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The Underground and Cultural Legitimacy: The Divide in the American Comics History

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In contemporary times, comics command a fair degree of cultural legitimacy, but that has not always been the case. Like other artforms before them, they had to prove their worth. The process of how this legitimacy was achieved is of interest though, as it varies greatly depending among the region one examines. Of the three major regions of comics production -- Europe, Japan, and America -- how American comics found their way to cultural legitimacy is particularly odd. Unlike Japan and Europe, America suffered a major hit to its mainstream comics publishers brought about by censorship initiatives in the 1950s. As a result, the cultural legitimacy of American comics rose largely from independent comics movements.

In his essay, "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?" Thierry Groensteen, one of the most influential comics theorists, argued that cultural legitimacy is achieved when a piece of art garners the approval of cultural tastemakers, such as educators, critics, museums, and the media (Groensteen 3). He goes on to explain the ways in which comics -- specifically French comics -- were accused of being illegitimate art, and makes counter arguments to these criticisms. He also implies, but does not discuss directly, that art intended for children is never recognized as culturally legitimate (7). While what art is and is not culturally legitimate is heavily subjective depending on the culture one is observing, the art that is considered legitimate in any given culture does seem to still abide by two criteria: advocacy by cultural tastemakers and being directed toward adults.

The larger cultural opinion of comics has changed significantly since Groensteen originally published his article. Now, arguing whether or not comics have been able to achieve cultural legitimization by such metrics is a fruitless endeavor; there are countless examples of cultural tastemakers advocating for the legitimacy of comics, and the medium, in contemporary times, has largely shifted to one that is adult-oriented. Thus, the question of "if" is not as worth

considering as the question of "how," and the fact of American comics attaining cultural legitimacy through the efforts of independent comics is only worth discussing if it is somehow novel. Japanese and European comics have shown that they were more than capable of achieving cultural legitimacy through the confines of their mainstream markets.

Japan's comics scene achieved cultural legitimacy through sheer tremendous production of material. To illustrate what I mean, in 1984, 27 percent of all material that was published in Japan was in comic form; Japan uses more of its paper for comics than for toilet paper (Schodt 12). Manga -- which is the Japanese term for comics -- is probably the largest, most diverse comics culture in the entire world. This is in part due to the absurd amount of demand for manga in Japan. The model for comics production in Japan is similar to the monthly magazine model that American comics followed for many decades, only pushed to an extreme. Most manga magazines are published weekly, and prominent serializations will have issues that can push upwards of 350 pages (13). Part of the reason manga publishers began turning out such massive amounts of material was as a way to compete with other forms of entertainment such as television, and it has been a cycle of supply and demand since then (66-67). This absurd volume allows for manga publishing companies to be more lenient with the types of material they produce, which means that there is room for manga series with far more specialization than one could expect to find in the other comics markets of the world. For example, there is a subcategory of manga that focuses entirely on realistic tales about modern Japanese housewives and office women (Ito). There is also one key difference between the mainstream manga market and other comics markets around the world. Mangaka -- manga creators -- are superstars in their native Japanese culture. The mangaka of successful manga make more money than any other comic creators anywhere else in the world, easily breaking into the wealthy class of Japan

(Schodt 138-139). Furthermore, a mangaka, unlike an American comics artist, is considered to be a sort of comics auteur. They are often expected to be sole creators of their work, meaning that one mangaka is typically responsible for every element of both art and writing; more popular artists will sometimes bring in assistants to deal with lettering or filling in backgrounds, but the mangaka is upheld to be the creator responsible for their work and the owner of it. This is not an altogether enviable existence as a comics creator, though, as mangaka often lead busy, brutal work lives. It is not altogether uncommon for the editors of popular serializations to go to great lengths to ensure mangaka meet deadlines, such as locking mangaka in rooms until they produce the work expected of them (144). These elements of Japanese comics culture are the main contributing factors to how manga became a legitimate art form. Since the market has an unmatched need for comics, it allows for unmatched levels of creative freedom. Mangaka were and are able to be more experimental with their stories since manga publishers want to meet these absurdly high outputs. Through this freedom and experimentation, mangaka were able to produce stories that would probably have been shot down in more restrictive markets, but ultimately proved to be huge hits with critics, fans, or often both. Manga such as *Akira*, *Onwards Towards Our Noble Deaths*, and *Lone Wolf and Cub* are all just a few examples of highly regarded manga that were serialized by mainstream manga journals. However, mangaka often were not able to produce some of their iconic, experimental work that would achieve massive critical praise until they had already spent some time proving themselves as a mangaka. This relates back to the fact of mangaka being such well respected artists in their native culture; they are respected as lone creators capable of honing a craft. This obviously signifies that a culture takes the comics as an artform seriously if it is willing to hold their creators in such high regard.

