

*Raluca MĂRGINAȘ*

## BEGINNINGS OF COMIC BOOKS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS: A SEQUENCE IN SEQUENTIAL ART

**Abstract.** This paper is an introductory study in the imaginary of graphic novels and their role in the evolution of contemporary popular culture. On the other hand, this is not only a history of comic strips and their yellow journalism resources, but it provides an understanding of the social impact of these very specific forms of visual expression. The discussion of the impact the “fantasy-and-phantasms-producing machine” of the comics had on the public imaginary moves from the “codes” of the comic books to the fundamental idea of “auterism”. From an applied interpretation on comic strips, done in correlation with the “auteur theory”, comes a description of the roots of the “comics environment”.

**Key words.** Imaginary studies, comics, graphic novels

When writing about comics, it is almost impossible to maintain a hieratic or even a strictly academic tone. It becomes necessary to let go off the rope, to come out of the ivory tower, as you feel the syncopated intensifications of the world into which you are transported. The academic community studies the imaginary of graphic novels (the difference between comics and graphic novels to be discussed later) with keen interest and involvement in popular culture, a form of unofficial education.

By no means histories in their own right, sealed with a band of political correctness, the recurrent images of popular culture have at their origin racist undertones derived from vaudevilles, with troubadours, wild Indians, villains and the indispensable testosterone heroes. In the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American popular culture carried with it a baggage likely to suffer various adulterations, due to the increase in the number of immigrants, to excessive

urbanization, to an economy ever booming, all these gathered in a boiling melting pot. Soon, thousands of people would simultaneously enjoy large quantities of music, literature, vaudeville, and later film. Subsequently, communities that will use English as a second language are formed, contesting the prejudices of the white Americans by creating alternative business networks. Pulp literature, by artists whose main sources of income (oil portraits, works on commission) are no longer of interest to them, suffers a mutation towards the patronage of collective consumption: periodicals and widely circulated tabloids.

It seems that the readers of yellow journalism, especially of comic strips published during 1895 were immigrants, according to Paul Buhle<sup>1</sup>. The Sunday supplement of the *New York World*, managed by Joseph Pulitzer, hosted the first cartoon panel, which functioned as a catalyst for later serialization: “The Yellow Kid” – a bald, drunk, ill-shapen kid from *Hogan’s Alley*, dressed in a very yellow nightgown.



1 Paul Buhle, ‘Popular culture’, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*, ed. Christopher Bigsby, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 391-392.

The need to express a meaning without resorting to language that is too difficult or goes on for too long starts here, and will later spread with the help of technology and of carefully designed business plans. Despite the precarious financial situation, signs of personal freedom in the use of leisure time by the middle classes start to emerge. The Americans’ disillusionment with World War I, together with the taming of radical causes of widespread impact, such as socialism, feminism, unionism, helps lay the foundation for a new anti-puritan ethos. Felt as existential and social uncertainty, this will settle in again later, in the 70s, also against the background of normative discrediting.<sup>2</sup> Coming back to the late 20s, one can notice a decline of comic strips in newspapers, which are being replaced by quasi-realistic characters with dubious narratives: Tarzan, Terry and the pirates, Blondie the flapper, Mammy Yokum and her mantra: “good is better than evil because it’s nicer”, simplifications of human character such as Superman or Batman, (in the 40s), characters drawn by young Jewish men in their studios in New York.<sup>3</sup> Their intellectual quality is targeted to be assimilated easily by a readership that is not requiring intellectual satisfaction but rather reads these to fill the void of a need.

Accused that it corrupted the innocent minds of the young by promoting gra-

2 *Idem*, p. 395.

