This is the text of the speech that Bill Watterson gave at the Festival of Cartoon Art at Ohio State University, October 27, 1989.

## THE CHEAPENING OF COMICS

About *Peanuts*, *Pogo* and *Krazy Kat*, comics then and now, syndicates owning strips, licensing, and strips drawn by assistants.

I received a letter from a 10-year-old this morning. He wrote, "Dear Mr Watterson, I have been reading Calvin and Hobbes for a long time, and I'd like to know a few things. First, do you like the drawing of Calvin and Hobbes I did at the bottom of the page? Are you married, and do you have any kids? Have you ever been convicted of a felony?"

What interested me about this last question was that he didn't ask if I'd been apprehended or arrested, but if I'd been convicted. Maybe a lot of cartoonists get off on technicalities, I don't know. It also interests me that he naturally assumed I wasn't trifling with misdemeanors, but had gone straight to aggravated assaults and car thefts.

Seeing the high regard in which cartoonists are held today, it may surprise you to know that I've always wanted to draw a comic strip. My dad had a couple of Peanuts books that were among the first things I remember reading. One book was called "Snoopy," and it had a blank title page. The next page had a picture of Snoopy. I apparently figured the publisher had supplied the blank title page as a courtesy so the reader could use it to trace the drawing of Snoopy underneath. I added my own frontispiece to my dad's book. and afterward my dad must not have wanted the book back because I still have it.

Peanuts, Pogo, and Krazy Kat have inspired me the most over the years. These strips are different in almost every way, but their worlds captivated me. Looking back on them, I think they can teach us something about comic strip potential.

Peanuts was my introduction to the world of the comic strip, and Peanuts captured my imagination like nothing else. Because it was the first strip I read, its many innovations were lost on me, and I suspect most readers of Peanuts today have forgotten how it single-handedly reconfigured the comic strip landscape in a few short years. The flat, simple drawings, the intellectual children, the animal with thoughts and imagination - all these things are commonplace now, and it's hard to imagine what a revolutionary strip it was in the '50s and '60s. All I knew was that it had a magic that other strips didn't.

A lot of the magic for me is in those deceptively simple, stylized drawings. For me, the few lines that make up each character, their faces, and gestures are remarkably expressive. Two dots with parentheses around them have become the cartoon shorthand for eyes looking uneasy or insecure. When Charlie Brown's eyes do that, you know his stomach hurts,

Peanuts has held my interest for many years because the strip is very funny on one level and very sad on another. Charlie Brown suffers - and suffers in a small, private, honest way. Schultz draws those quiet moments of self-doubt: Charlie Brown sitting on the bench, eating peanut butter, trying to work up the nerve to talk to the little red-haired girl - and failing. As a kid, I

read Peanuts for the funny drawings and the jokes, and later I realized that the childhood struggles of the strip are metaphors for adult struggles as well.

Peanuts is about the search for acceptance, security, and love, and how hard those self-affirming things are to find. The strip is also about alienation, about ambition, about heroes, about religion, and about the search for meaning and "happiness" in life. For a comic strip, it digs pretty deep.

Of course, the strip has a flair for weird humor, too. Snoopy in goggles, his doghouse somehow riddled with bullet holes, yelling, "Curse you, Red Baron!" is, I submit, as bizarre an image as anything ever seen on the comics page. Peanuts defined the contemporary comic strip.

And Pogo? Pogo was an almost opposite approach to the comic strip. The drawings were as lush as the foliage of its Okefenokee setting, and the dialogue was as lush as the drawings. With the possible exception of Porkypine, there was not a soul-searching character in the cast of hundreds. Pogo was trusting, good-natured, and innocent, which generally meant it was Pogo's larder that got ransacked whenever someone got hungry. Most of the other characters were bombastic, short-sighted, full of self-importance, and not just a little stupid. What better vehicle for political satire and commentary? Pogo was largely before my time, so, like Peanuts, I can only imagine how it must have shocked its first readers. Considering how controversial many papers find Doonesbury in the 1980s, one has to wonder how Pogo got away with its political criticism 30 years earlier.