It is a mark of legitimacy equivocal to Russian ballerinas, Spanish matadors, or American auteur filmmakers.

Europe stands out in the discussion of comics achieving legitimacy since it seems to have always upheld comics as a potentially legitimate artform. There have been microcosms of resistance, such as the ones Groensteen himself points out in his article, but none of them had a lasting impact. Comics, as they are understood now, are thought to have originated in Europe, which is quite possibly why this was the case (Mainardi). France is the most predominant case of holding comics as a legitimate art form, as evidenced by the French categorizing comics as the "Ninth Art" (Van Lente 19). Belgium holds comics to similar heights, having established entire museums dedicated specifically to comics as early as the 1980s ("The Belgian Comic Strip Center). Interestingly, the term *bande dessinée* -- the native term for French and Belgian comics -- encompasses both the art form of comics themselves, and the critique thereof. That having been said, other European countries have made considerable contributions to the development and legitimation of comics. The government of Madrid, for example, officially commissioned a journal, *Madriz*, for a few years to celebrate the history of Spanish comics (Mazur & Danner 162). There have been comics journals established specifically with the intent of pioneering experimental comics forms. There is no shortage of awards, critical consideration, or academic attention given to comics in Europe. Europe also benefits from the fact that they long held a clear divide between children's comics and adult comics, thus avoiding the trappings of children's art never receiving legitimacy (Van Lente et al. 13-17).

In terms of comics history, what most separates America from the other regions of the world is immense censorship that took place in the 1950s. This was in response to the uproar caused by the psychologist Frederick Wertham and the American court system hearing relating

to juvenile delinquency. Both Wertham and the court hearings reached the conclusion that the violent and hypersexualized material in popular American comics at the time was responsible for the then recent increase in violent and sexual crimes being committed by children (78). Frederick Wertham detailed his work with such child patients, as well as his research into the types of comics they were reading in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*. While there was a fair amount of scholarship being done around this era both for and against the merit of comics, some of which was other work by Wertham, nothing seized the attention of the public quite like *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham ultimately began a campaign against the American comics industry of the time (80) His efforts, combined with the notoriety stemming from juvenile criminal cases, created a prominent threat of censorship looming over the heads of the mainstream American comics industry.

However, censorship never came from the federal level; it did not have to. Recognizing the proverbial writing on the wall, the American comics industry proactively created its own authority of regulation, the Comics Code Authority (87). Though it was not technically an authoritative body created by the United States government in response to the social uproar against comics, many of the regulations the Code established directly addressed the issues being brought up by the campaign against comics: hypersexualization, graphic violence, depiction and elaboration of real life crimes, racism, a few specific prohibitions against certain words, and even sweat beads. (88-89). Following the self-imposed censorship of the Code, strangely, was not required by the mainstream comics industry for a comic to receive publication; however, in light of the public outrage against comics, mainstream publishers were too terrified of publishing a comic that was not approved by the Code, since they feared it would tarnish their reputations further and that comics which did not adhere to the Code would be doomed to sell poorly. This

devastated the mainstream American comics industry. It is estimated that in the years before the Code was put into effect, comics printed in America encroached on one billion; after the Code took effect, that number crashed to a bit over one hundred thousand (Gabilliet 46).

