

...words and images belong together

Edward Tufte, The Visual Display of Quantitative Information

Graphic Novels for Graphic Designers

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Contents

Preface

Introduction

The graphic novel in a historical context

Maus by Art Spiegelman

Graphic novels with a serious purpose and the acceptance of the genre.

Watchmen by Alan Moore 1986-87

Structural complexity in the reinvention of the super hero genre.

Arkham Asylum 1989

The importance of non-linear structures.

Gods in Chaos 1992

From print to multimedia: the page as an organizing narrative structure.

The Sandman by Neil Gaiman 1988

Fiction, folklore and mythology: graphic novels in academic context

Interaction of text and image

Comics and other media

Conclusion

Bibliography

References

List of images

Introduction:

This dissertation discusses graphic novels and their contribution to visual culture as well as their relevance to the teaching of Graphic Design. The paper will argue the case for including graphic novels on Graphic Design syllabi by demonstrating how different aspects of the structure of graphic novels and comics in general can be useful to graphic designers as producers of image/text narratives.

It will also show how the genre's staging of narrative delimited in frames and its structuring through the weaving of image sequences can be used as a reference model and a resource for the creative process. Furthermore this dissertation also investigates how many aspects of the narrative and graphic devices of comics can help an animator, a film director or a playwright to tell a story in a more efficient way.

This dissertation will attempt to put the graphic novel in a historical context by giving a general chronological account of the genre in Britain and in the United States in the last three decades and analyse what the author consider to be significant examples of modern age graphic novels. The dissertation will specifically focus on the following titles:

Maus by Art Spiegelman

Watchmen by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

Arkham Asylum by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean

The Sandman by Neil Gaiman

The Woman Trap by Enki Bilal

In order to define what a graphic novel is, the paper will look into the origins of the term graphic novel and how its definition has influenced the public's perception of the genre.

Finally it will explore the graphic elements and narrative structure of graphic novels, drawing parallels with other forms of sequential art and discuss how the medium has evolved and dominated other cultural forms.

Chapter 1. The graphic novel in a historical context:

Before beginning to define the term graphic novel it is important to point out a disputed fact that is acknowledged by Roger Sabin in *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (1996, p. 165): the idea of the graphic novel was mainly the invention of publishers' public relation departments who were keen to sell adult comics to a wider public by disassociating them from the comics aimed at children and associating them with literature. While this perception has indeed been helpful in gaining respectability for graphic novels, it is a distortion of the facts, as graphic novels were in existence long before the term was coined. Nevertheless, as also pointed out by Sabin, the term also suited creators and readers, who wanted to differentiate their work from lighter works intended for children and the industry began to encourage mainstream media to publish and to advertise outside the small circle of fans. However, there was more than just a marketing strategy and graphic novels were far from being the recent development public relations wanted the public to believe in. (Sabin 1996, p.92-94)

Typically, a graphic novel is a long-form work rather than a short publication and has a thematic unity. The term "graphic novel" also implies that a significant part of the product is given over to a single long-form story and also that the book is published in a higher quality format than a traditional comic book. However, according to Saraceni in the *The Language of Comics*: "the distinction is nothing more than a matter of labels, and has barely anything to do with content or with any other feature". (2003 p.4)

The term "graphic novel", in its current application, was popularised by artist Will Eisner, as it appeared on the cover the 1978 paperback edition of his *A Contract with God*, leading many sources to credit Eisner with originating the term. This type of illustrated story is generally acknowledged to be the first example of the graphic novel, a "one-shot publication in book form with a continuous comic narrative". (Bettley, 2001 p.122-135).

Graphic novels have since progressed and become sophisticated works of graphic literature and “in a longer narrative there was more scope for building up tension, generating atmosphere, developing characters and so on” (Sabin 1996 p.165). Will Eisner’s commitment to the genre inspired many others like Art Spiegelman and helped to establish graphic novels as a literary form. (Gravett 2005)

Chapter 2. Maus by Art Spiegelman: graphic novels with a serious purpose and the acceptance of the genre.

Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* is perhaps the best-known example of graphic novel with a serious theme and mainstream recognition was sealed when Spiegelman was the first comics creator ever to receive a Pulitzer prize for literature in 1992 (Sabin, 1996 p.188). In *Maus*, Spiegelman uses the personification of cats and mice to illustrate the destructive and predatory relationship between the Nazis of Hitler’s Third Reich and the European Jews of the 30’s and 40’s in an almost documentary footage style (fig.1). *Maus* is a journey into the memories of Spiegelman’s father, who was interned by the Nazis during the second World War.

According to Sabin (1996)

By anthropomorphising events, the horror was personalised in a way that it could have not been if the characters had been depicted in human form. (Sabin, 1996 p.182)

Originally released in instalment form, the compilation *Maus* Volume 1, sold for ten dollars in book form. The fact that it was not advertised and the subtle and actionless front cover (fig.2) drew much attention and came as a surprise; even more so as comic books were traditionally seen as depicting costumed super heroes in dynamic poses. (Golda, G.J. 1997).



