To Be Continued....

Serialization and Its Discontent
in the Recent Comics of Gilbert Hernandez

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Between 1989 and 1993, Gilbert Hernandez's epic Poison River was serialized in the first volume of the comic book Love & Rockets (#29-40), the groundbreaking alternative comic book created by Gilbert and his brothers Jaime and Mario. Eventually published as a single volume in 1994, Poison River did not lend itself well to serialization. With its non-linear plotting, its lack of narrative transitions, its temporal experimentation, its expansive cast of characters, and its constant shifts between realism and the fantastic, the story confused many of its readers and even helped to drive down sales of the comic book. In interviews, Hernandez has commented on the fact that the serial form worked against the ambitions of Poison River and his evolving style of storytelling. It is equally worth noting that as Hernandez's graphic narrative began to reach novelistic proportions, its reliance on episodic packaging highlighted some of the limitations of the medium, including distinctions between the "comic book" and the "graphic novel."

Given all of these issues, all of which play a part in the conception and consumption of graphic narrative, it would be useful to explore the ways in which a reliance on, as well as the resistance to, comic book serialization has helped to determine the form of Gilbert Hernandez's more recent texts. In addressing this dilemma, it would be particularly telling to focus on several recent serialized works -- specifically, "Julio's Day" and "Me for the Unknown" (both of which were serialized in the second volume of Love & Rockets) as well as Grip: The Strange World of Men (2002) and Speak of the Devil (2007-2008), two stand-alone mini-series published by DC's Vertigo imprint and Dark Horse, respectively -- and compare them with two graphic novels never previously serialized, Sloth (2006) and Chance in Hell (2007). A reading of these texts in light of certain comics formalists, such as Scott McCloud and Thierry Groensteen, demonstrates that Hernandez's narrative style is largely determined by the sequential contexts of his storytelling. For example, realistic and more linear narratives such as "Julio's Day" and Speak of the Devil are not only better suited to serialization (at least when compared to original graphic novels), but may even benefit from the episodic format with its emphasis on suspense and character motivation. Perhaps even more notable are Hernandez's "holistic" works. Highly experimental graphic narratives such as Sloth and Chance in Hell, with their privileging of narrative anachronisms and fantastic subject matters, rely less on chronological sequencing than they do on iconographic contexts and their impact on reader affect. In mapping out this latter concept, it would be useful to discuss McCloud's understanding of closure in comics as well as Groensteen's understanding of spatio-topical operations, that is, comics' emphasis on both the paneled figures as self-contained iconic units, as well as their situated coordinates within and among the comic pages. Such readings shed light on the direction of Hernandez's recent comics and his increasing reliance on non-serialized narrative. It is notable that Hernandez's apparent abandonment of the episodic Palomar stories -- based on the mythical Central American community that gained him widespread recognition -- has coincided with more experimental novelistic texts that de-emphasize linearity but privilege larger iconographic frameworks. Indeed, this shift in his narrative strategy illustrates the limitations of periodic storytelling, at least as a vehicle for what has become known as "literary" or "alternative" comics, and its links to genre expectations within graphic narrative.

Charles Hatfield, to date the most astute scholar on comic book serialization, discusses the three kinds of effects that serialization can have on comic books and their resultant collection into graphic novel form: that it influences the episodic structure of the narrative, that it can give shape and continuity (e.g., through repetition of theme and structure of discourse) to long-form works, and that it allows the author to potentially shape his or her narrative through reader reaction. Hatfield's analysis can help shed light on the nature of Hernandez's comics, especially those that have appeared in serialized form. For example, the episodic structure, as well as the narrative trajectory, of such graphic novels (or previously serialized works that now appear in "graphic novel" form) as Birdland, Love and Rockets X, and Speak of the Devil can certainly be seen as a function of their initial serialization. This essay, however, is not only concerned with the effects that serialization has on the work of Gilbert Hernandez, but the converse as well: how the lack of serialization, its benefits as well as its liabilities, help determine the shape of his recent long-form works that have not been previously serialized.