To the credit of Wertham and the others that were critical of American comics in the 1950s, there was a glut of inappropriate material for a medium predominantly marketed toward children. There are now websites devoted both to finding sources for the comics that Wertham references in *Seduction of the Innocent*, as well as contemporary comics that contain equally disturbing material that Wertham did not specifically reference (The Web's Original Seduction of the Innocent Site). Even the most vehement of pro-comics supporters that would take the time to explore these comics would likely find themselves uncomfortable with some of the things being depicted in a medium targeted at young children. That having been said, there has been a fair amount of questioning the gross content of 1950s comics to the effect of the chicken-or-the-egg debate: were children in the 1950s hyper sexualized and violent because of the comics they were consuming, or were the comics of the 1950s hyper sexualized and violent because that was what the children wanted to read? It is unlikely either is strictly the case due to the production and consumption of cultural objects being so deeply intertwined. People have made observations regarding American culture of the 1950s and found that there was a permeating issue with prominent violence and sexualization. Curiously, there was even a study that showed a strong correlation between increased lead intake and the growing violent crime rates (Wakefield 3). Regardless, there was undeniably a growing issue with the material being presented to children in comics. Furthermore, the censorship focusing primarily on children's exposure to inappropriate material in comics helped crystallize one of the biggest obstacles to American culture accepting comics as legitimate art: the notion that comics were an artform meant for



children. Of course, this was not an incorrect association at the time of the censorship because, excluding newspaper strips, American comics were a medium marketed primarily to children and adolescents. This association of comics as children's media became an issue in the following decades, though, as the mainstream market adjusted its content to appeal to an older audience -- young adults and older. Even in contemporary times, the primary consumers of comic books are middle-aged men, but there remains this specter of comics being children's media (Schneider & Cannon).

One of the greatest ironies of the entire Comics Code Authority was that Frederick Wertham was perhaps more upset at the state of comics that followed the Code as he was of the comics that were being published before the Code (Van Lente et al. 92). He took issue with many of the ways that the mainstream comics publishers would circumvent the restriction of the Code. For example, many comics would get around the prohibition of graphic violence by still portraying the violence, but doing so in an outlandishly cartoony way that would circumvent the consequences of the action, while remaining imitable (92). In light of the confines of the code, many comics publishers defaulted to the superhero genre, which Wertham considered to be fascist (84). Among other things, Wertham's distress serves to show that harsh and sudden censorship did little to improve the overall state of the mainstream American comics industry. In fact, some of the developments that are considered to be most integral in the improvement of mainstream American comics are instances where the Comics Code Authority was not adhered to. These developments will be discussed in greater detail later on.

Perhaps the one net positive thing the Comics Code Authority did to contribute to the legitimization of comics in American culture was that it spawned the underground comix movement in America. The underground comix movement was typified by artists and writers

creating their own serialized comics journals that purposefully violated the Comics Code Authority as an act of defiant artistic expression. Since these were often the labors of individuals or small groups without access to either traditional distribution channels or large budgets, underground comix had to rely on unconventional means of distribution and the word of mouth to spread interest. The two main edges that these comix had over the mainstream American comics industry was that their goal was artistic expression, not to turn profits, and within the comix subculture they were considered the works of auteurs, similar to mangaka. This meant that comix producers were not only able to take risks with being experimental, potentially off-putting to their readers, they were practically going out of their way to do so. Though it was ultimately responsible for most of the advancements in comics becoming considered legitimate art for in America, the underground comix movement in America had more than its fair share of unpleasant material.

Perhaps the most influential member of the American underground comix movement was Robert Crumb, creator of *Zap Comix* (Mazur & Danner 24-26). *Zap Comix* may not have been the first publication of the underground comix movement, but it was certainly the one that sent the rest of the movement into motion. There are a number of reasons why *Zap Comix* was particularly successful in igniting interest in American underground comix. For one, Crumb started *Zap Comix* in the late 1960s, which was an important window given the demographic of comic readers and creators in America. The Comics Code Authority had made the mainstream industry highly reductive, with most of the mainstream publishers reverting to stories that appealed almost exclusively to young children because of their simplicity (Van Lente et al. 91). Adolescent and young adult readers were turning away from the mainstream industry and toward underground comix, because circulations like *Zap Comix* had the more mature and complicated

themes they were interested in. Similarly, people who were readers of comics when they were children were reaching the point where they were interested in creating comics themselves, and the underground comix scene proved a more welcoming platform for many seeking to break into comics publishing (Mazur & Danner 26-28). Furthermore, the intentional challenging of the Comics Code Authority appealed greatly to the anti-establishment youth subculture in late 1960s America (24). In fact, one of the main distribution channels for underground comix were what are commonly referred to as "head shops." Head shops were locations that traditionally dealt with products such as drug paraphernalia and music memorabilia, and they proved a perfect platform to distribute underground comix (24). However, the early stages of the American underground comix scene had its fair share of issues as well.