Fig.1: Spiegelman use of documentary style narrative in *Maus*.

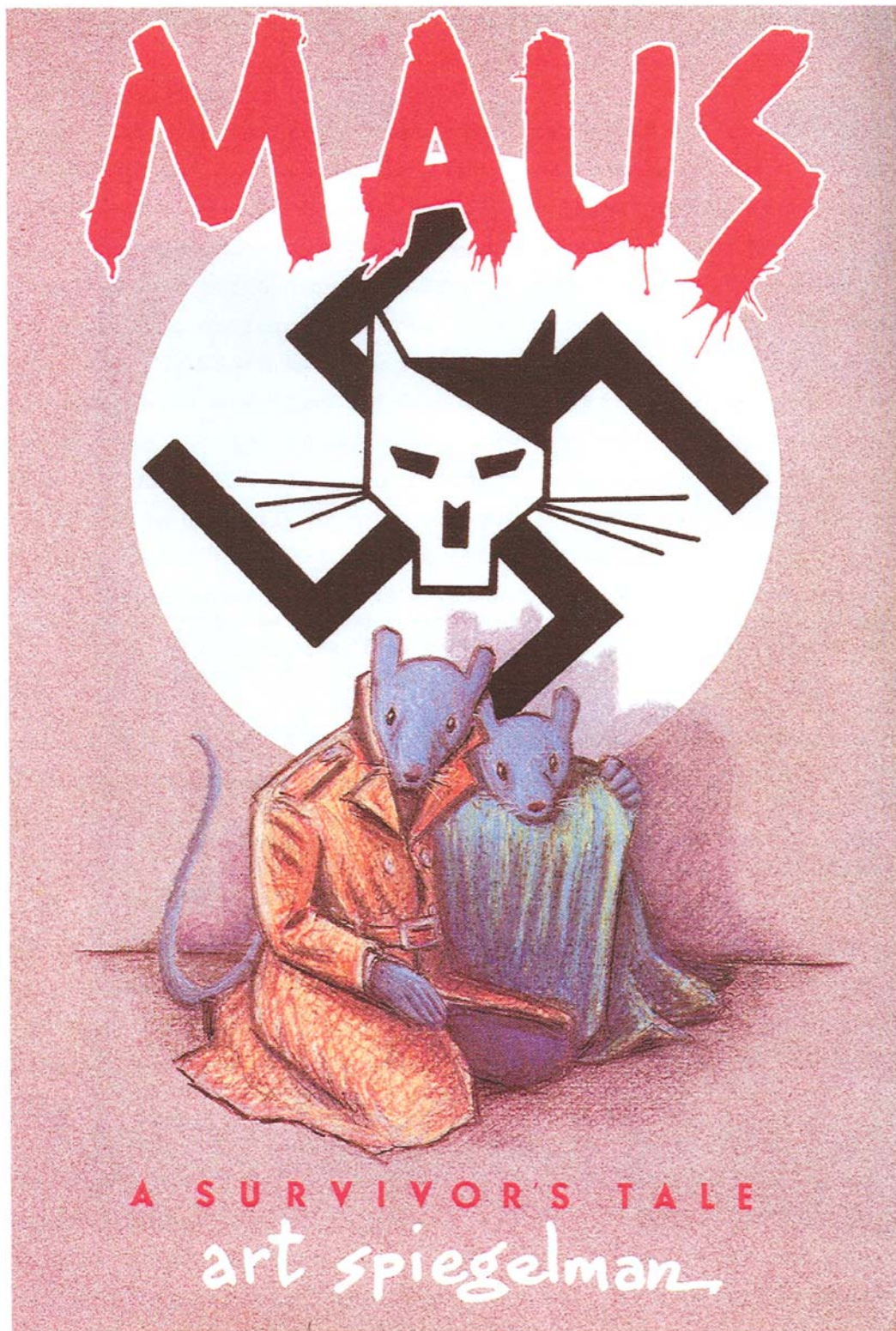


Fig.2: Cover of *Maus: a survivor's tale*

Chapter 3. Watchmen: Structural complexity in the reinvention of the super-hero genre.

The superhero genre also evolved towards more mature stories with the publication in 1986-1987 of Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. Much of *Watchmen's* poetry lies in its parallel narratives and visual motifs. *Watchmen's* themes deal with surveillance, symmetry and time, its labyrinthine plot includes multiple perspectives, incorporating flashbacks, and precognitive clues. (Thomson, 2001)

There are several academic websites devoted to exhaustive annotation of the 400 pages of the series, which is not surprising considering its richness in symmetries and details. Many British artists were involved in the reinvention of this archetypical American medium. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons had previously been involved with British science-fiction title 2000 AD and a comic version of the decidedly British Dr Who. This artistic and commercial impact became known as the "UK invasion" of the 80s and British writers and artists were even invited to "interfere" with America's most sacred comic-book institutions. As Thomson points out (2001):

Unprecedented in its structural complexity and density of reference, *Watchmen* dwarfed all expectation of the medium, attracting high praise from *Newsweek*, *Time* and *Rolling Stone*, publications not previously known for their critical interest in comic books. (Thomson, 2001)

Gibbons' illustrations are a tribute to the golden age style of super hero comics but *Watchmen* is usually admired for its narrative.

