

WOLK, DOUGLAS. READING COMICS: HOW GRAPHIC NOVELS WORK & WHAT THEY MEAN. CAMBRIDGE, MA: DA CAPO PRESS, 2007.

CHAPTER 1

What Comics Are and What They Aren't

The Golden Age Is Right Now

It's no longer news that comics have grown up. A form that was once solely the province of children's entertainment now fills bookshelves with mature, brilliant works by artists like Chris Ware, the Hernandez brothers, Dan Clowes, and Charles Burns, discussed in the sort of tone that was once reserved for exciting young prose novelists. Cartoonists' work is hung on the walls of galleries and museums; there's an annual anthology of *The Best American Comics*. A character in a 2004 *New Yorker* cartoon spoke for a lot of people: "Now I have to pretend to like graphic novels, too?"

For better and worse, though, the people who sustained the comics medium through its awkward childhood and difficult adolescence—and who have kept those aspects of comics alive if not always healthy, too—aren't just readers but collectors. To collect comic books is to treasure them as physical artifacts—not just vehicles for stories but primary documents that tell us something about our history as well as their own. So let's look closely at the covers of a handful of comics that will explain, in the broadest terms, how we got to where we are.



Carmine Infantino and Joe Kubert's cover for *Showcase* #4, the first Silver Age comic. 'Showcase' #4, ©1954 DC Comics. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

outcry about how comics caused juvenile delinquency, and arguably clung to life until that issue of *Showcase* showed up on newsstand and drugstore spinner racks.

Look again at the cover: it tells in miniature the early history of the understanding and misunderstanding of comics. The Flash is a new character with an old character's name, the first of endless recapitulations of the glories of the past. The artists, Carmine Infantino and Joe Kubert, aren't named, but it's easy enough for the trained eye to identify them (Infantino by his design sensibility, Kubert by his slightly feathered linework)—someone with a trained eye would consider their distinctive styles among the most important things about this cover, actually. In the upper right-hand corner, there's the seal of the Comics Code, which had been established a few years earlier. It's a sign that this comic book is

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meant for children and safe for them, and that if by chance it had struggled against being safe for children, its errors had been corrected. The cover's text and art reveal fumbling confusion over what exactly it is advertising. Is this comic a showcase for art, as in a museum? A series of frozen representations of reality or representations of something so unreal that a body moving at high speed leaves parallel lines of ink behind it? A movie that isn't really a movie, made out of individual images that the eye can see in or out of sequence or at the same time? Something that breaks destructively out of attempts to fix it in place?

Any art with a bygone golden age is doomed to try to repeat it, and to repeat its failings. The big problem with the idea of the Silver Age is that, by definition, the Golden Age it follows is lost, and the people who use that name for it are working from the assumption that the gold belongs to the past. The cartoonists of the '30s and '40s and early '50s were, for the most part, desperate, underpaid kids and sleazy entrepreneurs. Sometimes they managed to make crudely powerful imagination-bombs anyway, and a small handful of them were way ahead of their time. Most of the rest were simply of their time; they knew they could fob off any old thing on the children who were their audience—and did. All of them left their mark on the next generations of cartoonists, though, because they were the Ancients. For the next couple of decades, new comics either imitated the Golden Age's artistic and storytelling strategies, developed improvements on them, or (occasionally) rebelled against them.

On the following page is the cover from another comic book, *The Amazing Spider-Man* #31, cover-dated December 1965. The artist here is Steve Ditko, at the peak of his powers; the "spider" design is freakier than anything that would have been seen on a cover a few years earlier, and some of the inset images are unnerving on their own, especially the one with Spider-Man trapped in a lattice of thick black lines. The name of the publisher appears in the upper left-hand corner as "Marvel Pop Art Productions," the new name that writer and editor in chief Stan Lee gave the company for a few months. It reverted to "Marvel Comics Group" the month after this issue was published; somebody must have pointed out



Steve Ditko's cover for *The Amazing Spider-Man* #31, from Marvel's brief "Pop Art Productions" period.
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Marvel breed of reader!"—well, that's a clue to the future: most obviously, Lee is setting up the idiotic brand rivalry between Marvel and its chief competitor, DC, that continues to this day. But he's also suggesting that he and Ditko are establishing something new that has more to do with a broader system (the "Marvel breed") than with the particular comic book at hand, and that what they're presenting is a kind of fan service—giving the "Marvel breed" exactly what they want.

The Comics Code seal is still up in the corner, as it was on virtually every comic published for the next decade, and many more after that: whatever else this issue of *Amazing Spider-Man* is, it's first and foremost a piece of entertainment for kids. At least as late as the mid-'70s, there were still universally understood rules for what a comic book looked like, how long it was, who it was for, and what kind of stories could be

told in it. The few comics that didn't stay within the boundaries of those rules always seemed to be dancing frantically just outside them.