It is entirely possible that the anti-censorship sentiment at the heart of the underground comix movement caused many of the artists participating in it to over-adjust. Some of the material in *Zap Comix* was troubling, even if it was in the interest of satire. Crumb would routinely sexualize women, have incredibly problematic portrayals of minorities, and depict gruesome violence in great detail (Mazur & Danner 26). Crumb was not the only culprit though; other underground comix artists were using this newly established no-rules format as an outlet for their issues. S. Clay Wilson, for example, was notorious problematic for things such as multi-page, literally orgiastic depictions of sex and violence with mutants that were visually dense that he likened them to abstract expressionist paintings if viewed from a distance (28-29). In fact, many of the early years of underground comix were defined by this unrelenting stream of excess. Not all comix were quite to such extremes, though, and some of the decisions made by these artists were the primordial traces of comics being treated as serious art. For example, Crumb himself "imitated the masters" by reviving the bigfoot art style common among American

newspaper comics of the 1920s and 30s (23). Of course, eventually the pendulum swung back a bit in the mid 1970s, with underground comix artists creating comics and starting movements that were in response to this glut of uncontrolled material.

If nothing else, the incredible amount of anti-Code material the underground comix movement was producing served to illustrate one important point: American comics finally had a place where openly adult themes could be featured. Beyond the violence, sex, and grotesque satire, underground comix let artists tackle subject matter most mainstream comics artist could not even dream of, and since underground comix were free from the Code's harsh idea of right and wrong, they could approach these adult topics with far more nuance and complexity. Some artists recognized this through the proverbial mist of outrage against censorship and took the opportunity to write stories that were less about challenging authority and more about interesting things that would not be allowed in the mainstream. Art Spiegelman is likely the most recognizable name from this group; Spiegelman, author of the critically acclaimed *Maus*, got his start in underground comics with underground serializations such as *Short Order Comics*, which contained his infamous four-page comic "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," which explores the aftermath of his mother's suicide. Harvey Pekar, with help from his friend Robert Crumb, began a series of autobiographical comics called *American Splendor* which dealt with his everyday life from the mundane to the dark. Justin Green created "Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary," a rather lengthy comic book that is a dramatic retelling of Green's struggle with his faith and mental health in his youth. Beyond their subject matter that would assuredly never have gotten approval from a mainstream American comics publisher, the previously mentioned comics also typified some innovations that the underground comix scene was bringing to light. For one, artists began exploring new grounds with the form by creating fully or semi-autobiographical

comics, which was something largely not done before in the American comics (41-43). Also, underground comix were much more open to the experimental, difficult, or contemplative forms that artists were creating that the mainstream industry would not have given even the slightest consideration. Lengthy stories, vignette-style snapshots, and hyper disjointed nonsense were all fair game for the underground creators (43). In comparison, space for autobiographical narratives and serious subject matter had long been available to Japanese mangaka. For example, in 1963, years before the American underground movement even began, Keiji Nakazawa began serializing *Barefoot Gen*, a series based on his experiences as a Hiroshima survivor (67). *Barefoot Gen* is such a highly regarded comic that it had been used as educational material (68). Furthermore, its original run appeared in *Weekly Shonen Jump*, one of the most prominent mainstream journals in the history of manga. European mainstream artists were experimenting with similar things as the American underground creators at around the same time; Martin Vaughn-James' 1975 book *The Cage* has no characters or tangible plot (127).

Another important occurrence in the development of American comics was the outbreak of women-focused comics. These developed within the underground comix movement partly as a response to the fact that underground comix movement was slowly becoming more guilty of portraying women problematically than even the mainstream industry had, as well as the fact that creating comics had largely remained a “boy’s club” even after the underground movement took off (33). The most famous of these women-focused comics is undoubtedly *Wimmen’s Comix*, which began serialization in 1972 as an all-female comics anthology. Written, drawn, and edited by members of a comics collective of the same name, *Wimmen’s Comix* featured works that contained subject matter on everything from feminism, sexuality, politics, and even some more autobiographical comics (Johnson). Many imitators soon followed, some of which were even

created by members of the original Wimmen's Comix team. Unfortunately, the surge of feminist and women-empowering comics did not cure either the mainstream nor underground comix scene from their issues with misogyny or oversexualization of women. Though, it did draw in a tremendous deal of female talent to the art of comics making, helping to diversify the types of comics available in the American culture. Also, the formation of a comics collective would be something that would precede important shifts later on.