In looking at the sequential contexts surrounding Hernandez's most recent comics, there are several central questions that will inform my analysis. Among those are the following: What does serialization provide for or do to the reader, and how might these features differ from any benefits, or liabilities, obtained from the longer more novelistic works? Conversely, what do self-contained graphic novels give to readers that is conspicuously absent from serialized comics? These questions are necessary when speculating on the author, in this case Gilbert Hernandez, and his role in the packaging of his comic art. In this regard, additional questions would include, What authorial benefits might spring from comic book serialization? and How might original graphic novels play to the author's narrative strengths? Such inquiries help reveal the interplay between these two vectors -- the reader's reception and the author's manipulation -- and what it might tell us about Hernandez's recent
choice to take up the graphic novel form.

In addressing these questions, it may first be useful to summarize some of the basic differences between these two graphic narrative forms, at least as practiced by Hernandez. His serialized works tend to be, at least relatively speaking, more realistic or "natural" narratives, are episodic in nature, rely primarily on event-driven actions, and are disjointed or fragmented due to multiple competing storylines. By contrast, his graphic novels employ a more dreamlike or "unnatural" narrative mode, contain slowly evolving or durable storylines, privilege visual contexts over action-driven meaning, and are plotted in a non-linear manner. Other significant differences between the two forms reflect the narrative compact between the author and the reader. Serialized works such as "Me for the Unknown" and *Grip: The Strange World of Men* rely heavily on suspense to engage its readers -- where each installment ends with a visual and/or verbal cliffhanger that both frustrates and titillates its audience -- while original novelistic works such as *Sloth* are holistic in nature, allowing the reader to take in the whole scope of the narrative and providing a more immediate sense of closure. For this reason, graphic novels may demand more from readers, requiring that they take in the text's full narrative range and negotiate its visual system, and to do this (or have the option of doing this) all at once and not in parcelled out, and perhaps more easily digestible, segments spread out over monthly intervals. What is more, Hernandez's longer and autonomous narratives more fully reveal the experimental side of his art where the montage (at times disharmonious) becomes highly significant and the placement of images allows him to draw out or extend time, or at least the appearance of temporal manipulation.5

This distinction between serial-based and novelistic comics also reveals a difference in narrative control. We can read the serialized works, and not just those of Hernandez, as more author-controlled, where the authorial agent gains power by withholding information -- the "what happens next" of the story -- at the end of each narrative installment. Such control is typical of serialized comics, where readers must wait until the next installment for a resolution. It is the indefinite future (in the case of those sporadically-produced independent comics), in order to satisfy their anticipation.6 By contrast, the self-contained novelistic works gives the reader everything at once, at least when compared to serialized narratives. They allow readers a more profound sense of control in that they may choose to move both forwards and backwards in their reading of the *completed* comic text, taking in as much or as little of the narrative as they like, from beginning to end. This is reminiscent of a central distinction that Scott McCloud makes between comics and film as two visually-based narrative forms, where the former gains meaning largely through juxtapositions within space, while the latter is more dependent on juxtapositions within time (1993:7). When reading comics, in other words, readers can control their access to information, moving their eyes over the individual panels, the entire page layout (the mise-en-page), or among visual page systems, either backwards or forwards, and do so as quickly or as slowly as they would like. Film (at least the kind consumed in theaters) cannot afford audiences that kind of luxury. And this emphasis on reader-centered acquisition becomes even more evident when applied to the analysis and appreciation of a complete graphic novel -- as opposed to serialized works -- where the reader can manipulate his or her access to all or even parts of the narrative.

