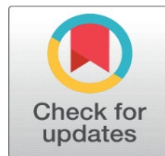
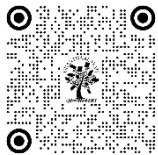


ADVENT OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL: A NEW GENRE OF LITERARY REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

While specialists in literature are now giving more serious attention to various forms of popular culture, much of the current research remains limited to historical overviews or thematic studies. This becomes evident when trying to critically analyze newer phenomena, such as the graphic novel. The term Graphic Novel was first introduced by Will Eisner in 1978 to describe his comic book collection, *A Contract with God*. Steve Roiteri defines a graphic novel as a standalone story in comics form, published as a book. This definition sets the graphic novel apart from the comic book, which is typically a short magazine, about 32 pages long, published serially with a soft cover and on inexpensive paper. Traditionally, comic books have been very affordable and primarily targeted at children and adolescents, although they are not exclusively read by them.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Comics, Humour, Satire, Holocaust, Fiction, Literature, Art, Postmodernism, Visual Arts

1. INTRODUCTION

In contrast, recent graphic novels are high-end publications printed on quality paper and may come in either soft or hard covers. Although these books can appeal to teenagers, they are more commonly purchased by adults. This change in target audience reflects the increased cultural recognition of graphic novels and comics over the past twenty years. In North America, the critical interest in comics surged after Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1992. Spiegelman's work, which addresses the Jewish Holocaust, demonstrated that comic-book formats could tackle serious and tragic subjects. The rise of graphic novels in the English-speaking world has also been supported by the success of Japanese manga, which has been popular in Japan since the 1960s across all age groups. Manga's unique illustration styles have influenced Japanese animation, which has slowly gained popularity in the West. This has led to increased interest in manga among younger Western readers, resulting in regular translations of manga into Western languages since the 1990s. Today, North American bookstores often feature both Japanese manga and Western graphic novels in the same section.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historians of popular culture debate the origins of modern cartoon strips and comic books. The disagreement largely stems from how the cartoon strip is defined, which is the fundamental unit for both comic books and graphic novels. Some cultural historians are divided over the use of speech bubbles versus speech-texts placed at the bottom of frames. For instance, some argue that only cartoons with bubble-like speech-texts should be considered comics. This debate also carries a nationalist dimension, with American historian David Carrier claiming that *The Yellow Kid* (1897) is the first true cartoon strip, while British critic Roger Sabin favors the British tabloid series *Ally Sloper*, which began in 1884. Thierry Groensteen contends that the work of Swiss artist Rudolphe Topffer in the 1830s precedes any English-language comics. Despite these debates, all comic historians agree that visual art forms telling stories through sequences of frames and text have existed since the early days of printing.

However, it was the advent of cheaper photographic processes in the 19th century that made it economically viable to publish magazines filled with illustrated stories. While comic strips and books have appeared worldwide, their cultural impact varies by country. Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan are significant producers of comics, whereas many other nations primarily import them. Since the early 20th century, many daily newspapers in Canada and the United States have featured comic strips. As noted by Carrier, this daily inclusion grants comics a paradoxical status: despite having a large market, they are often quickly read and discarded with the newspapers. Carrier views comics as straddling traditional genre boundaries, considered either irrelevant or transgressive by cultural elite. Interestingly, this sense of marginality has become one of the comic book's appeals.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Outside the English-speaking world, the critical examination of comics has largely been influenced by structuralism and semiotics. As early as 1963, Umberto Eco was offering thoughtful and appreciative analyses of popular American comics such as Superman and the Charlie Brown series. French criticism has also leaned heavily on semiotic approaches. For instance, Pierre Alban Delannoy's book *Maus d'Art Spiegelman: bande dessinée et Shoah* is a pioneering study of a graphic novel that contextualizes the work culturally and explores how it merges various forms of visual and literary discourse. Delannoy refers to it as a Poetic Experience and employs Bakhtin's concept of polyphony to analyze the diverse reactions it evokes from readers. In contrast, English-language criticism of this depth on individual works or artists is still emerging. Recently, American and British critics have shifted from broad historical surveys and thematic studies to a more focused analysis of the unique aspects of comics and graphic novels.