Once again, the American underground scene pushing for more women creators and women-oriented comics was a movement that was mirrored in the mainstream scenes of other major comics regions. In Japan, for example, there was more contrast than simply which scene this was happening on. The increase in girls' and women's manga was largely due to market demands rather than a conscious effort to right an injustice in the manga industry (Schodt 95). Shojo -- manga aimed at young girls -- and josei -- manga aimed at older girls and young women -- also saw an organic increase in female mangaka in the mainstream industry as well. This was a result of the younger generation of female Japanese comics readers reaching the age where they would be able to become mangaka themselves; these aspiring young female mangaka were able to convince mainstream publishers to hire them based on the premise that they were far better suited to know what young girls and women wanted to read than the old male mangaka that had previously been responsible for creating shojo and josei manga (96-97).

Formally, the underground comix scene died out somewhere in the early 70s. Part of this was the decline of head shops -- one of the movement's primary distribution points -- and the decline of the American hippie subculture (Gabilliet 66-67). Also occurring at this time was a Supreme Court case, *Miller vs. California*, that allowed local authorities to define what is and is not obscene material (82). This consequently placed many underground comix under

considerable pressure, as their willful playing with taboos meant they were rife with material that their local authorities would crack down on. Ironically, these changes in censorship regulations caused the underground to swing away from unfiltered chaos.

Scrappy and defiant as they were, the members of the underground scene did not simply keel over. However, a major diversion did occur. Some artists, Crumb and his cohorts for example, wanted to continue their wild trajectory of expressionism and satirical commentary, but with less of a nothing-is-too-far approach. Others, Spiegelman and company, were more interested in exploring the artistic possibilities of the comics form, but without the harsh censorship mainstream comics were subject to. At the time, the latter group was termed "groundlevel comics" (Gabilliet 83). Groundlevel comics approached the independent comics process a bit more formally than their predecessors. A perfect showcase of this is *RAW*, an alternative comics journal spearheaded by Spiegelman, who actively recruited talent for the comics, in some cases from universities (Mazur & Danner 184-185). Eventually, the distinction between the two blurred, and they both quickly became identified as "alternative comics" (Gabilliet 84).

Of course, the American mainstream comics industry was not remaining entirely stagnant while the underground scene was developing. There were attempts being made to break the mainstream industry of its trappings and move toward more serious art. Likely the most prominent example of this is the first mainstream comic to break the Comics Code Authority regulations and still go through with publications. In 1971, Marvel Comics published an issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* that featured illicit drug use, which was forbidden by the Code (Comics Code Revision of 1971). Shortly following this, the series also published issues that contained the explicit death of a villain, which was also against the Code's regulations. This was

a revolutionary small story arc for the mainstream industry; it went to publication without the approval of the Code and was still a large commercial success. The comics also featured things that were not forbidden by the code but were more complex than what comics had been used to portraying, such commentary on race and economic struggles (Lee 15). Still, the presence of these serious topics shows that the mainstream industry was making attempts at portraying more serious art. Marvel Comics as a whole had been transitioning to subject matter more suited for young adults simply to keep with the interests of their aging readership, which consequently meant that they were straying from simplified, formulaic comics the mainstream industry had bogged itself down with since the Code took effect.

Similar to this was the legendary comic artist, Jack Kirby, creating his own original comic. Frustrated with the rut and repetition of the comics he was expected to produce, Kirby briefly left Marvel to work for DC, creating several ambitious comics stories of epic proportions (Mazur & Danner 47-49). Unfortunately, the series never achieved much popularity or notoriety. It is assumed this was mostly due to the fact that Kirby's experience was in drawing comics, not writing them; the series reflects this in the fact that it is visually ambitious and captivating, but the dialogue and overall premise suffered from being overblown (49-50). Still, it shows that there were at least some artists in the mainstream American comics industry trying to make strides toward the legitimization of their craft.