The detailed artwork contrasts with a simple lay out based on a grid of nine panels [...]. A full-page panel does not appear until the climax within the final chapter (Bettley, 2001 p.140).

Gibbons points out that the aim was to focus on the story. By maintaining the same size for all pictures and obtain an effect similar to the experience of watching cinema or TV. "Because the frame or the

proscenium arch is always the same you block it out and get sucked into the picture that much more quickly". (Gibbons 1987 cited in Sabin 1996).

The presence of the gutters, the space between the panels, means that there is a gap that needs to be filled by the readers every time they move from one panel to the next.



Fig.3: Watchmen: lay out based on a grid of nine panels

As Saraceni (2003,p.51-56) observes, the gutter represents a gap in time or in space, or both and is a conceptual gap not necessarily a physical one. It is an important element in the narrative because it functions as a cognitive aid and represents the empty place needed by the reader in order to reconstruct the story. This capacity to make sense of incomplete information is called inference, while the perception of series of panels or sentences as unified texts is called coherence. (Saraceni 2003 p.51-56).

Chapter 4. Arkham Asylum: the importance of non-linear structures

Panels can also express a variety of conventional feelings or moods through variations in size and shape as in the case of the graphic novel *Arkham Asylum*. Published as a single hardcover volume, *Arkham Asylum* became a commercial success in 1989 selling more than a quarter of a million copies. (Thomson 2001). The text is written by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean provided atmospheric and macabre images accomplished through a fusion of traditional painting techniques combined with Adobe Photoshop technology.

In this graphic novel Batman is trapped inside Gotham's criminal madhouse and is surrounded by vengeful enemies while his sanity is put into question and he confronts his own demons. The prisoners take over the asylum with the goal of bringing Batman within the walls they claim he belongs. (Thomson 2001). Golda (1997) suggests that, "his vigilantism and destructive nature make a powerful case for his inclusion to Arkham's tormented confines". The Joker forces the issue of Batman's sexuality and his (according to the joker) inclination for masquerade and bondage. (Golda 1997) and the asylum's psychotherapist tries to keep the chaos at bay:

We're not even sure if the Joker can be defined as insane. We're beginning to think it may be a neurological disorder, similar to Tourette' s Syndrome. It's quite possible we may actually be looking at some kind of brilliant new modification, more suited to urban

life at the end of the Twentieth Century... .
(Morrison,1989)

Golda sees the beauty of this story as being its ambiguous representation of good and evil.

For once in the sorted history of D.C. comics we are privy to a view of characters that doesn't confine them to stereotypical roles of good and evil. The inmates are actually given a motivation beyond revenge. They are seen for the first time as patients in need of counseling and heavy doses of Prozac. (Golda, G.J. 1997)