Again, much of Pogo's magic for me was in the beautiful drawings. where the animals looked so real and animated you imagined their noses were probably cold to the touch. Part of the magic was the amazing dialects they spoke, which mangled English with awful puns and unintended meanings. Part of it was the gutsiness of attacking the fur right on the "funny" pages and pulling no punch. Part of it was the strip's basic faith in human decency underneath all the smoke and bluster. Part of it was the rambling storytelling, where every main road to the conclusion was avoided in favor of endless detours. Part of it was that Grundoon talked only in consonants, P.T. Bridgeport talked in circus posters, and Deacon Mushrat talked in Gothic type. And, of course, part of it was that it was very, very funny. The strip had a mood, a pace, and atmosphere that has not been seen since in comics.

I discovered Krazy Kat when a large anthology of the strip was published in 1969. The book is an editorial disaster, but it did show a lot of Krazy Kat strips, and I admired the work immediately. Krazy Kat seems to be one of those strips people either love or don't get at all. Krazy Kat is nothing but variations on a simple theme, so the magic of the strip is not so much in what it says but in how it says it. Ignatz Mouse throws bricks at Krazy out of contempt, but Krazy interprets this as a gesture of affection instead. Meanwhile, the law - Offissa Pupp - futilely tries to interfere with a process that's completely satisfying to all parties for all the wrong reasons. This weird, recycling plot can be interpreted as a metaphor for love or politics - or it can just be enjoyed for its own lunatic charms. The strip constantly plays with its own form, and becomes a sort of essay on cartoon existentialism. The background scenery changes from panel to panel, and day can turn to night and back again during a brief conversation.

Similarly, Herriman played with language and dialect, inserting Spanish, phonetically spelled mispronounced words, slang, and odd, alliterative phrases, giving the strip a unique atmosphere. The drawings are scratchy and peculiar, but they provide a beautiful visual context to the equally idiosyncratic writing. Krazy Kat's sparse Arizona landscape, like Pogo's dense Georgia swamp, is more than a backdrop. The land is really a character in the story, and it gives a specific mood and flavor to all the proceedings. The constraint of Krazy Kat's narrow plot seems to have set free every other aspect of the cartoon to become poetry, and the strip is, to my mind, cartooning at its most pure.

These three strips showed me the incredible possibilities of the cartoon medium, and I continue to find them inspiring. All these strips work on many levels, entertaining while they deal with other issues. These strips reflect uniquely personal views of the world, and we are richer for the artists' visions. Reading these strips, we see life through new eyes, and maybe understand a little more - or at least appreciate a little more - some of the absurdities of our world. These strips are just three of my personal favorites, but they give us some idea of how good comics can be. They argue powerfully that comics can be vehicles for beautiful artwork and serious, intelligent expression.

In a way, it's surprising that comic strips have ever been that good. The comics were invented for commercial purposes. They were, and are, a graphic feature designed to help sell newspapers. Cartoonists work within severe space constraints on an inflexible deadline for a mass audience. That's not the most conducive atmosphere for the production of great art, and of course many comic strips have been eminently dispensable. But more than occasionally, wonderful work has been produced.

Amazingly, much of the best cartoon work was done early on in the medium's history. The early cartoonists, with no path before them, produced work of such sophistication, wit, and beauty that it increasingly seems to me that cartoon evolution is working backward. Comic strips are moving toward a primordial goo rather than away from it. As a cartoonist, it's a bit humiliating to read work that was done over 50 years ago and find it more imaginative than what any of us are doing now. We've lost many of the most precious qualities of comics. Most readers today have never seen the best comics of the past, so they don't even know what they're missing. Not only can comics be more than we're getting today. but the comics already have been more than we're getting today. The reader is being gypped and he doesn't even know it.

Consider only the most successful strips in the papers today. Why ate so many of them poorly drawn? Why do so many offer only the simplest interchangeable gags and puns? Why are some strips written by committees and drawn by assistants? Why are some strips still stumbling around decades after their original creators have retired or died? Why are some strips little more than advertisements for dolls and greeting cards? Why do so many of the comics look the same?

If comics can be so much, why are we settling for so little? Can't we expect more from our comics pages?

Well, these days, probably not. Let's look at why.