It may be useful here, by way of illustration, to highlight an example of narrative control as applied to a novelistic text. Although not falling under my particular definition of "graphic novel" (see note 2), it is worth noting that the serialized *Poison River*, when first collected in 1994, does indeed read as a graphic novel. In fact, *Poison River* is a more cohesive and understandable narrative when collected into novel form, and not just because all of the pieces are fit together. In the completed *Poison River*, Hernandez includes 16 different full-page illustrations between the 17 different chapters (or serialized installments) that never appeared in the original *Love and Rockets* comics. Each new illustration bears the name of one of the story's significant characters, along with pictures of that individual at different stages of life, and each suggests that the chapter to follow will focus (at least in part) on that figure. Such intersectional pieces give *Poison River* more structural unity and make it more than the sum of its serialized parts -- in other words, they make *Poison River* more like a novel. And having a completed, organized, and more structurally coherent text in hand, the reader is better able to make sense of *Poison River*'s fragmented storylines and almost unmanageable cast. Just by flipping back and forth between the pages of the book -- which is something that 12 individual issues of a comic book, spread out over three years, might make particularly difficult -- the reader can better control the means of narrative acquisition.

The differences between these two kinds of comics forms, the serialized and the novelistic, play themselves out in the very layout of Hernandez's recent storytelling. In the case of his serialized comics found in *Love and Rockets*, this becomes clearly apparent in what is arguably the graphic narratives' most privileged positions, the beginnings and the endings. As we can see in Fig. 1, Gilbert and Mario Hernandez felt the need to begin each issue's installments with a summation of the story up to this point, so as to remind readers where they were the last time they encountered the narrative. In the case of "Me for the Unknown," these come in the form of heterodiagetic narration boxes inserted at the beginning of each episode. Not only do they serve as a means to help the reader catch up with the story; they function as an obtrusive, and at times even awkward, reminder of a narrating presence, the larger guiding voice from the outside that is controlling both the exposition and the flow of the comic that one is reading. At other times, this authorial presence presents itself in the middle of the
narrative, as we have in Fig. 2, another example from the episodically arranged "Me for the Unknown." Here, Gilbert and Mario begin the page -- indeed, the first panel -- with a narration box that sets up the mise-en-page. And sometimes, as is the case in issue #3 of Love and Rockets Vol. 2, he will use each entire page spread to contain one of the several storylines that make up the narrative. In this particular installment from "Me for the Unknown," almost every page contains just one particular narrative thread, introduced by the heterodiagetic narrator with such transitional comments as, "Meanwhile, back in the village of Cuerco,..." "Deep in the Comprachican Forest on the back trail to the coast...." and, as in the case of Fig. 2, "On a distant bank of the bayou, runaway Taggy Jr. awakens...."

Sometimes, as in the case of the serialized stories Grip: The Strange World of Men, "Julio's Day," and Speak of the Devil, Hernandez completely foregoes any overt narratorial intrusions within the story. In Grip, he inserts each issue’s "catch up" summary completely outside the diegetic level, placing it on the copyrights page that immediate precedes the actual comics. And, as in the example of Fig. 3, Hernandez uses no heterodiagetic narrative voice to transition between and among storylines. Contained within this one page are three of the many competing threads that make up this comic and a close reading of this page would help to illuminate Hernandez's serial-based narrative strategies. Instead of the intrusive narration boxes, the author/artist uses the arrangement and focus of panels to transition between characters. In panels 1 and 2, we see the young girl, Echo, on the beach as she gives a drink to the bodiless skin that she finds in her house. (For the purposes of this essay, it is
not necessary to summarize the many plot twists of Grip. Suffice it to say that
it is one very wild story.) In the background of the second panel, we are
brought to another storyline, the stripped body as it searches for its skin,
which becomes the central focus of panel 3. And then as that visual recedes
into the background of panel 4, it becomes the connecting image to a third
storyline, the relationship between Tigre and Sammy, who then become the
focus for the rest of the page in panels 5 and 6. Notice the subtle means in
which Hernandez transitions from one narrative thread to the next, using an
image from a preceding panel to set up the story of the next. And he does this
with a visual rhythm that paces the flow of information. The second panel of
each storyline contains the visual "germ" of the succeeding story. Also, as we
read down the page, the panels that make up each strip (the three horizontal
bands that compose the page) become successively larger and fewer in number,
creating something like an inverted pyramid, with three smaller panels on top
and the one larger one on the bottom.