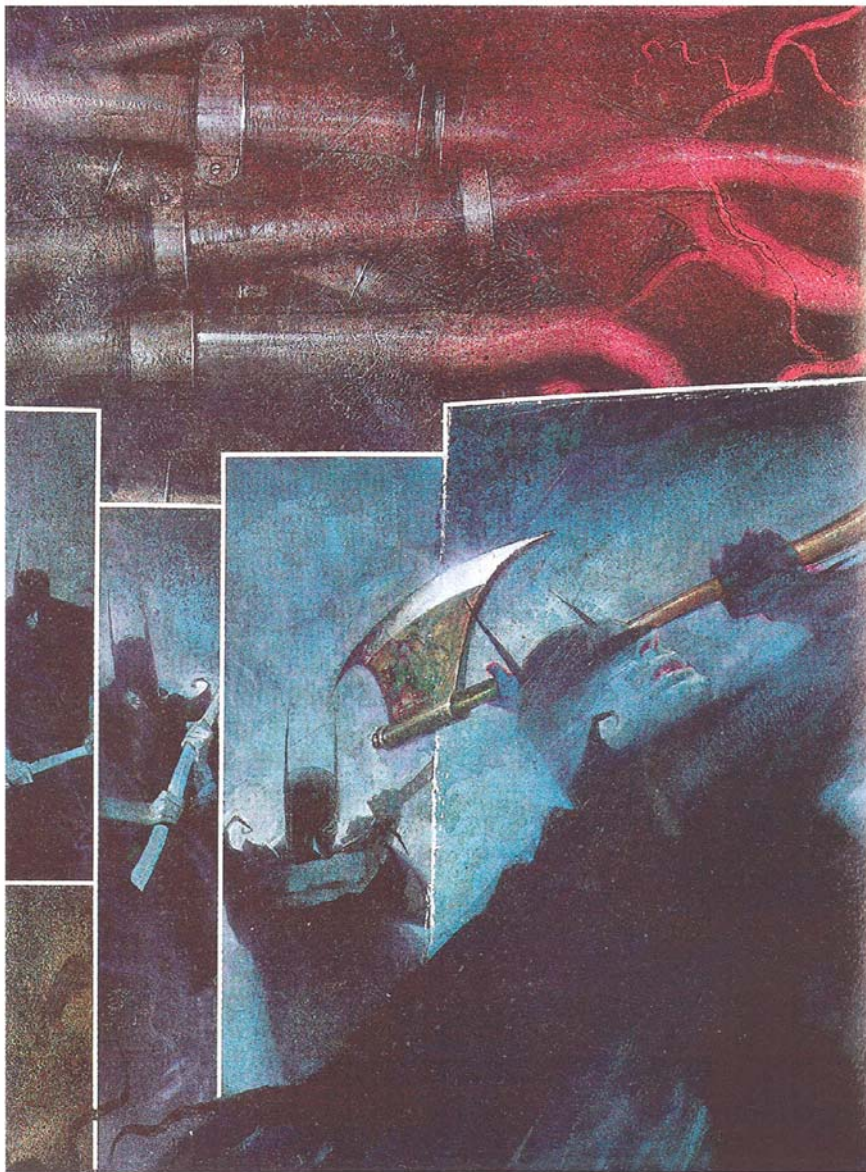


Fig.4: Dave McKean use of panels and suggestive imagery in Arkham Asylum.

Morrison and McKean employ suggestion and psychology, rather than special effects, in order to maintain the gothic mood of Bob Kane's original Batman drawings. In *Arkham Asylum* Batman becomes a symbol and an almost supernatural presence, accordingly illustrated by fusing photorealistic and iconic images rich in shadows and nebulous textures (Thomson, 2001).

While in some texts the panels are linked together mainly by repetition, in other texts the binding force is the relation based on a common semantic field. (Saraceni 2003 p.46-48)

Saraceni observes that, "comic texts are formed of strings of panels in the same way as language texts are formed of strings of sentences". The aspect of text analysis that deals with the ways in which sentences are connected to one another is called cohesion and this applies to all texts including comics. (Saraceni 2003 p.36).

He also observes how in some graphic novels "usually panels are connected to each other even though they are several pages apart". (Saraceni 2003 p.43).

In *Comics and Film: A Narrative Perspective* Christiansen demonstrates that

Even if panel boundaries are broken, the double-page spread provides a tableau on which the panels can be read individually, seen individually, or viewed as part of a whole. Even before starting to decode the text, the reader scans the page as a whole, in order to build an expectation of what is to come, what should be looked at and in what order. (Christiansen 2000 p.107-121)

The aim of this non-linear narrative structure is to allow for variations in the sequencing of data relationships thereby reducing predictability and increasing diversity in the viewing experience. (Legrady, 2000). According to Legrady

A key aspect of non-linear narrative is that it gives the viewer the freedom to access elements in the networked structure arbitrarily resulting in greater narrative complexity and a more interactive reading experience. (Legrady, 2000)

An interesting aspect of *Arkham Asylum* is that what is shown in the panel is so subjective that notions of "reality" become almost irrelevant exposing how tenuous our grasp of "reality" really is. However, as even McKean admits "Batman brings with him all these ridiculous trappings, and even though in *Arkham Asylum* it was reduced to a symbol, it is still a Batman comic". (McKean interviewed by Andrew Andreasen, date not available),

Chapter 5. Froid Equateur by Enki Bilal: from print to multimedia, the page as an organising narrative structure.

Enki Bilal is a science fiction author also worth mentioning. As Paul Gravett observes in an article in the magazine *Comic Collector*

his vision is very dark and sombre and reflects his upbringing in war-torn Eastern Europe (he was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia) and his absorption of the films of his fellow Eastern Europeans, particularly those of Tarkowsky and Zulawsky. (Gravett, 1992 p.45.)

In 1992, with the titles *La Femme Piegée* and *Froid Equateur* (translated into English as *The Woman Trap* and *Gods in Chaos*), both set in a decadent future populated by Egyptian Gods, Bilal has truly achieved recognition as both writer and artist. Their use of earthy, sensuous and atmospheric paintings (fig.5) prompted director Alain Resnais to commission Bilal to design sets for his film *Life is a Bed of Roses* (1983). (Gravett, 1992 p.45)

However, what is particularly relevant about these titles, apart from the beautiful imagery and interesting stories is their interactive CD-ROM version. According to Legrady, in the non-linear multimedia environment, there are many possible methods by which a story can be visualized and designed to evolve. The CD-ROM presents each frame of Bilal's *Froid Equateur* as a single full screen image. The result of the translation from

print to multimedia, despite the richness in texture of the drawings, is a striking loss in meaning.