Both text captions on the cover appear on "scroll" effects: a bit of self-deflating pomposity, suggesting both "something important is happening here" and "we're just kidding about the 'important' thing." And the bottom caption, "Dedicated to you, the great new

told in it. The few comics that didn't stay within the boundaries of those rules always seemed to be dancing frantically just outside them.

This next cover is a bit later: *Cerebus* #44, cover-dated November 1982 and drawn by the series' creator, Dave Sim. Its most obvious difference from our earlier examples is that it's a very design-conscious image, with its vertical bar, inset images, fancy typeface, decorative border, extensive use of negative space, and sideways logo. (In fact, the story inside the cover is sideways, too.) There's no Comics Code seal; children are simply not the intended audience for Sim's sprawling, satirical narrative about politics and religion in a medieval culture. The company publishing it is also something new: Aardvark-Vanaheim, a tiny Canadian concern started by Sim and his then wife, specifically to publish his series. There had been small publishers of black-and-white "underground" comics in the '60s, but Aardvark-Vanaheim didn't position itself as part of any kind of counterculture: it was just independent, and this series had already lasted forty-four issues, far longer than any of the undergrounds. The issue's cover price is \$1.50, two and a half times what was then the price of a new four-color superhero comic book. But this is something different—the cover's only explicit links to that visual aesthetic are the guy in the fuzzy parka with the antennae (a parody of the then popular superhero Moon Knight) and, of course, the size and shape of the cover itself.

Around the time *Cerebus* #44 was published, the rules of comics' style and substance were softening to conventions and norms. Breaking them was still a significant, conscious decision on a cartoonist's



Cerebus #44, drawn by Dave Sim: part of the independent-comics revolution of the '80s. ©2007 Dave Sim.

part, but it wasn't inconceivable or radical anymore. Over the course of the '80s, as independent comics companies sprang up all over, cartoonists took baby steps away from "the way we've always done things," figuring out which parts of their assumptions about the medium were just based on habit. For a while, it almost seemed that important or meaningful comics were, by definition, the ones that were dramatically different from all the others or somehow ruptured their conventions irreparably.

That's partly because, in 1986, three convention-rupturing comics appeared. Frank Miller and Klaus Janson's *The Dark Knight Returns* blew the dust off Batman's grim, gaudy subtext and made it the center of a brutal, smart, exquisitely drawn satire; Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, a shattering memoir of his father's experiences in the Holocaust and a formal triumph of cartooning, which was initially serialized in his magazine *RAW*, made waves beyond the comics world as a book; and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, a structurally magnificent superhero adventure that systematically demolished the entire idea of superhero adventures, galvanized mainstream comics. It was, it seemed, comics' annus mirabilis, the first year of a new era. From then until the turn of the millennium, those three books became the standard against which comics that wanted to be important or meaningful were measured and the standard to which too many cartoonists who wanted to create something important or meaningful (but didn't know how) aspired.

This brings us to our next comic: *Big Numbers* #1, published in the spring of 1990. The cover is at least as design intensive as that issue of *Cerebus* (this time, the price is exiled to the back cover, which looks classier, and is much higher: \$4.50), and the publisher is another creator-owned independent company (Mad Love, formed by *Watchmen* writer Alan Moore). A few things are obviously different about this one, though. The first is its format: it's big and square. The second is that the image is a painting—not a pen-and-ink drawing—of a deliberately quotidian street scene. And the third is the most consequential: not only is the image signed by Bill Sienkiewicz, but Moore's and Sienkiewicz's names appear in huge letters. The creators, not the characters, are the selling point.

Over the course of the '90s and early 2000s, a neat thing happened as a result of all the convention-rupturing that went on in the '80s (as well as a bunch of economic shifts that I'll describe in chapter 2): the conventions about comics' form and content that had had a million holes poked in them, as well as a few that hadn't, stopped being normative. A lot of comics still adhere to the old standards of form and style and subject matter, but that's now a creative choice like any other, instead of a default. Comics no longer have to make a point of what they *aren't*.

Next, instead of another cover, you'll have to imagine a stack of ten books and comics: Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim and the Infinite Sadness*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *All-Star Superman* #4, Kevin Huizenga's *Curses*, the *Kramers Ergot* 6 anthology, Ed Brubaker and Michael Lark's *Daredevil* #86, Ellen Forney's *I Love Led Zeppelin*, David B.'s *Babel* #2, Lilli Carré's *Tales of Woodsman Pete*, and Megan Kelso's *The Squirrel Mother*. They couldn't be much more different from each other; they're all executed in radically different styles, and only two of them (*All-Star Superman* and *Daredevil*, the two superhero comics) even have the same physical dimensions. Half of them don't have "issue numbers" of any kind. They were published by nine different companies. What they all have in common, though, is being somewhere between ambitious-and-very-good and the sort of flat-out phenomenal work people will be recalling for years; featuring their creators' names prominently on their covers,



Big Numbers #1, whose cover prominently features its creators' names.
©2007 Alan Moore and Bill Sienkiewicz.

which is now standard practice; and having been published during a period of about a month in the middle of 2006.