3 *Idem*, p. 399.

tuitous violence in its horror line, EC Comics was subjected to congressional hearing and control. Thus, the most famous satirical publication of its time (1955) circumvents the use of the “Comics Code”<sup>4</sup> by adopting a new, “non-comics” format in black and white.<sup>5</sup>

Here are a few examples of censorship, as found in article 10, section A: “The crime of kidnapping shall never be portrayed in any detail, nor shall any profit accrue to the abductor or kidnapper. The criminal or the kidnapper must be punished in every case”<sup>6</sup>; or regarding the use of dialogue, from section C: “1. “Profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, or words or symbols which have acquired



4 The Comics Code was a method of self-disciplining of publications, in order to protect the young readership from immoral acts and depictions. It was adopted in 1954 by the “Comics Magazine Association of America”, and a logo appeared on the cover of all issues that respected the code.

5 Buhle, p. 401.

6 <http://www.comicartville.com/comic-code.htm>10, 14 June 2010, published originally in *Comics Magazine Association of America. Facts about Code-Approved Comics Magazines*. New York, the Association, 1959.

undesirable meanings are forbidden”<sup>7</sup>; regarding marriage and sex, still in section C: “3. Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered. A sympathetic understanding of the problems of love is not a license for moral distortion”<sup>8</sup>. In the 80s, numerous independent companies appear on the market, and artists start looking for their own styles, as different from the mainstream. Three publications appear that dismantle the conventions churned by the industry up to that point. The talk of the town is the duo Frank Miller – Klaus Janson, with their *The Dark Knight Returns* (a brutal satire that redefines comics, with an introduction by Alan Moore, in which Moore says, among other things that Miller “has taken a character whose every trivial and incidental detail is graven in stone on the hearts and minds of the comic fans that make up his audience and managed to dramatically redefine that character without contradicting one jot of the character’s mythology. Everything is exactly the same, except for the fact that it’s all totally different.”<sup>9</sup> The other two are Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (a “graphic memoir” inspired by his father’s memories of the Holocaust), and *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave

7 *Idem*.

8 *Idem*.

9 ‘The Mark of Batman: An Introduction by Alan Moore’, in Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, DC Comics; 10 Anniversary edition 1997.

Gibbons. The manifesto concerning the new hero escorting *The Dark Knight Returns* offers a contextualization of the comics environment, alongside literature and film, by proposing a new take on the hero, undertaken in contemporary fashion.

In 1954, censorship constrained creativity and thus comic strips were forced to show the same superficial characters, caught in the same platitudinous games, against the backgrounds of social anachronisms. 1986, the *annus mirabilis*, crashes over the old standards and represents the start of a continuous flux of similar publications: *Scott Pilgrim and the Infinite Sadness* by Brian Lee O'Malley, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, *All-Star Superman #4* by Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely, *Daredevil #86* by Michael Lark, *I love Led Zeppelin* by Ellen Forney, *The Squirrel Mother* by Megan Kelso, etc.<sup>10</sup>

The term "graphic novel" starts to be popularized beginning with 1978, when Will Eisner was looking for a publisher for his new work, *A Contract with God*, which approached themes derived from social reality and challenged the reader intellectually. In a telephone conversation with the director of Bentam Books, Eisner lets the term drop, gets a meeting, although without a concrete decision yet<sup>11</sup>. Obviously, the interaction between

the two formulas has them vary in weight: sometimes the text will provide what the image does not show, creating thus a switch of functions; in other instances, the text consolidates the image, somewhat tautologically. The experience is not complete unless it appeals to the individual's usual experiences, outside the panels, and this is accomplished by merely suggesting the experience by means of spaces intentionally left blank, or incomplete.<sup>12</sup>

Without any transitory loss of attention, the avid reader goes through an ontogenesis transferred in another medium or universe, populated by familiar figures with whom he can identify. Of course, if we are living in the Golden Age of comic books and graphic novels, an inequitable exchange ensues (because transitory and based on clichéd formulae which impress mass consciousness with an irrefutable dichotomy of virtue vs. vice, whereas human nature is conflictual, as studies in psychology, sociology, anthropology show) between the consumer (the target audience, predisposed to influences) and the great fantasy-and-phantasms-producing "machine", which attracts the readership with "must have it" type strategies. Furthermore, since comic book reading was until recently, and in some cases still is, an extra-curricular activity, without constraints of any kind, it acquired an air

10 Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, Da Capo Press, 2007, p. 9

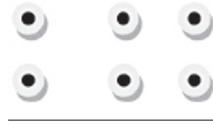
11 Danny Fingeroth, *The Rough Guide to Graphic Novels*, Rough Guides, London, 2008, p. 3

12 Steve Withrow and Alexander Danner, *Character Design for Graphic Novels*, Focal Press, 2007, p. 13



of “cool”, of lack of inhibitions, of a hobby that did not require too much of an effort.

