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[Review] The King of Bangkok

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Abstract

A graphic review of the ethnoGRAPHIC novel 'The King of Bangkok' by Fabri, Natalucci and Sopranzetti (UTP 2019)

Keywords: graphic anthropology, Thailand, ethnoGraphic novel

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OOOH ENTANGLEMENTS MESSAGED ME!!!

WHAT DO THEY WANT FROM ME!?!?

DID I TWEET SOMETHING SILLY ABOUT THEM?

OR DID I TWEET SOMETHING SO VERY SMART THAT THEY ARE AWARDED ME AN HONORARY DOI FOR AN ARTICLE THAT I HAVE NOT WRITTEN YET?

OH NO, NO, NO THEY ARE INFORMING ME THAT THE PETITION TO BAN ME FROM ANTHROPOLOGY HAS BEEN APPROVED... THAT MUST BE THE CASE.

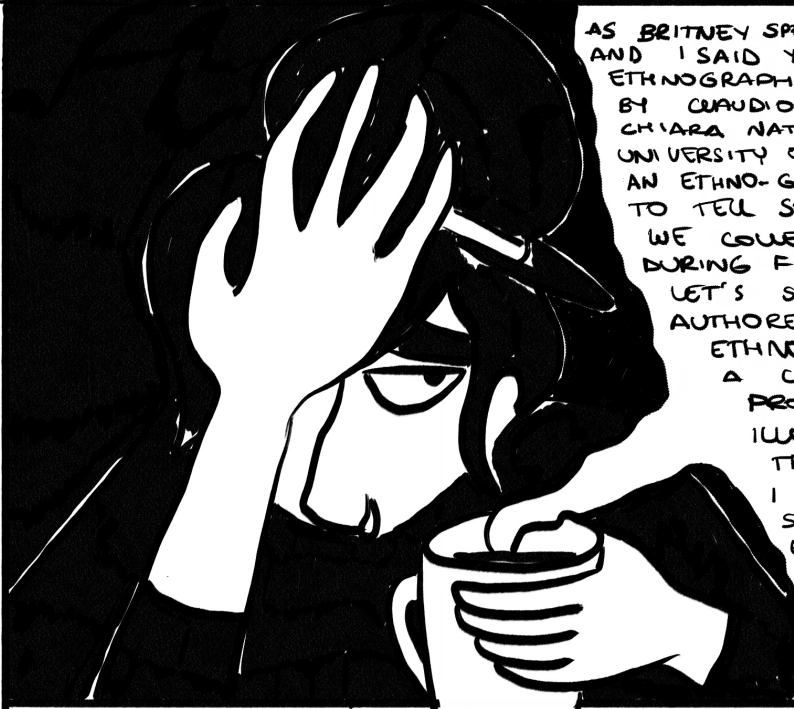
BE RATIONAL, SILLY GIRL. THEY PROBABLY WANT TO PEER REVIEW SOMETHING... BUT NO, NO, NO I'M ON A LABOUR OF LOVE REVIEW STRIKE.

THEREFORE I WILL SAY NO, WHATEVER THEY ASK ME TO DO. I WILL SAY NO. 6

I'LL BE ASSERTIVE BUT POLITE. MINE WILL BE A POUTE BUT FIRM NO.

I'LL TELL THEM:
I'd really love to do that but I regret to inform that I cannot do that on this occasion. Best regard, letria.





AS BRITNEY SPEARS⁰ WOULD SAY, DOOPS I DID IT AGAIN AND I SAID YES TO DO THE BOOK REVIEW OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC NOVEL "THE KING OF BANGKOK" BY CUAUDIO SOPRANZETTI, SARA FABBRI AND CHIARA NATAWCCI, WHICH CAME OUT IN 2021 FOR UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS.

AN ETHNO-GRAPHIC NOVEL IS ANOTHER MODE TO TELL STORIES (THOSE WE LISTEN TO, WE COLLECT AND WE GET CAUGHT UP WITH DURING FIELDWORK) IN COMIC FORMAT. LET'S SAY THAT INSTEAD OF A SINGLE-AUTHORED, CONVENTIONALLY WRITTEN, AN ETHNOGRAPHIC NOVEL IS OFTEN A COLLABORATIVE, COLLECTIVE PROJECT WHERE STORIES ARE ILLUSTRATED AND TOLD USING THE GRAPHIC MEDIUM.


I KNOW THAT THIS IS A VERY ROUGH, SUPERFICIAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT AN ETHNO-GRAPHIC NOVEL IS, BUT I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH SPACE TO PRODUCE A TREATISE ON WHAT THE ETHNO-GRAPHIC CONSISTS OF. (REFERENCES WILL FOLLOW)

REVIEW


THE KING OF BANGKOK




NOK IS THE MAIN PROTAGONIST OF THIS ETHNO-GRAPHIC NOVEL WHICH IS ETHNO-GRAPHIC AS IT IS BASED ON THE AUTHOR'S FIELDWORK IN THAILAND AND IS "GRAPHIC" AS IT IS "DRAWN" RATHER THAN "WRITTEN"



BANGKOK, I THINK, IS THE OTHER MAIN PROTAGONIST: THROUGHOUT THE BOOK, WE SEE IT CHANGE, GROW, DEVELOP A BIT TOO...