Unfortunately, these efforts fell proverbially on deaf ears. Perhaps because of the lingering stigma of comics being children's art, American cultural tastemakers seemed unwilling to consider the merits of nearly any mainstream comic. A turnabout was coming in the near future though. In the 1980s, a considerable shift occurred in the mainstream publishers as a result of independent comics becoming more organized. The independent comics publishers becoming



more popular and proving that adult oriented comics could be commercial successes, the mainstream publishers started to follow the trajectory. Additionally, the British comics culture had a huge appreciation for American superhero comics; this appreciation, combined with the theatrical release of the *Star Wars* franchise of all things, ignited a trend of British sci-fi/superhero comics (165). Since British comics were not subject to as harsh a censorship, they could experiment with darker, complex superhero tales the likes of *V for Vendetta* and *Judge Dredd*. The mainstream American publishers took note of this and sought to capitalize.

Ironically, despite Marvel being the first of the two major comics publishers to break the Code, it was DC Comics that first seized the opportunity to produce adult-oriented mainstream comics. Then-editor Karen Berger had taken a particular interest in a British comic artists Alan Moore, who was initially brought on to reboot the *Swamp Thing* franchise (175). Eventually, Moore would be tasked to rework a defunct superhero property obtained from a failed rival publisher, but he would end up converting the tale all together into arguably his greatest work: *Watchmen* (175-178). Moore's *Watchmen* was such a tremendous success not only in the comics scene but in the larger cultural scope of America, receiving praise from both pop-culture publications such as *TIME* and the more traditional honor of a Hugo Award in 1988 (Cocks & Gallagher). This being the mainstream American comics industry's first comic to receive major praise from cultural tastemakers is somewhat bittersweet, as every person who worked on the original *Watchmen* comic was British. So, in a way, the first and perhaps most legitimate comic the mainstream American scene produced is not even wholly American. *Watchmen* did, however, ignite a huge trend of thematically dark superhero comics, much to the chagrin of Moore (Mazur & Danner 176)

The increase in dark superhero comics lead to another series of comics that, while not as highly regarded as *Watchmen*, is possibly the only other mainstream comic to achieve a high level of cultural legitimacy. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the story of an aged Batman that comes out of retirement in the face of rising chaos in Gotham City, is highly regarded in the comics subculture, but does not have quite the same level of veneration from other cultural tastemakers; it did receive high regard in a 2005 *Times* article (Grossman). *The Dark Knight Returns* set the stage for comics to mainstream comics to portray new depths of crime and violence. Miller himself is often considered responsible for transforming the image of Batman into the more gritty version that is common for readers today (Mazur & Danner 175).

Though these were technically accomplishments made by the mainstream industry, the roots can be traced back to the independent comics scene in America. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* was following the trend of dark tales of imperfect superheroes that *Watchmen* created. *Watchmen's* creator, Moore, started his work in comics with British comics publications such as *AD 2000*. As previously noted, British comics publications, at the time more closely resembled the independent comics scene in America. Furthermore, the cultural legitimacy attributed to these two exemplary cases still does not match up to the cultural legitimacy attributed to a great number of comics that originated from independent comics creators.

Native changes were not the only reason for the shift in the American comics scene. Intercultural exchange played a considerable role in the transition toward more culturally legitimate comics. American comics, European comics, and manga were all beginning to move more freely between the various regions and subcultures. Japan and Europe never experienced the harsh divide between independent and mainstream comics that America did. So, American alternative comics creators were able to witness comics with the sort of subject matter they were

interested in, only produced at a professional level. Additionally, mainstream creators were able to witness more diverse and artistically deep narratives being commercially successful. Of everything that American comics creators learned from Europe and Japan, there is one that was perhaps the most important in terms of finding acceptance as culturally legitimate art.

The album format that is common amongst European comics is an excellent platform by which to republish popular comics as consolidated collections. Incidentally, manga also follows a similar pattern of collecting many issues of popular comics into larger books (Schodt 13). Many of the artists in the alternative comics scene recognized that their work was better suited for this style of format, so they were among the first to adapt to this still of production (Mazur & Danner 187). The colloquial term for albums in America is "graphic novel," though the name is moderately misleading. "Novel" technically refers to a fiction narrative of book length, and graphic novels are neither necessarily fictitious nor book-length narratives. In fact, many of the most popular and critically acclaimed graphic novels are technically memoirs, such as *FunHome* and *Blankets*. Misnomer aside, the graphic novel might be the single most important advancement made by the independent comics scene toward the legitimization of comics in American culture.