The expansion to the cinematic, full screen format with text at the bottom and linear forward/backward sequencing capabilities through clicking buttons erased any sense of context for each image's relation to the larger narrative". (Legrady, 2000 p.86)

The resultant full screen linearity introduces a rigidity into the narrative flow revealed in Enki Bilal's work suggests the importance of the page as an organizing narrative structure where "the frames function as units of a syntax, receiving much of their meaning by being seen in next to each other". (Legrady 2000, pg.86).

In fact, as pointed out by Christiansen, whereas the cinematic form produces meaning through the predetermined sequencing of time based scenes, comics rely on sequence as well, but instead of timed visual sequences and "sound"; groupings of image/text panels on the page function as guides to create meaning. Since the meanings of images change when juxtaposed with other images, it follows that images are normally seen in relation to each other, and, like words positioned together in a sentence, they oscillate each other, slightly expanding, re-adjusting and transforming their meaning through contrast, association, extension, difference, etc. The different ways in which panels are linked together in order to generate continuity and direct the reader's attention in comics can act very effectively in films, TV and animations, an example being the caption in a comic acting as a voice-over in a film adding dramatic effect and mood to the story (Saraceni, 2003 p.63).

Zabel suggests that other important elements in the page composition and that contribute in the kinetic effect of a page are the text containers (caption boxes and speech balloons). These shapes should therefore be carefully arranged so that a dynamic balance between concentrations of detail and "breathing space" is created. The reading of "these elements, also imposes a flow to the eye's progress across the page improving the story's flow and impact". (Zabel, date not available).

The visual perspective from which each panel is drawn can influence the interpretation of the story so the story can be told from different points of views, producing very different meanings (Saraceni, 2003 p.72-74).



Fig.5: use of atmospheric paintings in *Froid Equateur* by Enki Bilal

A sequence of panels in long-shot for example, will emotionally distance the reader from the character. Alternatively, another common technique is the close-up, which is used extensively in films too and which involves the reader more intimately with the characters (Saraceni, 2003 p.78-84). Factor that can affect the reading experience and the order in which panels are viewed include therefore, the position of the characters in the panel composition, the way they are facing, the direction they are moving and especially the direction of their gaze.

For example, if the scene is a crowded bar, and the characters are sitting in the foreground, the viewer's eye will tend to ignore the backdrop. On the other hand, if the protagonist is sitting in the background, the composition acquires realistic depth (Zabel, date not available).

As in the case of *Arkham Asylum* it is also important to vary the size of panels in order to provide a three-dimensional effect and suggest change. In black and white comics, the creation of areas of solid or near-solid black carefully balanced over the page, gives the art weight and substance.

Chapter 6. The Sandman by Neil Gaiman. Fiction, folklore and mythology: graphic novels in an academic context.

The graphic novel *The Sandman*, published by D.C Comics is often cited as one of the most important titles of the modern age in this genre. Sandman in reality had first appeared in 1941 as a "Member of the Justice Society of America", an early superhero team-up series but did not become a commercial success until recreated by British author Neil Gaiman. The series that ran from issue #1 (1988) to #75 (1996), made a literary star out of Gaiman, and became also known for the covers by illustrator Dave McKean, which function to define the story's atmosphere and are designed to dramatically announce the visual narrative, cueing the reader into the overall tone of the story. The title character is the anthropomorphic personification of a dream. The series begins as Dream

is captured by a coven of wizards. His capture, and the space of the years he finds himself imprisoned shape the events of the series.