BOTH NOK AND BANGKOK CHANGE A LOT OVER THE NEARLY 50 YEARS OVER WHICH "THE KING OF BANGKOK" UNFOLDS. THERE SEEMS TO BE A TIGHT AND DEEP SYMBIOSIS BETWEEN NOK AND THE CITY: THE CHANGES OCCURRING IN NOK'S LIFE MIRROR AND ARE MIRRORED BY THE CHANGES THAT OCCUR IN BANGKOK.



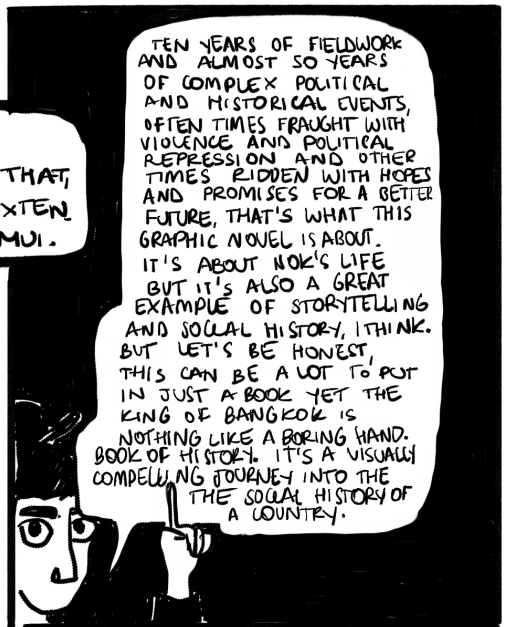
I'VE NEVER DONE A REVIEW OF A COMIC BOOK IN COMIC FORMAT BEFORE AND I DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW TO CALL THIS, A META-COMIC? A META-COMIC BOOK REVIEW, THAT'S WHAT IT IS.

[THE POINTING FINGER-TOOL OF THE PATRIARCHY, REVIEWER2 AND MANSPLAINER - IS USED FOR THE SAKE OF CLARITY AND LOVE]



THE STORY BEHIND THE KING OF BANGKOK IS BASED ON ALMOST TEN YEARS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK IN THAILAND THAT I WANT TO CLARIFY, EXTENDS FAR BEYOND KO SAMUI.

[SORRY FOR THE VERY APPROXIMATIVE PORTRAIT, CLAUDIO.]



TEN YEARS OF FIELDWORK AND ALMOST 50 YEARS OF COMPLEX POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL EVENTS, OFTEN TIMES FRAUGHT WITH VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL REPRESSION AND OTHER TIMES RIDDEN WITH HOPES AND PROMISES FOR A BETTER FUTURE, THAT'S WHAT THIS GRAPHIC NOVEL IS ABOUT. IT'S ABOUT NOK'S LIFE BUT IT'S ALSO A GREAT EXAMPLE OF STORYTELLING AND SOCIAL HISTORY, I THINK. BUT LET'S BE HONEST, THIS CAN BE A LOT TO PUT IN JUST A BOOK YET THE KING OF BANGKOK IS NOTHING LIKE A BORING HAND-BOOK OF HISTORY. IT'S A VISUALLY COMPELLING JOURNEY INTO THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF A COUNTRY.



THAT'S WHY A GRAPHIC NOVEL IS SUCH A GREAT FORMAT TO DEAL WITH, TELL AND DISSEMINATE COMPLEX STORIES IN WAYS THAT FRUIBLE BESIDE AND BEYOND ACADEMIA.



THE AFFORDANCES OF THE GRAPHIC MEDIUM ARE MULTIPLE (AND BY NOW ALSO VERY WELL KNOWN)? IT ALLOWS, FOR INSTANCE, TO PLAY WITH MULTIPLE TEMPORALITIES AND MULTIPLE NARRATIVE LINES.

FOR INSTANCE, PAST AND PRESENT EVENTS ARE RENDERED WITH DIFFERENT COLOUR PALETTES. THIS TRICK (WHICH I SHOULD DEFINITELY LEARN!) MAKES IT EASIER AND VERY INTUITIVE FOR THE READER TO FOLLOW THE STORY, THE STORIES, THE HISTORY AND THE HISTORIES NARRATED IN THE BOOK...