The comics are a collaborative effort on the part of the cartoonists who draw them, the syndicates that distribute them, and the newspapers that buy and publish them. Each needs the other, and all haves common interest in providing comics features of a quality that attracts a devoted readership. But business and art almost always have a rocky marriage, and in comic strips today the interests of business are undermining the concerns of the art.

Part of the problem is that the very idea that cartoons could be art has been slow to take hold. I talked about Krazy Kat, Pogo, and Peanuts to show that the best cartoons have a serious purpose underneath the jokes and funny pictures. True, comics are a popular art, and yes, I believe their primary obligation is to entertain, but comics can go beyond that, and when they do, they move from silliness to significance.

The first comic strip cartoonists were staff artists of major newspapers, and consequently, from the beginning, cartoonists were regarded as simple employees of their publishers rather than artists. when the creator of a popular strip left his employer, the cartoonist was rarely able to take his creation with him intact. Very early strips, such as The Yellow Kid, The Katzenjammer Kids, and Buster Brown, all appeared in two versions, one by the original creator and one by an imitator hired by the publisher who lost the creator. The comic strip came into being as a staff-produced graphic, and comics have never escaped the perception that they are a newspaper "feature," like a weather reap, instead of a forum for individual expression. In fact, despite the grim violence of Dick Tracy, the conservative politics of Little Orphan Annie, the social satire of Li'l Abner, and the shapely women that have graced dozens of other strips, the comics have somehow come to be thought of as entertainment for children. Cartoonists are widely regarded as the newspaper equivalent of Captain Kangaroo. The idea that comics are potentially one of the most versatile art forms is sadly foreign. Our expectations and demands for comics are not high.

Today, comic strip cartoonists work for syndicates, not individual newspapers, but 100 years into the medium it's still the very rare cartoonist who owns his creation. Before agreeing to sell a comic strip, syndicates generally demand ownership of the characters, copyright, and all exploitation rights. The cartoonist is never paid or otherwise compensated for giving up these rights: he either gives them up or he doesn't get syndicated.

The syndicates take the strip and sell it to newspapers and split the income with the cartoonists. Syndicates are essentially agents. Now, can you imagine a novelist giving his literary agent the ownership of his characters and all reprint, television, and movie rights before the agent takes the manuscript to a publisher? Obviously, an author would have to be a raving lunatic to agree to such a deal, but virtually every cartoonist does exactly that when a syndicate demands ownership before agreeing to sell the strip to newspapers. Some syndicates take these rights forever, some syndicates for shorter periods, but in any event, the syndicate has final authority and control over artwork it had no hand in creating or producing. Without creator control over the work, the comics remain a product to be exploited, not an art.

Why does this happen? As the syndicates will tell you, no cartoonist is forced to sign the ridiculous contracts the syndicates offer. The cartoonist is free to stay in his $3.50 an hour bag boy job until he can think of a better way to get his strip in the newspapers. Simply put, the syndicates offer virtually the only shot for an unknown cartoonist to break into the daily newspaper market. The syndicates therefore use their position of power to extort rights they do not deserve.

Sacrificing ownership has serious consequences for the artist. For starters, it allows the syndicate to view the creator as a replaceable part. To most syndicates, the creator of a popular strip is no more valuable than a hired flunky who can mimic the original. Some syndicates can replace a cartoonist at will, and most syndicates can replace a cartoonist as soon as he quits, retires, or dies. This attitude is simply unconscionable, but it's the standard practice of business.

Cartoonists and syndicates alike tend to exaggerate the syndicate's role in making strips successful. Ultimately, though, the level of sales is determined a lot more by how good the strip is than by who sells it. Reader polls across the country shows surprising consensus about which strips are good, and editors do their best to print what the readers want. The syndicates bring the cartoon to the market, but they can't keep it there. Only the cartoonist can do that. Syndicates simply do not need or deserve comic strip ownership for the job they do.