Scott McCloud's book *Understanding Comics*, presented in comic book form with a caricature of the author guiding the reader through terminologies and analyses, highlights the crucial interplay between images and text. Comics uniquely combine word and image, requiring new analytical methods. He also points out that the simplified depiction of human faces in successful comic books facilitates a process of Universal Identification, making readers feel as though they become part of the story, which explains the compelling nature of comic books for many readers. Robert C. Harvey concurs that the defining characteristic of comics is the interdependence of words and images. However, he notes that it is rare for a comic strip to fully exploit this unique characteristic. Harvey attributes this partly to the type of comic strip. In longer narratives, images often become static as the amount of text per frame increases. Although varying the perspective or switching between medium and close-up shots can mask the static nature, the balance between visual and verbal elements is often disrupted. Interest in the word/image unity is also evident in Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics*.

Like McCloud, Carrier examines how comic books engage readers and blur traditional boundaries. One of the most advanced theoretical studies in English in recent years is Mila Bongco's examination of language and culture in superhero comics. Bongco notes that the comic-book form allows artists to utilize narrative techniques from both visual and linguistic modes simultaneously. She highlights the importance of the frame as a compositional unit that can impose order on a narrative but also be disrupted, with images and text often extending beyond the frame or page to enhance the dynamism of the depicted actions. Thus, the increased recognition of comic-book narratives has been accompanied by a more adaptable critical vocabulary, with many critics not only adopting terms from literary and film studies but also developing new concepts tailored to the unique qualities of comic-book art.

4. VISUALIZING THE HOLOCAUST

At first glance, using a comic-book format to address the atrocities of the Nazi genocide against European Jews might seem highly unsuitable. However, Pierre Alban Delannoy clarifies in his study that Art Spiegelman, the American son of Holocaust survivors, chose this format to explore his personal connection to the Holocaust. The trauma that Holocaust survivors experienced was passed down to their children in a different way, and this dual layer of trauma is what *Maus* portrays. The central figures in the novel are Spiegelman himself and his father, Vladek, a Polish Jew living in Brooklyn. With his son's encouragement, Vladek recounts his and his wife's experiences during the Nazi occupation. Consequently, the narrative shifts back and forth between 1970s suburban America and various periods of wartime Poland, particularly the Auschwitz death camp. Delannoy notes that Spiegelman began working on *Maus* in the 1970s, a period when the children of Holocaust survivors were reaching adulthood and starting families of their own.

The narrative reveals the son's struggle to reconcile with aspects of his father's past, including his feelings of resentment towards his parents: his mother, who tragically committed suicide after struggling with her memories, and his father, a difficult man who often used his suffering as a weapon against others. The most striking aspect of *Maus* is Spiegelman's choice to depict all characters as animals, following the tradition of 'funny animal' comics. In this representation, Jews are shown as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs, with the title *Maus* itself meaning 'mouse' in German. This approach firmly places the narrative within the American comic-book tradition, where mice often assume heroic roles. Spiegelman even references a Nazi critique of Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse cartoons as degenerate, suggesting that the choice of mice symbolizes a broader counter-culture. Despite this, Spiegelman does not portray his Jewish characters, particularly his father, as mere victims. He begins the story with Vladek's pre-war life, characterized by selfish behavior, and continually returns to his later life in America, where he displays unsavory traits in his relationships.

This depiction challenges the cultural stereotypes of heroism often seen in comic books. The use of a dual narrative, including Spiegelman's own role as a comic book artist grappling with his motivations, adds a postmodern element to the work. The son in the narrative is not always sympathetic; in one impactful scene, he is shown working on his novel, initially depicted in a close-up contemplating his motivations. The frame then expands to reveal a pile of dead bodies and Auschwitz's gates, only to be ironically contrasted by a speech bubble where a film director calls for cameras to record the scene. This metafictional touch critiques how the Holocaust has sometimes been commercialized. *Maus* intertwines the horrors of the concentration camps with mundane family conflicts, such as those between Vladek and his second wife Mala, or Vladek and his son. These storylines are interconnected, as Vladek's manipulative behavior, while unappealing, was also what enabled him to survive Auschwitz. The readers are led to understand the complexities of his personality, making it difficult to simply condemn him. Unlike typical comic-book characters, who are often one-dimensional, Spiegelman's father and son are portrayed with depth, offering a blend of tragedy and comedy. Through this approach, Art Spiegelman transforms the comic-book genre into a psychological drama.

5. SUMMARY

Although thematically, these texts diverge significantly from conventional comic book content (eschewing superheroes and fantastical elements) they still employ the comic book's visual language. This includes their approach to character depiction and the manipulation of frame layouts on the page. The stylistic variations among these works highlight the narrative freedom available within the comic book format. These four novels, alongside many others by diverse artists, prompt literary critics to broaden their investigative scope into narrative theory and technique. While traditional comic books might be dismissed as mere popular culture and excluded from academic discussions, the graphic novel demonstrates its significant value and cannot be easily disregarded.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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