Fig. 3. From Grip: The Strange World of Men. Issue 2, p. 8

In "Julio's Day" (see Fig. 4), narrator-generated transition is also absent.
This graphic narrative is completely episodic in nature, with each installment
showcasing one particular day from the protagonist's 100-year life, from birth
to death. In this example of six almost evenly-framed horizontal panels, the
entire chapter is contained within a single page. There is no need here for any
heterodiagetic narrator filling us in on what happened previously, since each
installment of "Julio's Day" is like a self-contained story, a snapshot in comics
form of one episode in Julio's life. Hernandez has said of his recent serialized
work, such as "Julio's Day," that he tried to make each installment a self-
sufficient narrative, so as to make up for the "erratic (in)frequency" of Love
and Rockets that may be difficult for many readers (Email interview, 2008).
Hernandez establishes a different kind of pacing in his Dark Horse comic book

Fig. 4. From "Julio's Day." Love and Rockets. Vol. 2, Issue 8, p. 20.

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series, *Speak of the Devil*, seen in Figs. 5 and 6. What the reader sees in these two images are the opening pages from two of the series’ six issues. In Fig. 5, Hernandez begins the fourth installment by picking up where the previous issue left off, a cliffhanger where Val Castillo, who is holding a knife in this image, discovers her boyfriend Paul in a compromising situation with her stepmother, Linda. The fast pacing of this opening page transitionally complements the closing page of the previous installment, issue #3, which featured a knife-wielding Val in one panel and a close-up of spurting blood in another. Indeed, the opening page of that previous issue, seen in Fig. 6, contrasts its ending by establishing a more subdued, aspect-to-aspect pacing (referencing Scott McCloud’s understanding of closure in comics) among its three panels. Even though these two examples from *Speak of the Devil* are strikingly different in their wordless visual actions, they both highlight the ways in which Hernandez -- and not only here, but in ways similar to “Julio’s Day” and *Grip: The Strange World of Men* -- stays strictly within the diagetic level to transition between narrative installments, using scenic and panel paging to establish these links.

We find a much different organizing principle in the case of his graphic novels. Coming back to a point made at the beginning of this essay, it is in his longer and more novelistic works that Hernandez resists many of the aforementioned methods of serialization, and this very resistance determines the form of these graphic narratives. His slower evolving, context-driven novels such as *Sloth* and *Chance in Hell* demand a different method of narration, one that affords him more freedom of visual rhythm over the text’s topography and allows him to realize more fully his narrative ambitions. It may be useful here to reference Thierry Groensteen’s conception of the spatio-topical system...
of comics. He defines spatio-topia as comic's fundamental principle, a bringing together of space (in a more abstract sense) and visual placement, while simultaneously acknowledging the distinction between the two. It is an understanding concerned with "two orders of curiosity: the description of figures (panels) in itself, and the observation of their situated coordinates" (2007:168). For Groensteen, the language of comics can best be found within the page layout, or the mise-en-page, where meaning is ultimately generated and the comic reveals its "definitive configuration" (2007:21). If we read Hernandez's comics in this way, then the very spaces of graphic storytelling — such as the word balloons, the frame of the individual panels, the gutter (that "blank" space between panels), the strip (the horizontal ban of panel arrangement), and the entire page layout itself — can foreground relational perspective between and among individual subjects. Such visual strategies are a necessary means to understanding Hernandez's long-form narratives, writing that by its very nature relies upon themes of relational context and contingency to construct meaning.

