The invention of the graphic novel: underground comix and corporate aesthetics

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Description

Title: The invention of the graphic novel: underground comix and corporate aesthetics

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This dissertation explores what I term the invention of the graphic novel, or more specifically, the process by which stories told in comics (or graphic narratives) form became longer, more complex, concerned with deeper themes and symbolism, and formally more coherent, ultimately requiring a new publication format, which came to be known as the graphic novel. This format was invented in fits and starts throughout the twentieth century, and I argue throughout this dissertation that only by examining the nuances of the publishing history of twentieth-century comics can we fully understand the process by which the graphic novel emerged. In particular, I show that previous studies of the history of comics tend to focus on one of two broad genealogies: 1) corporate, commercially-oriented, typically superhero-focused comic books, produced by teams of artists; 2) individually-produced, counter-cultural, typically autobiographical underground comix and their subsequent progeny. In this dissertation, I bring these two genealogies together, demonstrating that we can only truly understand the evolution of comics toward the graphic novel format by considering the movement of artists between these two camps and the works that they produced along the way. Ultimately, I show that comics became graphic novels by invoking notions of visual parataxis, holistic forms, and Modernist unity, which allowed for book-length comics that were much more than just collections of comic-book pages, but instead were a new publishing form. My dissertation traces a series of moments in the history of the graphic novel. In my introduction, I take up the current field of comic studies and establish the terms by which we distinguish the modern graphic novel from other book-length comics. In my first chapter, I examine the cross-pollination of Modernism and comics, arguing that they share an emphasis on unifying disparate elements, with an emphasis on the problem of visual or graphic narrative. In my second and third chapters, I take up the rise of the first comic-book auteur, Jack Kirby, who helped shape the early comic-book industry and show how Gil Kane and Richard Corben took his model to create the first graphic novel to imagine itself as such in 1976. In chapters four and five, I examine the works of Art Spiegelman, Frank Miller, and Alan Moore, who all, in 1986-87, published works that established the graphic novel in the public consciousness as a viable sales format. Finally, in chapter six and my coda, I take up the works of Alison Bechdel, Chris Ware, and an argument by Eddie Campbell that allow us to consider the ramifications of the codification of the graphic novel.

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Graphic narrative art is a fascinating phenomenon that emerged centuries ago with the expansion of literacy and the publication industry. The earliest example of a repeating comic character dates back to the late 1700s. By following the growth of print technology in Europe and Asia, it is possible to understand how and why artists across cultures developed different strategies for telling stories with pictures. This book reflects my circuitous arrival to the subject of comics by way of the study of narrative art and theater. I read comics when I was young, but I was never an avid collector and had largely lost interest in reading comics years before I first picked up Art Spiegelman’s Maus in 1992 and then three years later discovered Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics. Since the emergence of the graphic novel in the mid-1980s, popular media notes that “The Comic Book Grows Up” (Salomon) and celebrates a new generation of “Not Funnies” (McGrath). In order to thoroughly explore the evolution of the American graphic narrative, this work will additionally analyze four sample comics that defined their era in terms of form and content. The first analysis approaches George Herriman’s newspaper comic strip Krazy Kat (1913). Relying on anthropomorphic characters and visible aesthetics, Crumb addressed controversial issues such as the thriving counterculture of the 1960s. Eventually, the series of analyses closes with Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s postmodernist graphic novel Watchmen discussing the legitimacy of vigilantism. In graphic novels, including wordless graphic novels, readers apply this skill to multiple images while also synthesizing or integrating knowledge from prior panels. Graphic novels like Shaun Tan’s The Arrival, Milt Gross’ He Done Her Wrong, and Sara Varon’s Robot Dreams follow in the German woodcutter tradition of using images alone to convey a story. Readers exposed to wordless picture books would not necessarily find it difficult to read wordless graphic novels, despite the complexity of text structure. The story conveyed by a graphic novelist, then, is as intricate as a story told by a traditional author, regardless of the age group of the target audience.