If there's such a thing as a golden age of comics, it's happening right now. As I write this, with that stack of new comics in front of me, it's obvious that there has never been as enormous a volume of extraordinary English-language comics published in a single year as there has been in the last twelve months. Long-awaited masterpieces like *Fun Home* and Charles Burns's *Black Hole* have appeared as hardcovers from large book-publishing companies. Cartoonists from the phenomenal French art-comics collective L'Association have found an audience for English translations of their work. The big companies that dominate the superhero genre are publishing some terrific, formally adventurous work (as well as a lot of by-the-numbers crap, but only the good stuff counts toward the Golden Age).

On top of all the new things worth getting excited about, publishers have finally learned that it's in their interest to keep the best comics of the past in print in book form—often printed much more nicely than they were when they originally appeared as ephemeral periodicals. Has something been lost in their shift from disposable pulp to acid-free archival paper? The jealous collector in me says “maybe”—but what's been lost is more cultural context than anything intrinsic to the work itself.

It's not that the average quality of new comics has improved. As always, there are hacks, no-talents, and bandwagon jumpers everywhere, and right now a lot of them smell money. But there are a lot more comics in print that reward close attention than there have ever been before. This book is possible to write now in a way it wouldn't have been even five years ago.

The best part is that it looks like the Golden Age is only beginning: the aesthetic development of comics has finally built up enough momentum to keep attracting more creators (and, thank God, more kinds of creators—women cartoonists aren't anomalous anymore), and to give them the time they need to get good and produce significant work. Nobody has ever gone into comics for the money, but with the audience and cultural prestige expanding, it is becoming more possible for good

cartoonists to make a living. A very young generation of cartoonists has grown up on manga and animation as much as on American comics, and they're already publishing their own work or disseminating it on the Internet; the new kids are still mostly figuring out how to make the leap from pretty-picture-making to storytelling, but within ten years or so, they're going to be doing amazing things.

Finite Crisis

All this creative bounty and cultural power has brought comics to a moment of crisis. It's a “we should all have such crises” crisis, and a distinctly finite crisis, but a dilemma nonetheless. There have been so many interesting comics in the last few years that a worthwhile addition to the bookshelf isn't surprising. Over the last decade or so, the main format for narrative comics has been shifting from periodical pamphlets to books. Meanwhile, the schism between the two big American schools of comics—let's call them “the mainstream” and “art comics,” and I'll explain what those terms mean later—is becoming wider and bitterer. And the big, awkward question hanging in the air is how to read and discuss comics now that they're very different from what they used to be.

There's a problem with the way a lot of people talk about comics: it's very hard to talk about them *as comics*. One numbingly common mistake in the way culture critics address them is to invoke “the comic book genre.” As cartoonists and their longtime admirers are getting a little tired of explaining, comics are not a genre; they're a *medium*. Westerns, Regency romances, film noir: those are genres—kinds of stories with specific categories of subjects and conventions for their content and presentation. (Stories about superheroes are a genre, too.) Prose fiction, sculpture, video: those, like comics, are media—forms of expression that have few or no rules regarding their content other than the very broad ones imposed on them by their form.

Still, there's a reason people make that mistake. Until about twenty years ago, the way almost everybody experienced the medium was intimately tied to a handful of genres. That's what made money for the big

pulp-comics companies: superhero stuff, mostly, but sometimes horror or romance or science fiction or crime comics, each of which has its own familiar codes and formulas.

The box of “genre”—it’s easy to visualize as a long, white cardboard box, the kind collectors store plastic-bagged back issues inside—is easy to close, and hard to see out of, once you’re inside it. Occasionally, comics-industry types assert that comics are good at telling stories in lots of different genres, which misses the big picture in the same way as a dairy-industry type insisting that milk can be made into lots of different flavors of ice cream. On the art-comics side of things, there’s even a backlash now: readers and critics dismissing genre-based comics out of hand on the grounds that they *are* genre-based. This is also known as the “I’m so sick of superheroes I could scream” effect, and even though I don’t subscribe to it, I’m kind of sympathetic to it.