We see the semantic significance engendered by this narrative method clearly in the case of Chance in Hell. In Fig. 7, Hernandez generates narrative not only by relying on the mise-en-page, but on his page spread as well. Here, the novel's protagonist, a young woman who goes by the name Empress, decides to leave her home after brutally killing her self-appointed guardian. Notice that the thread of the story, first established through what McCloud has called action-to-action or subject-to-subject pacing through the first four panels of this spread (1993:70-71), slowly transitions into a scene-to-scene arrangement (bordering on an almost aspect-to-aspect relationship), where the focus on Empress becomes more complicated, as if, to use a cinematic metaphor, a camera eye is pulling back into more of a long shot. Such durable pacing emphasizes her isolated position within the post-apocalyptic world of the novel and underscores her detachment from others. Hernandez employs a
similar visual narrative strategy in a series of two different page spreads that serve as an intradiagetic frame and stand equidistant from either end of the novel. In the first instance, Fig. 8, Empress has just arrived to the city after leaving the wastelands and being taken in by her guardian. In its companion arrangement, as revealed in Fig. 9, she has already killed her guardian and is now a young married woman years later. Notice that in both of these two-page spreads how Hernandez establishes his protagonist's isolation. Much as he did in the previous instance, Fig. 7, he links the Empress's psychological state to that of her spatial environment, and using the comic's spatio-topical system to do so. In both Figs. 8 and 9, he presents a scenic panel that consumes the entire page, what in film would be called an establishing shot, and then moves on to present her from three different perspectives, in each instance looking away from the people who surround her.

If in Chance in Hell Hernandez utilizes his comic's spatio-topia to full effect, he takes things one step further in his 2006 graphic novel for DC Comic's Vertigo imprint. Sloth is the story of three directionless young people stuck in a small town and, depending on where you are in the narrative, one of the three is in a coma or just recently awakened from one. The narrative is unnatural or dreamlike in that one character supplants the other's story by morphing one into another. Early on in the text, it is Miguel who narrates the story and who has just recently come out of his coma. In the second part of the novel, it is Miguel's girlfriend, Lita, who narrates her story about emerging from a coma state, and in the final pages it is their friend, Romeo, who narrates within his coma. Hernandez uses the visual layout among multiple pages to make this transition from one morphing character to another. In Figs. 10 and 11, we see this progression from Miguel to Lita and from Lita to Romeo, respectively, the transition page being that middle fantastic one, where (in Fig. 10) Miguel ascends from what appears to be the skin-like surface of the sea to become Lita, and (in Fig. 11) where the air bubbles from a drowning Romeo, having jumped off a bridge, become a series of lemons that link back to the mysterious lemon groves that distinguish both the town and each character’s coma-like state.

What is significant in these examples from Sloth is that Hernandez utilizes the full visual space of this non-linear narrative in a way that is unobtrusive and free of the kind of narratorial intrusions, and quick-cut paneling, that primarily defined his serialized stories. Much like Chance in Hell, the story unfolds slowly in a way that it could not in any serialized comic. Hernandez had attempted a similar -- yet more ambitious -- narrative move with Poison River, but he learned over the three plus years it took to produce the novel-in-serial that, at least for longer-form comics, the self-contained holistic graphic novel worked best for him. Nonetheless, serialization does have its assets. In a recent interview, Hernandez discusses both the benefits and the liabilities of the serial form. When asked what kind of advantages the ongoing comic book
gives him, he states, “The reader gets it all at once [...], and I don’t give myself enough time to second guess any PC nonsense that might weaken the impact [of my work].” The graphic novel, on the other hand, provides him with “breathing room” (Email interview, 2008). Lately, however, Hernandez’s sympathies seem to be more aligned with long-form graphic narratives. In a 2006 interview, Hernandez described his emergent shift from serialization. When asked about his interest in graphic novels, he said,

I’m actually looking forward to doing more original pieces that are longer and will fit in a graphic novel, because I think that’s where my strengths are. telling a longer story where I have more room to let the characters live and breathe. Normally I’m editing things down to nothing. I have fourteen pages in each issue of Love and Rockets, and I’m usually whittling down twenty-four-page stories into fourteen, or even into ten. I’ve been doing this for so long that I’ve gotten sick of it. (2007:235).

