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FROM COUNTERCULTURE TO CANON: THE AMERICAN GRAPHIC NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the evolution of the American graphic novel, arguing that its emergence as a significant literary form is rooted in the countercultural underground comix movement of the 1960s and 70s. Beginning with the restrictive censorship of the Comics Code Authority in the 1950s, the paper details how artists like Robert Crumb pioneered a new, uncensored space for adult-oriented, satirical, and deeply personal work. It then examines how creators such as Justin Green and Jaxon expanded the comix format to explore long-form autobiographical and historical narratives. The analysis culminates with Will Eisner, who synthesized these underground sensibilities into the "graphic novel" with A Contract with God, and Art Spiegelman, whose seminal work Maus solidified the medium's capacity for serious literary and historical expression. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that the graphic novel's journey from a censored medium to a celebrated art form was forged in the creative rebellion of the underground, which established the thematic and formal innovations that define the medium today.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Comix, Censorship, Counterculture, Sequential Art, Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman

1. INTRODUCTION

Figure 1 A single-panel cartoon by Pat Bagley. The Salt Lake Tribune. https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/bagley/2018/05/04/bagley-cartoon-the-liars-club.

Early critics in Comics studies like Will Eisner defined Comics as "...the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea." (1985) he later revised it as "the printed arrangement of art and balloons in sequence…" (1996) also, Scott McCloud in his book Understanding Comics (1993) defines Comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the

viewer." Both Eisner and McCloud emphasize the sequential arrangement of images as essential to the Comics medium, and sequentiality can be employed in several forms.

The distinction between the genres of sequential art can be based on their length and publication format. Short cartoons like single-panel caricatures, political cartoons (See fig. 1), or comic strips like Calvin and Hobbes or Garfield are published daily in newspapers (fig. 2). The primary aim of these newspaper cartoons is to provide commentary on politics or current events, on the contrary, Comic books and Graphic Novels primarily are storytelling mediums because they are longer narratives. A long format comic can be a series of chapter-length monthly issues of superhero comics or graphic novels like Persepolis or Maus which were earlier serialized and later published in a one-shot book-length format. It is important to look at the origins of the graphic novel to better define and delineate graphic novels from comic books.

Figure 2 The first Calvin & Hobbes strip by Bill Watterson, 1985.
The Complete Calvin and Hobbes V.1, 2005.

2. THE 1950S AND CENSORSHIP

The origins of the contemporary graphic novel lie in the underground comix movement of the 1960s and mid-70s in America. The comix movement emerged in opposition to the censorship imposed by the Comics Code Authority in 1954, a self-regulatory body that prohibited the publication of comics with depictions of extreme horror and gory violence. Fredric Wertham, a psychologist, is seen at the center of the anti-comics crusade, in his book The Seduction of the Innocent (1954), argued about the dangers of comics, and the negative impact on the values and behavior of children, and the implicit sexuality of some comics. "...while Wertham's theories were damaging to comics and comic creation, they did imbue the medium with great public significance and import. The later, longer development of the graphic novel occurred against this backdrop." (Baetens)

Figure 3 Mandatory CCA label.
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/c/cf/Approved_by_the_Comics_Code_Authority.gif

The publishers were made to feature the CCA label on the cover (fig. 3); safer genres such as romance, war, and superhero comics were put into publication instead. The Code effectively disrupted an entire field and jeopardized the careers of numerous comic writers, artists, and publishers. Retrospectively, "comics were themselves developing into more sophisticated forms," and longer, single book-length strips were being experimented with. The publication of Leslie Waller's It Rhymes with Lust in 1950 was marketed as a 'picture novel' can be called the first graphic novel, it was essentially a long comic book, although themes like greed, sex, and political corruption were nothing new. Another

example of experimentation could be seen in war and historical comics of Harvey Kurtzman who presented reportages of World War II (1939-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953). He depicted the futility of war and conflict without the use of gory images, his pictures describe the feelings of a combat soldier who has witnessed his colleague randomly killed by a shell. He uses narrative devices like flashbacks, in a way it is speaking to the war being fought, the genre of war reportage will be taken up later by artists like Joe Sacco.

The superhero genre too suffered due to the Comics Code, the Golden Age of Comics (1938-1956) transitioned into the Silver Age (1956-1970). Preceding the Comics Code of 1954, the Golden age of superhero Comics saw the emergence of publishers like DC Comics in 1938 and Timely Comics (predecessor of Marvel Comics) in 1939. Following Superman in 1938, major characters like Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America were created in 1941. Comics serve as a cheap source of entertainment during World War II. During the Golden Age, it was not uncommon for a single comic book issue to sell over one million copies. The sales declined after the war and several superhero titles were canceled as publishers focused on genre comics (science fiction, horror, western, romance). As the Golden Age ended, fears of juvenile delinquency lead media critics and legislators to scrutinize the role of comic books in American life. The Silver Age (1956-1970) ushered in the revival of older characters from the previous age, and another comic book publisher Timely Comics (Marvel Comics) introduced characters like Spider-Man, Thor, and the Hulk in 1962 and Iron Man and the X-Men in 1963. This period was affected the most due to the strict guidelines set by the Comics Code Authority. It was also during this period that the underground comics scene began to take shape as a part of the counterculture movement.