Another common error is to assert that highbrow comics are, somehow, not really comics but something else (preferably with a fancier name, as I’ll discuss in chapter 3)—different not just in breed but in species from their mass-cultural namesakes. There’s a certain nose-in-the-air class consciousness inherent in this particular argument; it’s evident, for instance, in a review by Gloria Emerson in the June 16, 2003, issue of *The Nation*. “It has never been a habit of mine to read comic books,” she writes, “so I was, at first, slightly taken aback by *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, by Marjane Satrapi. But she is such a talented artist and her black-and-white drawings are so captivating, it seems wrong to call her memoir a comic book. Rather, it is a ‘graphic memoir’ in the tradition of *Maus*, Art Spiegelman’s brilliant story of the Holocaust.” If you don’t see what’s wrong with that passage, imagine it beginning: “It has never been a habit of mine to watch movies . . . ,” and ending by asserting that, say, *Syriana* is not actually a movie but a “cinematic narrative” in the tradition of *Saving Private Ryan*.

The genre/medium confusion is an error of ignorance, while the if-it’s-deep-it’s-not-really-comics gambit is just a case of snobbery (in the sense of wanting to make a distinction between one’s own taste and the

rabble’s taste). But the most thoroughly ingrained error in the language used to discuss comics is treating them as if they were particularly weird, or failed, examples of another medium altogether. Good comics are sometimes described as being “cinematic” (if they have some kind of broad visual scope or imitate a familiar kind of movie) or “novelistic” (if they have keenly observed details, or simply take a long time to read). Those can be descriptive words when they’re applied to comics. It’s almost an insult, though, to treat them as compliments. Using them as praise implies that comics *as a form* aspire (more or less unsuccessfully) to being movies or novels.

When comics try to be *specific* movies or novels, they are indeed unsuccessful. Comics adaptations of movies are pointless cash-ins at best—movies that don’t move, with inaccurate drawings of the actors and scenery. Why would anyone but an obsessive want to look at that? Likewise, comics adaptations of prose books are almost uniformly terrible, from the old *Classics Illustrated* pamphlets to the contemporary versions of *Black Beauty* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*; they don’t run on the same current, basically, and they end up gutting the original work of a lot of its significant content. The one major exception to date—the only prose book I can think of that has been turned into first-rate comics—is Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, and David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik’s 1994 variation on it works only because it extends Auster’s metafictional games into a visual dimension.

I’m not trying to make the essentialist argument that the only good comics are the ones that avoid strategies from other media. A lot of great ones do use storytelling devices they’ve adapted from film, in particular. Think, for instance, of the deservedly famous opening sequence of *Watchmen*: six panels of identical size, starting with a close-up image of a smiley-face pin in a puddle of blood and zooming upward until the camera is looking out a window many stories above. “Close-up,” “zooming,” “camera”: not only the concepts but the words belong to movies. As readers, we imagine a stable, continuous Steadicam motion upwards (and also visualize the sign carrier in the “shot” walking at a constant pace, perpendicular to the direction the “camera” is moving). Still,

that's a great scene that *uses* a cinematic technique, not a great scene *because* the technique it uses is cinematic.

Other comics actually do aspire to being movies, mostly for economic reasons: license your story or characters to Hollywood and there's a lot of money to be made. (A few comics imprints, whether covertly or openly, exist mostly to create and publicize properties that can be pitched as movies. Their comics tend to be dreadful, of course.) Still, that aspiration has to do with content rather than form. And nobody has ever wanted to write a novel and settled for making their story into comics: for one thing, it just takes too damn long to draw something when you could write it instead.

I'm even going to take issue with Will Eisner, the late grandmaster of American comics, who liked to describe comics as a "literary form." They bear a strong resemblance to literature—they use words, they're printed in books, they have narrative content—but they're no more a literary form than movies or opera are literary forms. Scripts for comics are arguably a literary form in exactly the same way that film and theater scripts are literary forms, but a script is not the same thing as the finished work of art. I occasionally find it convenient to refer to some kinds of comics as "literary" (essentially, the ones that have the same sorts of thematic concerns as literary fiction), but that's still a dangerous convenience. Samuel R. Delany's term "paraliterary" is useful here, if clunky: comics are *sort of* literary. But that's not all they are.

Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they're not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of a film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties. The first step toward attentively reading and fully appreciating comics is acknowledging that.

French critics sometimes refer to comics as the "ninth art," a phrase that has slipped into Anglophone discussion. (I first encountered it as the name of a Web site that ran from 2001 to 2006.) The phrase is inspired by Ricciotto Canudo's 1923 manifesto *Reflections on the Seventh Art*—the seventh art being film, and the first six being architecture, mu-



The opening sequence of *Watchmen*'s first issue, written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons. From *Watchmen*, ©DC Comics. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

sic, dance, sculpture, painting, and poetry. (The eighth? Photography, television, cuisine, or fireworks, depending on whom you ask.) The numbering's a little arbitrary, but giving comics-the-art a number is useful, because it suggests that it requires a vocabulary of its own to discuss and evaluate.