What we see in his more recent long-form works is not only an attempt to tell more involved stories, but a significant revisioning of his narrating strategies. How he employs his narrating voices, how he transitions between and among panels, and how he utilizes the spatio-topical system of his visual canvas is largely dependent on the specific comics form, serialization or novelization, in which he chooses to operate. In his growing reliance on the self-contained narrative form — his new graphic novel, The Troublemakers, is due out in 2009, and the third volume of Love and Rockets began in the Summer of 2008 as a single-issue annual — he has subtly, although profoundly, changed his underlying mode of storytelling.

Endnotes

For further analysis on Poison River and the challenges of serialization, including commentary from a personal interview, see Charles Hatfield. He discusses the problems inherent in what is considered by many (including me) to be his most ambitious work to date. With its emphasis on temporal fluidity and non-linear storytelling, Poison River comes across to many readers, in Hatfield’s words, as a “tangle” (2005:89), a work whose “complexity [...] undermined its success as a serial, forcing Hernandez into a period of artistic and commercial crisis” (2005:88). I have experienced the “tangle” phenomenon firsthand in the classroom. When teaching Poison River, I have found that students are at best confused, and at worst adamantly resistant and even hostile, when it comes to their appreciation of the text. While I am truly fascinated by this complex text, my students find the fragmented storyline difficult to follow and the large ensemble a hurdle to interpretation. Their acquisition of the text is further complicated by the fact that almost all of my students, even self-professed comics enthusiasts, know nothing of
Hernandez's work. Since Poison River is Luba's backstory, knowing the previous tales helps in understanding what is going on. This problem of interpretation has not been the case when teaching Human Diastrophism (serialized in Love and Rockets #21-26, 1987-88, and first collected in Blood of Palomar: A Love and Rockets Collection [1989]) or the various later Palomar stories, now collected in the recently published Human Diastrophism: A Love and Rockets Book (2007).

Distinctions between these two forms are almost endlessly debatable, yet here I will refrain from problematizing the term “graphic novel.” For the purposes of this essay on Hernandez’s comics, instead of contextualizing this form of narrative in light of marketing strategies or its cultural history, I am simply defining “graphic novel” as a holistic work not previously serialized and meant to be a self-contained work of fiction. In this sense, and specifically in this essay, my definition of “graphic novel” differs from that of Hatfield’s, who defines it as both never-before-published long-form comics and previously serialized works that have been collected in “novelistic” format (2005:5-6). For a discussion of the problems inherent in the label “graphic novel,” see my introduction, “Coloring America,” to the special issue of MELUS (2007).

With the exception of “Me for the Unknown,” all of these texts are both written and illustrated by Gilbert Hernandez. “Me for the Unknown” was a series written by Gilbert’s brother, Mario, but illustrated by Gilbert. Although the focus of this essay is on the recent comics of Gilbert Hernandez, I nonetheless include this collaborative work due to the narrative significance of the illustrations, especially when it comes to structure and serialization.

For a fuller analysis of what Hatfield calls “the devil of serialization,” see 153-162.

Although Hernandez’s long-form graphic novels are highly experimental, I do not mean to suggest that these are the only venues where he deviates from realism. On the contrary, experimental and more surrealistic shorter narratives — such as “Beep Beep” (which first appeared in issue #27 of Love and Rockets Vol. 1) and the longer “BEM” (appearing in issue #1 of Love and Rockets Vol. 1) — were a part of Hernandez’s repertoire from the very beginning. However, as his Palomar stories developed, he included fewer and fewer of these experimental pieces into his comic books. In the second volume of Love and Rockets, and as he began to spend less time on his Palomar saga, he once again returned to the shorter experimental form. In an interview I conducted with Hernandez, he suggested that in leaving behind his signature Palomar characters, he plans to “emphasize more the experimental side of doing comics. . . . I have this abstract, wacky part of me I like to indulge” (2007:244). Both Sloth and Chance in Hell are clearly novelistic examples of this “wackiness.”

