribution in the newsstands – and wide critical acclaim – starting in the early 1970s, in part as a reaction to the student revolts of May 68. He concentrates particularly on those most close to the extra-parliamentary extreme left, such as *Autonomia Operaia*, *Lotta Continua*, or the galaxy of anarchist-inspired movements that thrived outside of any formal organization. The book starts with a rather fast-paced review of the development of the comic medium in Italy, paying particular attention to the editorial policy of the magazine *Linus* and of its spin-off *Alter-Linus* (later renamed *Alter-Alter*), where the semiotic analysis of Umberto Eco and the critiques of Umberto del Buono were to be found side by side with classics of American comics history such as the *Peanuts*, *Popeye*, *Krazy Kat* and *Lil' Abner*, as well as, later on, translations of French “nouvelle vague” *bandes dessinées* from *Métal Hurlant* and works by the best artists of the Italian school of fumetti, such as Dino Battaglia, Sergio Toppi and Hugo Pratt, among many others. The author adds to this an excursus in the cheap and violent world of the so-called *neri* comics, small format productions with explicitly sexual and often morbidly sadistic plots, by and large very poorly drawn (not to mention badly written) with the notable exception of those authored by Roberto Raviola, who will later become a respected author under the pen name Magnus.

The purpose of this presentation, as the title of Chapter 1 attests, is to give an idea of “Italian Adult Comics Before ‘77”, the year that saw the publication of the first issue of the magazine *Il Cannibale*, which, according to Castaldi, marks the true beginning of the history of the new adult comics in Italy.

One could easily argue that the notion of “adult comic” itself is fraught with imprecision. *Linus* was aimed at an adult and young-adult readership, but mixed all through its existence reprints of American comics that had never had any particular intellectual ambition (*B.C.*, *The Wizard of Id*, *Animal Crackers*) with a new critical discourse on the medium and studies of a historical nature on valuable comics from the past (the first issue included a six page article by Rino Albertarelli on the work of Antonio Rubino, a major illustrator from the beginning of the century). Most of the so-called “popular comics” of the time, such as those issued by the Bonelli publishing house, were read equally by children and adults, and could sometimes be said to deliberately blur the frontier between the two readerships in order to remain attractive to as large a public as possible. Other initiatives were also attempted in the seventies with a view to offer mass readers works that would combine a taste

for adventure with “a more refined graphic product without betraying the traditional popular content to which this public is accustomed”¹. Such was the collection “Un uomo un’avventura”, issued by Bonelli, that could probably be called the very first instance of a major publishing house proposing what would be later called “graphic novels”, penned by contemporary masters of the genre.

Castaldi prefers not to deal with this aspect of comics production, and the choice is understandable, since it would require a broadening of critical perspective that would likely cause the reader to lose focus of his main subject. He concentrates instead on those “alternative” authors that sprung up around the fringes of the revolutionary left, for whom the works proposed by Linus (aligned with the Communist Party) were too tame. These are the young artists that created the already mentioned *Il Cannibale*, as well as *Il Male* in 1978, and later *Frigidaire* in 1980. These creators were imbued with what Castaldi calls “the cultural nomadism of post-’77 underground culture” (53), a willingness to break down barriers between high and lowbrow culture and to attempt new and complex approaches to story-telling, often inspired by contemporary developments in the art world. In turn, they inspired new generations of literary writers, such as the school of narrators aptly called *cannibali* (Nove, Ammanniti, Pinkerle) in the ‘90s.

Castaldi offers an analysis of the many ways in which these authors – fascinated by intertextuality and constantly juggling with cultural references of all kinds – can be considered “a prime example of [a] practice of mystification and appropriation of languages” which would lead to “the contamination with the languages of the avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes that would characterize most of their best work in the early ‘80s” (46-47). Indeed, the proximity between the post-modern, baroque sensitivities of these artists, lovers of pastiche, and the so-called “*nuovi nuovi*” painters belonging to the trans-avant-garde theorized by art critics such as Achille Bonito-Oliva and Renato Barilli can appear striking. Castaldi attributes particular value to the creative impertinence with which comic creators such as Andrea Pazienza, Massimo Mattioli or Stefano Tamburini could literally sack and plunder “literature, science, journalism, and [the] visual arts” (75) in order to produce works imbued with various layers of meaning. Indeed, he states that “multiple coding – where two or more different and antithetical reading possibilities within a single text – coexist – sits at the heart of the great majority of the works of new adult comics artists” (118). This, and an ability to hijack the language of the official media, using it and abusing it for their own purposes, was one of the main characteristics of this new wave of comics where both image and language underwent radical transformations, shocking the reader with constant oppositions between form and content.

One of the strengths of this book is the care with which the author renders the connection between the social and political situation of Italy in the 1970s, with its growing tensions that will lead to the dark years of terrorism both from the left and the right, and the development of the medium of comics. He probably oversimplifies somewhat the circumstances of the time when he states that: “A part of the youth movement distanced itself from traditional political activity, although still being actively engaged, and produced culture; the other, having disappeared from the public eye and gone entirely into clandestine action, gave birth to the phenomenon of terrorism and armed militant groups” (50-51). It is beyond doubt, however, that the developments in the world of comics that this book relates mirrored a political

and intellectual environment both complex and fragile, and provided an entire generation with a caustic and imaginative view of the reality of their lives that "official" culture was unable or unwilling to supply.

Notes

¹  « [...] portare il grosso pubblico a contatto con un prodotto più raffinato dal punto di vista grafico senza tradire il contenuto popolare tradizionale a cui questo pubblico è abituato ». N.P., « L'avventura siamo noi »Alter Alter, Marzo 1977, p. 63.