While it was neither the first book-length comic, nor was it the first publication to brand itself as a "graphic novel," Will Eisner's *A Contract With God* was a particularly groundbreaking work for a few reasons. For one, Eisner sought to produce a book length comic that was literary in nature, and not the sort of genres that had been worn out. Second, *A Contract With God* was distributed through book stores, rather than the traditional comics distribution channels (181). This, along with referring to the work as a "graphic novel" rather than a comic, was a key rhetorical move. It signaled to readers that this was something different, and it was able to shrug

off the subconscious baggage associated with things called comics. Unfortunately, *A Contract With God* was not particularly successful, due to many book stores being unsure of how to correctly shelve or market the work (Van Lente et al. 10). Luckily, another artist in the alternative comics world was able to find far more success.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, subject of much critical praise and winner of many literary awards including a Pulitzer Prize, is one such case of a serialized comic that was later republished as graphic novels ("Special Awards and Citations"). Originally serialized for several years in the alternative comics journal *RAW*, *Maus* received the majority of its praise from cultural tastemakers only after the first few chapters had been published in book length form in 1986. *Watchmen* is a similar case; it received its Hugo Award in the year following its 1987 republication as a graphic novel. The graphic novel format finally showcasing itself to be a massive success was a huge step toward the cultural legitimacy of comics in America. However, it was also a pseudo-death-knell for the independent comics scene as it was.

The graphic novel had proven itself to be significantly more critically successful than traditional comics books, and at least equally as commercially viable. This sent a message to creators and publishers alike. Comics creators began circumventing the serialized format altogether and creating works that were meant strictly to be graphic novels. Traditional book publishers took these original works as their own, and it was not long until many major trade publishers had imprints that were dedicated to graphic novels. This shift was not a rapid one, but it was definite.

Shortly following the turn of the century, many of the independent comics publishers in America were disappearing. Some failed financially and had to dissolve, others were absorbed and converted into imprints under traditional book publishers (Mazur & Danner 294). The major

American comics publishers, DC and Marvel, continued to release serialized comics, but the era of journals in America had largely passed. Even now, major comics publishers turn more profit from licensing deals than from their actual comics (294). The transition for comics artists was not absurd, since the alternative comics movement had done a good job of introducing them to a formalized production. Still, a few creators struggled with the favoring of long, coherent narratives with definitive stopping points, such as the Hernandez Brothers (295). A few critically acclaimed series were handled by major comics publishers in the decades to follow, such as Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, but nothing that ever quite matched the example set by *Watchmen*. Ironically, it would appear that the American independent comics scene, once defined by anti-establishment attitudes, willful rule breaking, and doing things on one's own terms, over time lead itself into an established mainstream production avenue.

Independent publishing did not entirely die with the reign of the graphic novel, though. The advent of the internet proved to capture much of the feeling that many comics creators felt the graphic novel movement lost. Now, entire series can exist on online platforms, removing the need of the middle-man of publishers or even printing altogether. However, the call of the graphic novel industry is not always inevitable for even webcomics. In some cases, webcomics will be left uncompleted online and the last sections are only made available in the graphic novel collections, as is the case with Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (302). Still, many artists have found great success in the webcomics format.

One of the benefits of webcomics is the opening of new possibilities with storytelling that would not be possible in normal print comics. A prime example of this would be *Delta Thrives*, a webcomic formatted as a single long horizontal scroll that included everything from limited animation to functional drop-down menus incorporated into the story (307). It would seem

another generation of comics creators interested in circumventing the mainstream publishers has risen up, though this time with far less of an overtly anti-establishment sentiment.

Comics have a tumultuous history for what is a comparatively new art form. Spanning across cultures and subcultures, comics are now so much more than scant inclusions in news periodicals. It would appear that comics are finally starting to be accepted as a legitimate art form after spending so long fighting for such recognition. Particularly American comics seem to have finally overcome the notion of being childish and poor art that has been haunting them since the time of Wertham. The efforts of independent comics artists that kept on creating without succumbing to the censorship of mainstream outlets helped shape the comics that drew the first great approval from the general public, not just the comics subculture. Even so, the independent comics scene may never have been needed if the American mainstream industry followed the examples of Japan and Europe, who never suffered from strict censorship. When the mainstream American industry eventually removed the shackles of its self-imposed censorship, it too was able to produce some highly regarded comics. Nowadays, in the face of the growing graphic novel industry umbrellaed underneath standard book publishers as well as the proliferation of online publication, the mainstream American comics publishers may soon find themselves at another historical breaking point.

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