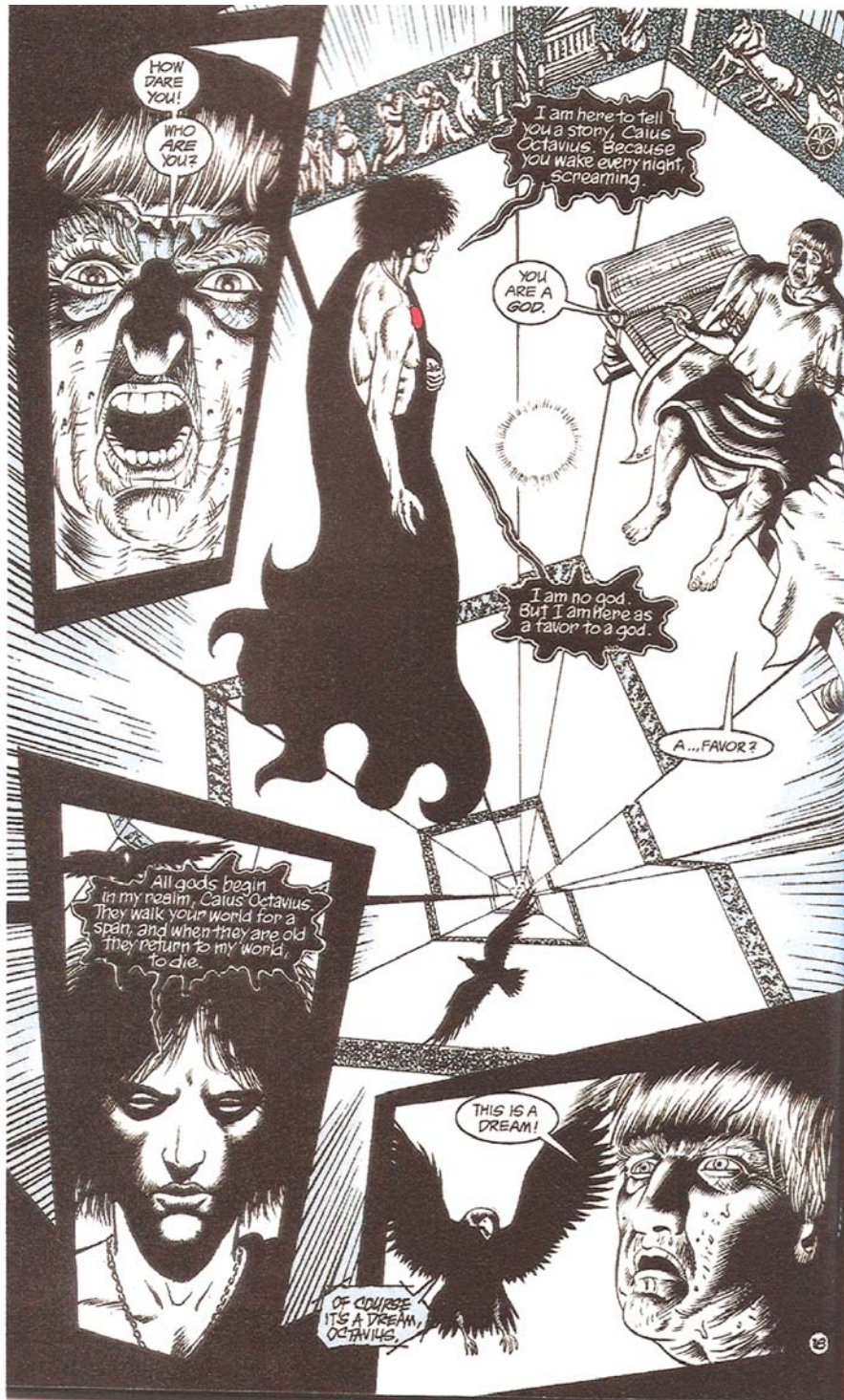


Fig.6: *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman. Use of panels and balance of graphic elements with black and white areas. Themes deal with dreams, death, mythology, history and folklore.

As Sabin notices :

The Sandman was one of the comics that captured something of its time. In particular, it chimed with some of the preoccupations of the "gothic punk" subculture, especially the romantic obsession with dead. (1996 p.168).

The Sandman won several awards, including, for issue 19, The World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story. In the author's opinion, one of the reasons it is so loved is perhaps due to its blend of fiction, European folklore and Greek mythology, making it accessible to a broad spectrum of readers.

Finally, not only were graphic novels for everyone, but they were also taught in classes. *The Sandman* has been a primary text for classes on myth at the University of California and according to the National Association of Comic Art Educators (NACAE),

[...] while most schools still hold antiquated notions of what comics are, a growing number of colleges have started offering programs and classes in comics (or sequential art, as it is often referred to). Teaching comics in college is a relatively recent phenomenon. The few colleges that have implemented programs have met with tremendous success." (NACAE ref.)

The Sandman is really about dreams and the nature of tales. Because of Neil's popularity, *The Sandman* began to be collected into trade paperbacks and even the more expensive hardbacks. This would have been unheard of twenty years ago.

Chapter 7. Interaction of text and image.

As observed by Saraceni (1993 p.28): "in comics and graphic novels, text and image do not just mirror one another, but interact in many different ways", each contributing to the interpretation of the story.

Relationships created between text and image include:

- Picture specific combination where the words provide a soundtrack to the text
- Combinations where the text and image give the same message
- Combinations where words amplify the image
- Parallel combinations where each element follows its own narratives without necessarily intersecting
- Montage where the words become graphic elements in the panel
- Interdependent combinations, where neither the text nor images read on their own would make sense (McCloud, 1993 p.153-55)

It follows that the verbal text needs collaboration from the visual text, which provides the reader with the fundamental elements for the interpretation of the story. Words can be perceived as images and certain images convey their meaning in a way, which make them similar to words. (Saraceni 2003 p.18)

Saraceni argues that "in comics and graphic novels the graphic value of words can be exploited because letters are not usually typed but handwritten". Handwriting is closely associated with human agency and allows the designer much more freedom than a set typeface resulting in a more organic and versatile image that is neither purely visual nor purely verbal but a blend of the two. (Saraceni 2003 p.20-21).

Will Eisner is famous for blurring these distinctions. In *Comics and Sequential Art* Eisner observes:

Typesetting does have a kind of inherent authority but it has a "mechanical" effect that intrudes on the personality of free-hand art. Its use must be carefully considered because of its effect on the "message" as well. (1985 p.27).