That said, it's not a bad idea, exactly, to talk about comics using some of the same language we use to talk about prose and film and nonnarrative visual art; sometimes it fits. (In fact, we have to, because

the language of comics criticism is still young and scrawny—it's so underdeveloped that there's no good adjective that means "comics-ish.") It's just worth being careful about. Describing the viewer's perspective in a particular comics panel is entirely reasonable; talking about where the "camera" is, as I did a few paragraphs ago, has some loaded associations. On the other hand, borrowed language is sometimes a fair trade-off for clarity. As Hedwig said to Tommy Gnosis, it's what we've got to work with.

Explaining Myself to a Straw Man

I've seen a handful of questions about the point, terms, and function of comics criticism raised in various places; some have been raised by cartoonists I admire (or don't), some by other critics, some by me. For the sake of convenience, I'm going to put them all in the mouth of a single impudent straw man, and I will try to patiently explain myself to him.

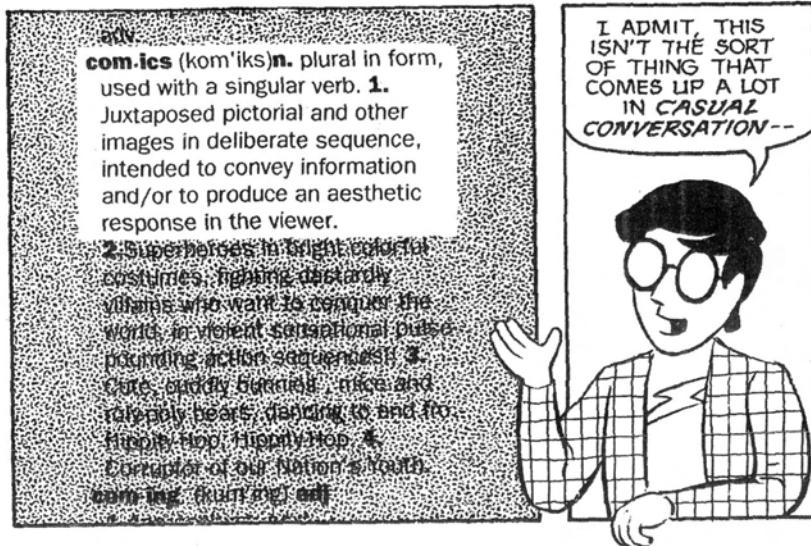
STRAW MAN: Why would criticism about comics be useful? They're such an immediate art: so seductive, so easy to sink into and get carried away by, so un-hungry for explanation. It's all there on the surface!

ME: In ten years, I suspect, that question will sound sillier than it does now, but it deserves an answer in any case. It's true, Mr. Straw, that this particular visual, narrative medium can offer some very easy pleasure—but easy pleasure and simple pleasure aren't the same thing. It's worth thinking about how that immediacy and seduction you mention work, what makes good comics different from mediocre or bad ones, and even what virtues can be found in lesser ones. Critical analysis and strong opinions are a necessary response to any art—they're part of what helps it grow and change and what bonds its audience to it. And criticism is particularly valuable to an art coming into its Golden Age.

That's part of my mission with this book: to explore some of the ways it's possible to read comics, and to figure out where their power comes from. I'm not alone in that mission, either. There are magazines devoted to serious discussion of comics and the artists who make them (*The Comics Journal* is the longest running, while *Comic Art* is fairly new and pretty impressive so far), and there have been a handful of interesting books about the way comics work—Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* was the first, and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is the best known. But I'm most interested in the reader's side of the comics experience: figuring out how we experience them in general and looking carefully at particular artists and works.

STRAW MAN: Let's get started by defining terms, then. McCloud famously defined comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer"; Dylan Horrocks affectionately picked apart that definition in an essay called "Inventing Comics" that can be read at www.hicksville.co.nz. What's your definition, Mr. Critic Guy?

ME: My reply is that I'm not going to define "comics" here, because if you have picked up this book and have not been spending the last century trapped inside a magic lantern, you already pretty much know what they are, and "pretty much" is good enough. That word I mentioned above that Samuel Delany coined, "paraliterary," is part of a terrific essay called "The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism" that's effectively scared me off trying to come up with a definition. If you try to draw a boundary that includes everything that counts as comics and excludes everything that doesn't, two things happen: first, the medium always wriggles across that boundary, and second, whatever politics are implicit in the definition always boomerang on the definer. (As Horrocks points out, although McCloud's definition counts photo-booth strips and



Scott McCloud presents his definition of comics in *Understanding Comics*.
©2007 Scott McCloud.

Hogarth's etchings as comics, it deliberately excludes single-panel cartoons like "Dennis the Menace," and McCloud has tried to distance himself from the idea that it includes illustrated children's books.)

STRAW MAN: Fine, then. I'll just have to be trickier and ask you what the hell the thing you're writing about is.