One should keep in mind, however, that author-control is only part of the picture. The manipulation inherent in serialization is also determined largely by market forces in that the writer/artist is required by his or her publisher to

produce a 24-32 page comic book paced at regular intervals so as to generate a sustained readership.

At times, such heterodiegetic intrusions from the narrating voice can become highly problematic, especially when the serialized narrative is convoluted and comprising multiple storylines. Indeed, in his sprawling Poison River, Hernandez attempted to avoid this disruption by foregoing summarizations from previous issues, at least within the story proper. He limited his exposition to just a few vague words contextualizing time and geographic place, such as “Somewhere in America circa 1971” and “Somewhere in Latin America—Late fifties, early seventies.” However, in an attempt to retain his readership and clear up any narrative uncertainties, at times he apparently felt the need to insert his exposition paratextually within the comic’s table of contents. In issues #34 and #37 of first volume of Love and Rockets, he included summaries that were intended to get the reader up to speed, although given the complexities of the serial novel, it is difficult to see how such brief contexts can do justice to the narrative. In fact, the original Poison River serves as an illuminating example of the problems of serialization: to recapitulate the previous storylines may awkwardly impose on the current installment, and the absence of any narrative context may further confuse the reader.

Although, as I will later argue, the significance of the mise-en-page is more characteristic of Hernandez’s self-contained graphic novels, these examples from “Me for the Unknown” are in many ways illustrative examples of what Thierry Groensteen refers to as the spatio-topias of comics (see, in particular, 2007:24-102).

References


Cartoons as Pop Idols: The “Sani Star Search” Contest in Tanzania

Jigal Beez

Introduction

With “Pop Idol,” which started in October 2001, the British music impresario Simon Fuller invented one of the world’s most popular TV formats of the early 21st Century. It is not only in Western nations where the dream of winning fame and fortune in a song contest appeals to the youth, but also in Arab, Asian, and African countries where thousands of contestants line the streets to participate and millions are glued to the “goggle-box” to assess talents, gossip about performances and pray for their heroes to make it to the next round.

In Tanzania a “Pop Idol” remake has been created by the media company Benchmark Productions and called “Bongo Star Search.” Its broadcast on the Tanzanian ITV channel became the talk of the nation and the voting results of the first “Bongo Star Search” contest made headline news in 2006 and early 2007. Since the Tanzanian cartoon universe is deeply rooted in Tanzanian popular culture, it is not surprising that “Bongo Star Search” even fascinated comic characters, and their artists. As a result the cartoonists of the Sani magazine created their own competition, the “Sani Star Search” contest.

The “Sani Star Search” Series

Sani magazine is one of the oldest Tanzanian popular publications. It started in the early 1980s as an irregularly appearing comic magazine. Since 2002, it has changed into tabloid format and currently publishes issues on Wednesday and Saturday. Besides all kind of gossip and celebrity news, cartoons are still a main feature of the magazine. The artist Chris Katembo, who is cartoon editor-in-chief at Sani, invented the “Sani Star Search” cartoon series that debuted in the Saturday edition, Feb. 24, 2007, and finally finished nearly nine months later on Wednesday Nov. 21. Most of the series appeared on the prominent back page of the Wednesday edition printed in color. As news vendors display the front and back pages of tabloids on their sale stalls, the latest “Sani Star Search” episode enticed readers to buy Sani (or at least read it for free while glancing over the offered papers).

Most episodes consist of two rows of panels. Sometimes if there is a need to narrate the story quickly, an episode consists of three rows.