According to New York based art director Steve Heller and American graphic designer Mirko Ilic, comics can therefore be considered as sources of innovation in typography as they have been an inspiration for numerous artefacts ranging from billboards to tattoos.

The lettering style of comics has roots in the 19th Century sign or shop-card painting, known for its bold,

brash and bulbous contoured letters with colourful dramatic drop shadows and circus-poster alphabets made from ornamented Tuscan and Egyptians. Vintage 20th Century film title cards and movie foyer posters are also among comic-strip lettering forebears. Today, with such easy access to digital typefaces, comic-style handlettering offers more than a historical grounding, it is a quirky alternative to digital typography and can add an element of irony to any graphic design. (Heller and Ilic, 2004 p.181) (Fig.4)



Fig.7: Distinction between words and images are blurred in this splashcover of Spirit by Will Eisner (1966).



Fig.8: Devil Girl Choco-bar by Robert Crumb for Kitchen Sink
Comic style hand lettering as a quirky alternative to mechanical typefaces.

Rick Griffin (1944-91), who designed the original nineteenth-century, psychedelic swash logo for RollingStone magazine in 1968, which is no longer in use (fig.9) was perhaps one of the most innovative and visionary of the 1960s Underground Comix letterers.



Fig.9: Swash logo for Rollingstone magazine 1968 by Rick Griffin

However, the stylistic range of lettering for comics is as diverse as the artists. (Heller and Ilic, 2004 p.181).

For example, in a large panel showing a dungeon, with the caption " the dungeon was dark, musty...and filled with vermin..." the phrase "...and filled with vermin..." could be positioned next to a small detail of a rat, so the reader will more readily notice the animal. (Zabel)

Another factor that can affect the reading experience and the order in which the panels are viewed is the position of the characters in the panel composition, the way they are facing, the direction they are moving and especially the direction of their gaze.

For example, if the scene is a crowded bar, and the characters are sitting in the foreground, the viewer's eye will tend to ignore the backdrop. On the other hand, if the protagonist is sitting in the background, the composition acquires realistic depth". (Zabel)

Chapter 8. Comics and other media

Another interesting aspect of the graphic novel and sequential art in general, and what in the author's opinion also makes them suitable for the teaching of graphic design, is their cross-pollination with other cultural forms.

According to Sabin (1993), one of the first manifestations of this appeared in the hippie culture with psychedelic artwork with patterns in day-glo colours. Sabin (1993) cites Science Fiction comics as the most influential, their illustrative style becoming known as "Fantasy Art". This style was typically "characterised by smooth airbrush techniques and subject matter ranging from the Tolkienesque or alien landscape inhabited by grotesque creatures to the imagined complex technologies of distant futures" (Sabin, 1993 p.214). Fantasy Art style became increasingly fashionable for posters, record and book covers, an example being the Lancer Conan paperbacks by American illustrator Frank Frazetta. (fig.10).

Fantasy art influenced book covers, computer games software, packaging of games such as “Dungeons and Dragons” and many important American comics creators such as Rick Griffin, Victor Moscoso and Robert Williams who emerged from the poster scene. As the underground comics (usually called comix) “became established, so images from them worked their way back into the posters” (Sabin, 1993 p.210).