ME: A good way of putting it. What I'm going to be discussing in the rest of this book is actually a *subset* of comics—and please note that while I'll be covering a pretty broad range of material, I'm passing over a lot of perfectly legitimate comics, too. I'm mostly interested in sustained narrative, which means comic books and graphic novels, much more than newspaper comic strips or one-off cartoon illustrations. I'm basically going to avoid discussing manga—the enormous category of Japanese comics—and its international derivatives altogether, partly because manga seems to

operate by a slightly different set of rules, but mostly because I simply don't have the taste for most of it, and I'm not going to go on about stuff I don't "get." I'm also going to deal here only with work published in English and available without much difficulty in the United States, which rules out most of the enormous body of European comics and a lot of worthy British material.

STRAW MAN: Have you noticed that that's mostly a description of what you're *not* writing about?

ME: I'm getting there. But before I get there, I should explain some of my central arguments and some of my major biases. If any of this seems vague or obvious or both, I apologize; the explanations and justifications will come later. First of all, what matters to me is mostly particular cartoonists and their work, rather than characters and series published by large companies, with stories written and drawn by interchangeable cartoonists.

STRAW MAN: You're saying you're an "indie" guy—you don't have much use for superhero comics. That's fair. I mean, I've noticed that you use "mainstream" in a slightly dismissive way.

ME: That's not what I'm saying! It's true that a lot of the comics that stick with me are owned by their creators and published by somebody other than DC or Marvel, but not a week goes by that I don't read, with pleasure, some glossy corporate superhero comics product from a writer or artist I really like. "Mainstream" is a useful piece of shorthand, even though it's a lot less literal than it was back when *Batman* and *The Fantastic Four* had much higher circulation and cultural potency, and black-and-white art comics had no hope of being seen by anyone who didn't frequent weird little grottos that specialized in them. Now "mainstream" basically means "superhero and other genre comics, serialized as pamphlets and then sometimes collected into books, and marketed

mostly to comics stores,” as opposed to “general-interest comics marketed outside the specialty comics industry.” Weird, but there you go.

STRAW MAN: Okay. Let me rephrase that: you’re an “indie” guy, but you don’t want to break up your collection of *Green Lantern*.

ME: Don’t get me started on collectors. (At least not yet—I’ll get to that in chapter 3.) And, actually, I’m a lot less interested in, say, *Green Lantern* as an ongoing series or ongoing franchise than I am in the specific early-’70s issues of *Green Lantern* by Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams, or in the messy but ambitious *Green Lantern: Mosaic* project that Gerard Jones wrote in the late ’80s. What tends to get my attention is *style*—a distinctive, coherent, and interesting aesthetic expressed in the way a comic’s story is told. I’m also less interested in *Green Lantern* as a cultural icon, or in what *Green Lantern* the character is going to do next month, than I am in the way the cartoonists who contribute to the enormous body of stories about *Green Lantern* use that character and the metaphorical associations attached to him.

STRAW MAN: Metaphorical associations?

ME: Metaphors are the core of what I’m going to be talking about, because comics are particularly well suited to extended and large-scale metaphors, for reasons I’ll get into shortly. When you look at a comic book, you’re not seeing either the world or a direct representation of the world; what you’re seeing is an interpretation or transformation of the world, with aspects that are exaggerated, adapted, or invented. It’s not just unreal, it’s deliberately constructed by a specific person or people. But because comics are a narrative and visual form, when you’re reading them, you *do* believe that they’re real on some level. (Cartoonists have lots of tricks to immerse the reader in invented environments.) So the meaning

of the comics story within the world we see on the page is different from its meaning within the reader’s world.

STRAW MAN: This is exactly what Susan Sontag was complaining about in “Against Interpretation,” isn’t it? You’re saying that comics can’t just be what they are—that they’re actually always something other than what they appear to be.

ME: Well, they *are* always what they appear to be, at the very least. And I don’t think that good comics *require* metaphors to be built into their structure, other than one very basic one: cartooning is, inescapably, a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception. No two people experience the world the same way; no two cartoonists draw it the same way, and the way they draw it is the closest a reader can come to experiencing it through their eyes.

Still, an awful lot of the comics that have stuck with me most seem to be built around metaphors. Some of them are blatant, like Art Spiegelman drawing Jews as mice and Nazis as cats in *Maus*; sometimes they operate at a level so deeply entrenched that they can be hard to notice or can be taken for granted. Genre comics, and especially superhero comics, involve concrete representations of abstract ideas in ways that have become so familiar it’s easy to gloss over them.

STRAW MAN: You’re saying your job as a comics critic is to say what those metaphors *really* mean, Mr. Arbiter of Meaning?

ME: It can be, in part; it can also be figuring out the mechanisms that make those metaphors function. But the way I experience and think about comics has a lot to do with the fact that I really *enjoy* them. I like figuring out how that pleasure works and describing it to other people so that they can enjoy them too, or at least enjoy them more fully than they would otherwise. And what I like (and

want to pass along) about a particular comic can be the pleasure of pure spectacle, or of ingenious design, or of kinetic flow, or of characters' psychological depth, or of a story that's funny or engaging, or any number of other things.