THE KING OF BANGKOK TELLS THE RISE AND FALL OF THAILAND, FROM THE ECONOMIC BOOM TO THE FINANCIAL CRASH OF THE EARLY 2000S. THE STORY OF BANGKOK, ITS INCREASING TOURISTIFICATION AND THE CONFLICTING EXPECTATIONS IT BRINGS ABOUT, INTERSECT AND OVERLAP WITH NOK'S LIFE TRAJECTORIES. A YOUNG MAN, NOK MOVES TO BANGKOK FROM A RURAL VILLAGE AND LIVES, GROWS, THRIVES AND FALLS FOLLOWING THE RHYTHM OF THE CITY THAT, IN TURN, BECOMES ALMOST A SYNECOCHE FOR THE ENTIRE COUNTRY. ALL THE PROMISES AND HOPES FOR DEMOCRACY AND MODERNITY, FOR BETTER LIFE AND DIGNIFIED LABOUR CONDITIONS ARE DEEPLY ENTANGLED WITH THE INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY; UNFORTUNATELY THESE CAME WITH THE LOANS AND CONDITIONS OF THE IMF. IN THAILAND AS ELSEWHERE WHERE THE IMF HAS ARRIVED, PROMISES FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH ARE EPHEMERAL AND THE PROMISES OF POLITICAL STABILITY PROVE EQUALLY FLEETING.



APPENDIX 1 (211-215) OFFERS A BRIEF BUT CLEAR TIMETABLE OF THE EVENTS, HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL AGAINST WHICH NOK'S LIFE UNFOLDS

- HARDCORE ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERLUDE -



I THOROUGHLY DESCRIBED WHAT HAPPENED IN THAILAND IN TERMS OF CRYPTOCOLONIALISM®

FOR ME, WHAT HAPPENED IS SHEER CAPITALISM.



THE STORIES OF NOK, HIS FAMILY, HIS FRIENDS AND COMRADES ARE CRUCIAL TO THE MAKING OF HISTORY YET THESE STORIES OF EVERYDAY PEOPLE, THEIR EVERY LIFE AND EVERYDAY STRUGGLES OFTEN GO UNNOTICED, UNTOLD AND SILENCED BECAUSE THEY POSSIBLY DISTURB OUR ACADEMIC CONSCIENCES AND OUR HOLIDAYS TOO. THE POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND THE REPRESSIVE TURN THAT FOLLOWED THE MILITARY COUP, THE EXPLOITATIVE LABOUR REGIMES THAT MADE THAILAND A VERY ATTRACTIVE TOURIST DESTINATION, ALL THESE ASPECTS (AND MANY OTHERS THAT YOU'LL FIND OUT IF YOU READ THE BOOK - AND YOU SHOULD REALLY READ IT!) ARE STILL PART OF TODAY'S SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF THAILAND YET SO LITTLE WE KNOW ABOUT THEM AND SO LITTLE WE TALK ABOUT THEM. PERHAPS BECAUSE WE WANT TO HOLD ON TO SOME LITTLE EXOTIC DREAMS OF A FAR AWAY BUDDHIST HEAVEN FULL OF SMILING PEOPLE.

(or perhaps it's just me not quite update about Thai politics!)

THIS IS TO SAY THAT THE KING OF BANGKOK IS A POWERFUL YET DELICATE JOURNEY INTO THE QUITE UNKNOWN HISTORY OF A COUNTRY AND DRAGS THE READER INTO NOK'S LIFE WHICH - YOU SOON REALISE - IS AN INDIVIDUAL AND AT THE SAME TIME COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE FOR A BETTER LIFE. IT'S A PERSONAL IN FACT VERY POLITICAL EXPLORATION OF WHAT IT TAKES TO NAVIGATE UNCERTAIN AND OFTEN VIOLENT TIMES. AND YES, I TOTALLY SEE THAT THERE'S A BIT OF WUTHER BUSSET^① THERE. IT'S THE ITALIAN NEW EPIC, BABE! YOU NEED TO CHECK IT OUT 😊



- ① BRITNEY SPEARS IS A CONTROVERSIAL (RECENTLY REHABILITATED) POP SINGER AND ICONIC ANTI-LITERARY FEMINIST. FOR THE SAKE OF CLARITY, SHE HAS NEVER WRITTEN OR SANG ANYTHING VAGUELY RELATED TO ANTHROPOLOGY.
- ② FOR INSTANCE: RUMSBY CHARLIE (2020) RETROSPECTIVE (RE) PRESENTATION: TURNING THE WRITTEN ETHNOGRAPHIC TEXT INTO AN 'ETHNO-GRAPHIC'. *entanglements* 3(2): 7-27
- ③ HERZFELD MICHAEL (2002) THE ABSENCE PRESENCE: DISCOURSES OF CRYPTO COLONIALISM. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101(4): 899-926
- ④ WUTHER BUSSET (1999) Q. Einaudi (ITA)
(YOU CAN ALSO FIND IT IN ENGLISH - RECOMMENDED!)
* THE NEW ITALIAN EPIC, WU MING COLLECTIVE