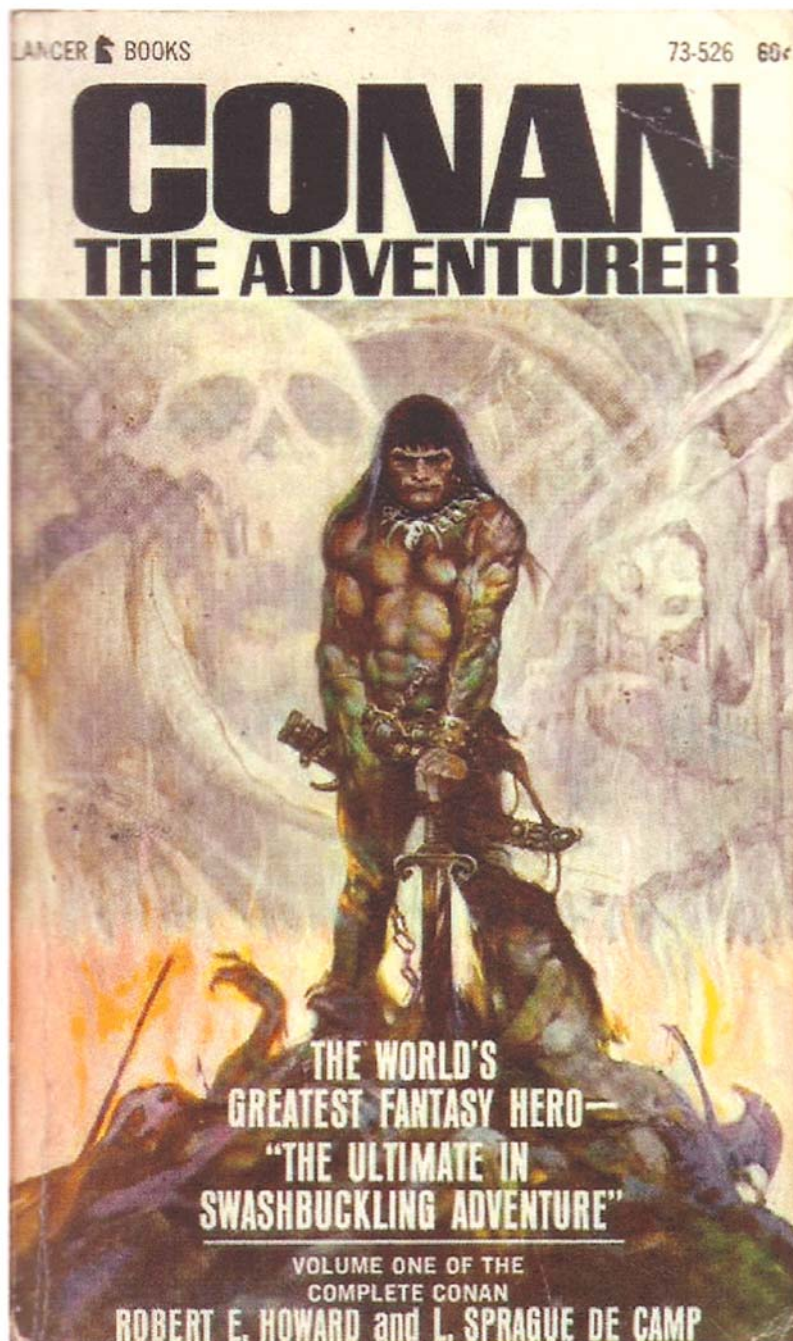


Fig.10: "Conan the Adventurer" by Robert E.Howard

Lancer books edition. Cover art by Frank Frazetta

Posters and comix art dispersed into wider area of illustration, which could include anything from record covers to T-shirts, custom-car and-bike art and tattoo designs (Sabin, 1993 p.212). Science Fiction movie-makers increasingly made use of comics creators for design and storyboarding.

French author Jean Giraud (also known as Moebius) was perhaps the most in demand; his work was used (in various forms) by Ridley Scott in *Blade Runner* and *Alien*, Steven Lisberger in *Tron* and George Lucas in *The Empire strikes back*. (Sabin, 1993 p.215).

Many European film directors made use of ideas taken from comics. Alan Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad*, for instance, is said to have a comics style narrative, and in *8 1/2* Fellini made use of the comics technique by emphasising particular characters or scenes by contrast of light and shade (Reitberg and Fuchs, 1972 p.170). Finally, even the advertising industry exploited comics imagery, examples being Tank Girl images used to sell Wrangler Jeans, the *Fat Slags* (from British *Viz* magazine) used in poster commercials for Tennents Beer (appendix 2) and Marvel-style images on posters for Barclay Bank aimed at students (Sabin, 1993 p.219).

Conclusion:

Comics are a literary and visual phenomenon, which is fully part of the twentieth-century experience and the increased use of sequential narratives and comic art is an important part of the development of an integrated and global language (Horn, 1998 p.135) and can therefore be cited as examples of book production, design, illustration, as well as cultural indicators and examples of popular culture (Bettley, 2001 p.123). Comics and graphic novels can also allow a graphic designer to analyse issues of the representation of sexual, racial, ethnic and class "otherness" as well, of course, as aesthetics.

As demonstrated in chapter 2 and 3, studying comics and graphic novels can help us to understand the construction of meaning as it occurs in sequenced images, especially when contrasted with the still photograph

and cinematic narrative unfolding in time. If we consider the graphic designer as a producer of text/image narrative or simply a story-teller, the same disciplines of story construction or the construction of characters apply to comic scripting as for any other form of creative writing. In chapters 4 and 5 the author demonstrates how psychology and suggestions can be used to convey a message or a special atmosphere and how the construction and the structure of the page can affect the reading experience. Finally it is also noted how graphic novels can be introduced in an academic context using a multitude of approaches, from copywriting, illustration, typography and text/image interaction to an approach focussed on cultural and media studies.

Graphic skills involved in making a graphic novel are diverse and include drawing, typography, staging, costuming, designing, writing, inking, colouring as well as editing. Being equipped with such a wide range of skills can provide graphic designers with many choices in the marketplace, including work in the field of computer gaming, video and film storyboarding, art direction and illustration. Sequential art courses could therefore complement and enrich existing curriculum like multimedia, animation and illustration and offer graphic design and computer art students the challenge of dealing with a multitude of elements and effects in order to produce a cohesive whole (NACAE, 2002). Finally, considering new media and computer art departments are becoming popular and continue to develop and increase in demand within the creative industry, the case for sequential art becomes even stronger.

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