I also think it's my responsibility as a critic to be harsh and demanding and to subject unambitious or botched work to public scorn, because I want *more good comics*: more cartoonists who challenge themselves to do better, and more readers who insist on the same. Here's a bit from one of my favorite critical manifestos, Rebecca West's 1914 essay, "The Duty of Harsh Criticism": "Just as it was the duty of the students of Kelvin the mathematician to correct his errors in arithmetic, so it is the duty of critics to rebuke these hastinesses of great writers, lest the blurred impressions weaken the surrounding mental fabric and their rough transmissions frustrate the mission of genius on earth."

STRAW MAN: All this "genius on earth" stuff sounds kind of po-faced—what about comics that are just cheap and vulgar and exciting?

ME: Cheap and vulgar and exciting is great. I love cheap and vulgar and exciting, and I don't think there's any contradiction between that and genius on earth. I just hate cheap and vulgar and boring. I probably hate expensive and refined and boring at least as much.

STRAW MAN: So what you're into is really just fun? Do you test comics on a fun-ometer or something? And do you really think you can have much to say about something if you're judging it on the basis of "I laughed; I cried"?

ME: Some of that intent to entertain, honestly, is coded into the DNA of comics: the medium was incubated in the marketplace, and for decades, cartoonists knew that their work had to *instantly*

give pleasure if they wanted to eat. In the course of its development as a populist art, the comic book got really good at entertainment: thrills! chills! laughs! When the art-comics revolution came along, a lot of its point was that the medium was capable of *more* than being entertaining in a few overfamiliar, blatant ways. But one thing that's always entertaining is being caught up in a story, and since comics simultaneously feed the parts of the brain that make sense of written language and pictures, narrative seems natural or at least formally appropriate to them.

STRAW MAN: It's a little on the tautological side, maybe, to point out that comics tell stories, especially since you've already mentioned that you're mostly interested in "sustained narrative," I think the phrase was? Isn't this McCloud's "Dennis the Menace" problem again?

ME: Maybe, but it also illustrates my point. If you look at a block of text, you don't necessarily expect that it's going to be a story. If you look at a series of comics panels, you have the expectation that you're going to "find out what happens." (Even single-panel comics, "Dennis the Menace" and others, are almost always meant to be funny, and the humor usually comes from implying a story of which we're only seeing one moment.) I'm sure it's theoretically possible to come up with comics that would do the same sort of thing Laura Mulvey proposed as an avant-garde for movies, deliberately eliminating not just their narrative conventions but the pleasure of looking at them. That doesn't make it worth doing, though. For all the unsavory habits and formal clichés American capitalism has bred into comics, I think the tradition that they generally try to tell stories, and tell them in a compelling way, is pretty healthy.

STRAW MAN: To recap: you're into metaphors and stories. So comics criticism, as far as you're concerned, is basically literary

criticism, except that the texts you're writing about happen to have drawings of Captain America attached to them?

ME: Do me a favor and say "Hopey Glass" sometimes instead of "Captain America," will you? Comics criticism actually works pretty differently from literary criticism—partly because what drawings do is very different from what words do (we'll get into that more in chapter 5) and partly because *style* is so important to the way comics work.

By style, I mean all the elements that go into a comic's "look and feel," to use the computer-design term: the things that affect the reading experience irrespective of the story's content. Some of that is linguistic tone, some of that is pacing and storytelling, but the biggest element of it is the idiomatic way a comic is drawn.

It's very easy to think of comics in terms of their plots and incidents—to slip from "what happens in this story" to "what this comic is about" to "what this comic *is*." And it's true that some comics are intended as not much more than vehicles for narrative: their stylistic gestures aren't supposed to count for nearly as much as what happens between the beginning and the end. Those are mostly mainstream comics meant to be read as having their publisher's and period's "house style." (Of course, there's no such thing as a genuinely neutral style: every stylistic decision, even if it's arrived at by default, means something.)

If you want to evaluate comics as a critic, or enjoy them fully as a reader, you have to be attentive to both their narrative substance and their style—and cartoonists' visual style is manifested in every image they draw on every page of every comic book.

"Only Inarticulate People Use Language"

Back, for a moment, to one of those comics I was waving around near the beginning, for a quick quote and another excuse. *Big Numbers* #1

begins with a scene in which poet Christine Gathercole, sleeping on a train to her hometown, is awakened by a kid throwing a heavy bolt through her window, and yells "Shit!" "I don't think there's any need to use language," says the old man sitting across from her. "Only inarticulate people use language."

It's worth noting that what comics are closest to, in the way we physically experience them, are prose books. We watch a movie, we look at a photograph (or a single, wordless drawn image), but we *read* comics. That's the process: holding them in our hands, turning their pages, getting stories from them as we burrow from one end to the other.