By having complete control over the comic strip, the syndicate can ruin the work. Although there has never, ever been a successor to a comic strip half as good as the original creator, passing strips down through generations like secondhand clothes has been the standard practice of the business since it began. Incredibly, syndicates still today tell young artists that they're not good enough to draw their own strip, but they are good enough to carry on the work of some legendary strip instead. Too often, syndicates would rather have the dwindling income of a doddering dinosaur than let the strip die and risk losing the spot to a rival syndicate. Consequently, the comics pages are full of dead wood. Strips that had some relevance to the world during the depression are now being continued by baby boomers, and the results are embarrassing.

Suppose you're a painter and you go to an art gallery to see if they'll represent you. They look at your work and shake their heads. But, since you show some basic familiarity with a paintbrush, they ask if you'd like to continue Rembrandt's work. After all, you can paint. Rembrandt's dead, and some buyers would rather have a Rembrandt forgery than no Rembrandt at all. It's an absurd scenario, but this is what goes on in comic strip syndication.

Comic strips have a natural lifetime. and any cartoonist ought to be able to quit or retire without fear that his syndicate will hire some hack illustrator to keep the work going. It's time syndicates stopped maiming their comic strips by passing them on to official plagiarists. It's also time that the would-be successors of comic strips had more respect for their own talents and for the work of those who created something original. If someone wants to be a cartoonist, let's see him develop his own strip instead of taking over the duties of someone else's. We've got too many comic strip corpses being propped up and passed for living by

new cartoonists who ought to be doing something of their own. If a cartoonist isn't good enough to make it on his own work, he has no business being in the newspaper.

Syndicate ownership of strips also gives them control over comic strip merchandising. Today, newspaper sales can't bring in a fraction of the money that licensing can bring. As the number of newspapers has diminished, and as the remaining papers run pretty much the same 20 strips everywhere, the growth of a syndicate now depends on dolls and greeting cards more than newspaper sales. Consequently, the quickest contracts are going to strips with licensing potential. One syndicate developed a comic strip after it had settled on the products: the strip was essentially to be an advertisement for the dolls and TV shows already planned. The syndicate developed the characters and then found someone to draw the strip. Lots of heart and integrity in that kind of strip, yes sir. Even in strips with more honorable beginnings, the syndicates are only too happy to sell out a comic strip for a quick and temporary buck, and their ownership and control allows them to do just that.

Of course, to be fair to the syndicates, most cartoonists are happy to sell out, too. Although not to the present extent, licensing has been around since the beginning of the comic strip, and many cartoonists have benefitted from the increased exposure. The character merchandise not only provides the cartoonist with additional income, but it puts his characters in new markets and has the potential to broaden the base of the strip and attract new readers. I'm not against all licensing for all strips. Under the control of a conscientious cartoonist, certain kinds of strips can be licensed tastefully and with respect to the creation. That said, I'll add that it's very rarely done that way. With the kind of money in licensing nowadays, it's not surprising many cartoonists are as eager as the syndicates for easy millions, and are willing to sacrifice the heart and soul of the strip to get it. I say it's not surprising, but it is disappointing.

Some very good strips have been cheapened by licensing. Licensed products, of course, are incapable of capturing the subtleties of the original strip, and the merchandise can alter the public perception of the strip, especially when the merchandise is aimed at a younger audience than the strip is. The deeper concerns of some strips are ignored or condensed to fit the simple gag requirements of mugs and T-shirts. In addition, no one cartoonist has the time to write and draw a daily strip and do all the work of a licensing program. Inevitably, extra assistants and business people are required, and having so many cooks in the kitchen usually encourages a blandness to suit all tastes. Strips that once had integrity and heart become simply cute as the business moguls cash in. Once a lot of money and jobs are riding on the status quo, it gets harder to push the experiments and new directions that keep a strip vital. Characters lose their believability as they start endorsing major companies and lend their faces to bedsheets and boxer shorts. The appealing innocence and sincerity of cartoon characters is corrupted when they use those qualities to peddle products. One starts to question whether characters say things because they mean it or because their sentiments sell T-shirts and greeting cards. Licensing has made some cartoonists extremely wealthy, but at a considerable loss to the precious little world they created. I don't buy the argument that licensing can go at full throttle without affecting the strip. Licensing has become a monster. Cartoonists have not been very good at recognizing it, and the syndicates don't care.