It may be said, for instance, about *Watchmen*, that it uses cinematic techniques in its first sequence, with six successive panels of equal dimensions, and a panoramic one below them. A gradual close-up on the smiley badge lying near a pool of blood follows, then a zoom-out revealing two people present, and the zoom-out continues to a bird’s eye view while a voice-over describes an abject vision of the world depicted (giving a sense of three dimensions). The sound is relative to the distance from the observer, so that we hear the cop’s conclusion just as we stop next to him. The emotional impact of the image is easily transmitted to the reader by the bright red (John Higgins was the colorist), but the view from above provides the detachment needed to solve the crime. The reader is guided in the duration of the moment by a scheme similar to the Morse code:



Sometimes, the dialogue is absent from the panels on a page, which enhances the action as well as the visibility of the images. The flux of uninterrupted experiencing, which the reader witnesses, unfolds, of course, naturally, but what we have are sequences “frozen”, enclosed by frames. A double form of control masters the eye, by accepting the cognitive convention of reading left-to-right.<sup>13</sup> The number of panels on a page is limited in the case of comic strips, whereas in film or animation the action is created by hundreds of consecutive frames flowing imperceptibly.<sup>14</sup>

Sequential art implies a style that exposes all the idiosyncrasies of artists, who are sometimes interchangeable because of ephemeral collaborations. The idea of “auturism” applied to comic strips in correlation with the “auteur theory” in film was formulated by Andrew Sarris in his essay “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962”, and was attacked by Pauline Kael in “Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris”. The first condition stated by Sarris in his match with Kael, refereed by Wolk, refers to “the technical competence of the

13 Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*, W. W. Norton & Company, NY, 1985, p. 42.

14 Eisner, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

director as a criterion of value”<sup>15</sup>. Or, Kael claims that the term is slippery because possibly subjective. The second premise is “the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value”<sup>16</sup>. Here, one may substitute personality with style, since every great comic book artist evidences his own style, but a distinctive style is no proof that the artist is outstanding. The reverse of the situation is impossible. Sarris’ final argument: “[...] interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material”<sup>17</sup>, is the one that Kael attacks most vehemently: “Their ideal

auteur is the man who signs a long-term contract, directs any script that’s handed to him, and expresses himself by shoving bits of style up the crevasses of the plots. If his ‘style’ is in conflict with the story line or subject matter, so much the better – more chance for tension”.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, we should follow the advice given by Alan Moore in a 2003 documentary *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*, directed by Dez Vylenz, that if we only see comics in relation to movies, the best we can acquire is the false perception that comics are still movie scenes, instead of concentrating of the things which only the medium of comics can render.

### References

- Buhle, Paul, ‘Popular culture’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*, ed. Christopher Bigsby, Cambridge University Press, 2006
- Eisner, Will, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1985.
- Fingerroth, Danny, *The Rough Guide to Graphic Novels*, Rough Guides, London, 2008.
- Moore, Alan, ‘The Mark of Batman: An Introduction by Alan Moore’, in Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, DC Comics; 10 Anniversary edition 1997.
- Withrow, Steve and Alexander Danner, *Character Design for Graphic Novels*, Focal Press, New York, 2007.
- Wolk, Douglas, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, Da Capo Press, 2007

### Internet references

- <http://www.comicartville.com/comicscode.htm><sup>10</sup>, 14 june 2010, published originally in *Comics Magazine Association of America. Facts about Code-Approved Comics Magazines*. New York, the Association, 1959.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.