Even so, the comparison is badly flawed, because comics aren't just more visual than prose; they're *less verbal*. Comics can get across the image of a physical setting or person or object or any other visual phenomenon much more easily than prose—they can just show it—but dialogue, or anything nonvisual that needs to be described or explained, takes up



Christine Gathercole questions her own medium in *Big Numbers* #1 (written by Alan Moore, drawn by Bill Sienkiewicz). ©2007 Alan Moore and Bill Sienkiewicz.

an awful lot of space very quickly in comics form. More than 150 words or so on a six-panel page, and things start to look pretty crowded.

For that reason, and some others, the actual text in American comic books was generally pretty impoverished until the '80s. It's always been subordinate to plot and storytelling, out of necessity; narrative isn't the same thing as language usage, and a lot of comics' best-loved writers were ace storytellers but mediocre wordsmiths. Stan Lee revolutionized comics writing in the '60s, but his dialogue and captions back then were oddly stylized at best and cringeworthy at worst (let's not even get into his more recent writing); in the '70s and early '80s, Chris Claremont's *X-Men* scripts made their impact on the strength of his dexterous approach to characterization, not the mannered eccentricities of dialogue that have since hardened into almost unbearable tics. When Alan Moore earned his stripes on *Swamp Thing* in the '80s, his precise, naturalistic dialogue seemed shockingly good—better than it really was, probably, because it was so far out of the league of anything around it. Moore was arguably the first mainstream comics writer who seemed fully in command of his style, but a few years later, other writers, mostly British, started to follow his example of sensitivity to language: Neil Gaiman, Warren Ellis, Garth Ennis, Grant Morrison, and a few others belonged to the first wave.

All of the writers I've just mentioned have a couple of things in common: they made their name in mainstream genre comics, and they write scripts for other people who draw them. The other thing that was happening in the mid-'80s, while Moore and the "British Invasion" were raising the mainstream's standard for writing, was the independent comics revolution. Most of the notable comics that came out of it were by cartoonists who both wrote and drew their work and for whom "writing" and "drawing" sometimes didn't even seem like separate activities.

As it turned out, a lot of the prominent cartoonists in the independent scene were good with language, too. Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, Howard Chaykin, Dave Sim, and (although it took them a little longer to get up to speed) Peter Bagge and Dan Clowes all made comics with a unified force and grace that most writer/artist collaborations

lacked. They attracted the attention of readers who had grown bored of trying to scratch for pellets of genuinely original expression in the formula-bound world of genre comics.

But the big mainstream companies still had plenty going for them: the *X-Men*, Superman, and lots of other character names people recognize; devoted if slowly dwindling audiences; money enough to buy the services of some top-flight cartoonists who didn't mind not owning their work (and initiatives that allowed some of them to own their work); and deep if convoluted collective histories that would eventually become the focus of the way they intended their comics to be read. (I'll explain in chapter 4.)

Since the mid-'80s, both the mainstream (which has expanded beyond Marvel and DC to encompass a bunch of smaller companies that specialize in the same sorts of stuff) and the artists and publishers outside it have retrenched and concentrated on what they do best. The result is that American comics, which had seemed for a while like they fit on a continuum with convention on one side and expressiveness on the other, have become divided into two very different schools,* with almost no overlap between them—in fact, there's a distance between the two of them that sometimes turns into outright mutual contempt.

One school—the larger one, in terms of its market share—is mainstream comics: *Wolverine*, *Batman*, *Conan*, *Y: The Last Man*, and so on. Mainstream comics are genre-based and almost always serialized as monthly or quasi-monthly pamphlets, and they're generally written and drawn by different people—sometimes by mid-sized committees. They're story-driven and series-based, so there are always more stories to tell; they rely partly on readers' attachment to certain characters or franchises. The best ones are usually by writer/artist teams who plan the look and feel of their collaboration.

The other major school is art comics: *Love & Rockets*, *Ghost World*, *La Perdida*, *Palookaville*, and the like. Art comics avoid genre, unless

*American-produced manga-style comics are a smaller third category, which, as I mentioned earlier, I'm not going to go into here. I'll note, though, that they have very firmly set conventions of their own.

they can keep it at some kind of ironic remove. They are almost always written and drawn by a single cartoonist, and they tend to be conceived as self-contained books, even when they're initially serialized in pamphlets, which is becoming increasingly rare. Their visual style is usually outside, and sometimes far outside, the stylistic range of the mainstream, and the art carries a lot more of their storytelling and thematic weight. Art cartoonists often work much more slowly than mainstream cartoonists—it can take many years to finish a single substantial work. Still, they've collectively built up enough cultural capital to rival the mainstream; as we'll see in the next chapter, that happened very slowly, with the aid of the peculiar economic structure of the comics business.