And then we have established cartoonists who have grown so cavalier about their jobs that they sign strips they haven't written or drawn. Anonymous assistants do the work while the person getting the credit is out on the golf course. Aside from the fundamental dishonesty involved, these cartoonists again encourage the mistaken view that once the strip's characters are invented, any facile hireling can churn out the material. In these strips, jokes are written by committee with the goal of not advancing the characters, but of keeping them exactly where they've always been. So long as the characters never develop, they're utterly predictable, and hence, so easy to write that a committee can do it. The staff of illustrators has the same task: to keep each drawing so slick and perfect that it loses all trace of individual quirk. That way, no one can tell who's doing it. It's an assembly line production. It's efficient, but it makes for mindless, repetitive, joyless comics. We need to see more creators taking pride in their craft, and doing the work they get paid for. If writing and drawing cartoons has become a burden for them, let's see some early retirements and some room for new talent.

And while cartoonists and syndicates continue to cheapen their own product, newspapers worsen the situation by continually shrinking the comics to ever smaller sizes.

The newspaper business has changed. Afternoon papers are failing everywhere, and few papers are in the competitive situation that comics were invented to promote. Television brings that latest news at six and 11 in full-color action. Newspaper circulation is not increasing with the population, while newspaper costs continue to grow. Consequently, over the last several decades, newspapers have been squeezing the comics into less and less space to cut expenses.

When Krazy Kat was drawn, comics regularly ran a full page on Sunday - an entire newspaper page all to itself. Comics were like posters. Now most papers commonly print strips a quarter of a page on Sundays, and sometimes even smaller. Daily strips have shrunk, too. Strips had already lost a lot of space by the time I cut out a Pogo strip in 1969. Today, 20 years later, I work with almost a third less space than that. As comic strips are printed smaller and smaller, the drawings and dialogue have to get simpler and simpler to stay legible. Cartoons are just words and pictures, and you can only eliminate so much of either before a cartoon is deprived of its ability to entertain.

The adventure strip, a newspaper staple in the '40s, has all but pasted away, and we've lost much of the diversity of which the comics are capable. It's not too surprising. At current sizes, there is no room for real dialogue, no room to show action, no room to show exotic worlds or foreign lands, no room to tell a decent story. Consequently, today's comics pages are filled with cartoon characters who sit in blank backgrounds spouting silly puns. Conversation in a comic strip is a thing of the past. The wonderful dialects and wordplays of Krazy Kat and Pogo are as impossible now as the beautiful draftsmanship that characterized those strips and others. All the talk about how "sophisticated" comics have become shows a woeful ignorance of what comics used to be like. Comics are simpler and dumber than ever.

The situation is ironic. All across the country, newspapers are going to great expense to add color photographs, fancy graphics, and bold design to their pages in order to entice readers away from the steady blue light of their TV screens. It is strange that after all that expense and

work, newspapers refuse to take advantage of the comic strip, the one newspaper graphic that television cannot imitate. When 20 strips are reduced and crammed into two monotonous columns on one page, the result is singularly unattractive and un-effective. Newspapers pay for their comics and then refuse to let comics do their job.

Here, then, is the situation: despite the proven popularity of the comics, newspapers print them miserably, while syndicates have taken it on themselves to control, exploit, and cheapen their product. Between the two, cartoonists all but abandon the artistic responsibilities of their craft. Somehow, I can't shake the idea that this isn't how cartooning is supposed to be... and that cartooning will never be more than a cheap, brainless commodity until it's published differently.

What can be done? I'm not a businessman, but I'll toss out some ideas just to start some discussion.

First of all, we should keep in mind that newspapers and syndicates are by no means essential to the production of comics, There are all sorts of ways to publish cartoons, and if syndicates and newspapers won't hold up their end of the bargain, maybe there's an opportunity for a new kind of publisher let's start with eliminating both the syndicate and the newspaper. Consider for a moment that there may well be a market for comic books that has never been tapped simply because comic books have traditionally been an even sloppier; dumber, and more exploitive market than newspaper comics. But suppose someone published a quality cartoon magazine. Imagine full-color, big comics in a lush, glossy format. Why not? Just because cartoons have always been treated as schlock doesn't mean that sleazy packaging, cheap paper, poor color; bad writing, and crude art are what comics are all about. Imagine a publisher who recognizes that the way to attract readers is to give them quality cartoons... and that the way to get quality cartoons is to offer artists a quality format and artistic freedom. Is it inconceivable such a venture would work?

Or let's say we keep the syndicates but abandon the newspapers. So long as newspapers refuse to respect the legitimate needs of the comic strip, why don't the syndicates take control of their product and publish the comics themselves? Each syndicate could put out a weekly comic book of all its strips. Comic books originally started as reprints of newspaper comics, and they were so popular an industry was created to produce new comic books to fill the demand. Suppose the syndicate gives each of its cartoonists five pages to draw and color any way he wants, then binds the results, and sells them at chain bookstores and in supermarkets with the magazines and tabloids. Offer subscriptions, too, what the heck. Think of all the kids who unload $10 a week collecting miserably done super-hero comics, and you know there's got to be a market out there somewhere. What syndicate is going to try something new to showcase the talent it's collected?

Or let's say we keep the syndicates and the newspapers. There are still ways to improve comics. For one thing, the syndicates could again take over the printing, and the comics could be sold to papers as a preprinted insert. Or the syndicates could print the insert with advertising, and let the ads pay for its inclusion in the newspaper. Either way, the syndicates could start printing their comics big, in color, and on good quality paper that people could

keep and collect. If advertisers are paying for the comics section inserts, for example, editors can hardly complain that they don't get a citywide exclusive on their strips.

Or, if we assume no syndicate has the foresight to promote the quality of its own product, at the very least one would think an imaginative newspaper editor could come up with a way to add another half-page of space to the comics section and print the work as it was intended to be published. Given the readership of the comics page, couldn't an advertiser or two be persuaded to sponsor the comics section for a single ad of his alone at the top of the page? I don't believe all the possibilities have been exhausted.

I admit my ideas here are rough. Obviously, if I had any business savvy at all myself, I'd lump the whole business tomorrow and self-publish. See, that's another alternative! My point is simply that cartoons are not necessarily doomed to increasing stupidity and crude craftsmanship. With the right publishing, comics can move into whole new worlds we've never seen. Moreover, I think any effort to improve the quality of comics would very likely be rewarded in the marketplace. Think of the people who cut out certain comics to put on refrigerators, or to put in scrapbooks, or to send in letters, or to stick on their office walls. Give them a nicely printed, big color comic on good paper and see if they don't jump. I think the public would respond if there was a publisher out there with an ounce of vision. For too long, syndicates and cartoonists have been congratulating themselves whenever things don't get worse. I don't think that's good enough. This very weekend we've got syndicate executives, cartoonists, readers, and newspaper people all together. let's knock some heads together and see what we can do. Let's ask people what they're doing to improve the state of comics.

I started out talking about Peanuts, Pogo, and Krazy Kat. These strips suggest a world of possibilities that cartoons can offer. Comics are capable of being anything the mind can imagine. I consider it a great privilege to be a cartoonist. I love my work, and I am grateful for the incredible forum I have to express my thoughts. People give me their attention for a few seconds every day, and I take that as an honor and a responsibility. I try to give readers the best strip I'm capable of doing. I look at cartoons as an art, as a form of personal expression. That's why I don't hire assistants, why I write and draw every line myself, why I draw and paint special art for each of my books, and why I refuse to dilute or corrupt the strip's message with merchandising. I want to draw cartoons, not supervise a factory. I had a lot of fun as a kid reading comics, and now I'm in the position where I can return some of that fun. I try to draw the kind of strip I'd like to read, but I'm not entirely able to. This business keeps me from doing the quality work I'd like to be doing... and because I'm being cheated, so arc my readers.

Newspapers can do better. Syndicates can do better. Cartoonists can do better. The business interests, in the name of efficiency, mass marketability, and profit, profit, profit are catering to the lowest common denominator of readership and are keeping this art form from growing. There will always be mediocre comic strips, but we have lost much of the potential for anything else. We need more variety on the comics page, not less. Those of us who care about the comics need to start speaking up. This is an excellent place and time to do it.