3. ALTERNATE COMICS OR COMIX (MID-1960S - MID-1970S)

The Comix movement began in the mid-1960s against the backdrop of the anti-establishment counterculture movement in America. The first comix were circulated in American university campuses and radical pockets like Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco (the birthplace of the 1960s counterculture movement), and Greenwich Village, New York. Comix were aimed at adults, circulated in self-produced magazines, as supplements to student newspapers, and printed on small presses eschewing any kind of censorship.

"Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, Kim Deitch, Jaxon, and Justin Green, among others, produced new amusing, sexually explicit, and often satirical strips in self-produced magazines or in supplements to student newspapers. Their work was self-conscious, sometimes quasi-autobiographical, and utterly irreverent. For them, no topic was taboo. Sex, race, hippies, old mainstream comics, and the alternative drop-out scene itself, as well as targets in straight and conservative America, were all fair game for satire." (Baetens)

Satire magazines like Mad, which started in 1952 created a platform for satirical cartoonists and published one-to-two-page satires by unknown artists who had not worked for a superhero or mainstream strips. Marketed as a magazine, presumably for adults than children, and beyond the censorship of the Comics Code Authority.

Figure 4 First issue covers of Mad (1952) and Zap Comix (1967)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mad_(magazine)#/media/File:Madhk1.jpg
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Zap_Comix1.jpg

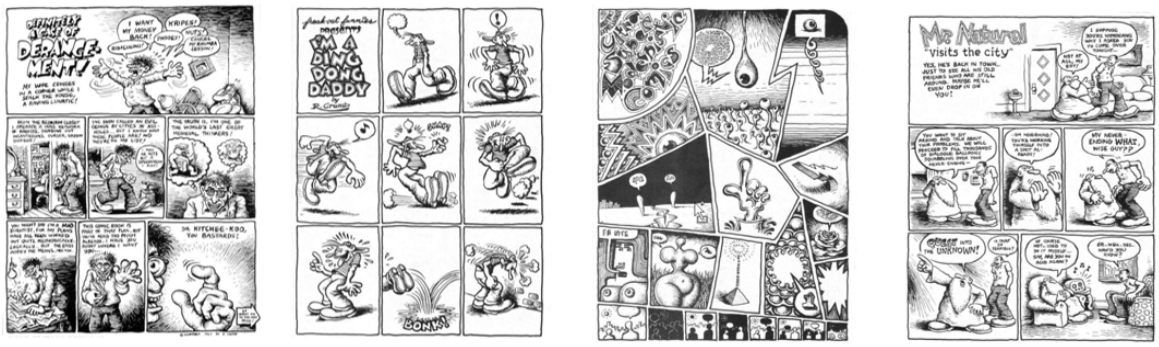

Figure 5 Diverse drawing styles and page layouts by Robert Crumb. Zap Comix (1967).

Free newspapers and other magazines in the mid-1960s developed alternative non-commercial newspapers for students and upcoming artists. Robert Crumb's small-circulation self-publication of his satirical Comix Zap in 1968 proved revolutionary for Comix and emerged as a model for comix publication. Charles Hatfield writes in Alternative Comics that Zap "...was the first underground title by a lone cartoonist to be published in what was recognizably the traditional comic book format" (Hatfield, 11) and it demonstrated that it was possible to take control of the whole issue of a comic book by a single person. Crumb "usurped" the long-form comics by keeping Zap twenty-eight pages long, closer to the conventional thirty-two-page comic book. A "...deceptively friendly-looking container for stories that could hardly be carried on mainstream newsstands, due to their iconoclastic, sometimes scabrous, and indeed radical content." (Hatfield, 11) On the content front, it was not hilarious or salacious; he used multiple drawing styles, not to appear abstract or modernist but to resemble and parody old comics (See fig. 5). Crumb's greatest achievement with Zap was that "...he ironically usurped not only the content of comics (that is, the characters and situations he had imbibed from childhood onward) but also the format (the periodical comic book), achieving a union of form and content..." (Hatfield, 12) Zap would go on to be published for sixteen issues with the latest issue published by Fantagraphics in 2016. The comix changed the perception of comics in style and subject, it laid the groundwork for alternative comics and graphic novels of the 1980s. The underground artists took up topics that would later appear as subjects of graphic novels such as autobiography, gender, women's selfhood, etc. Hatfield also notes that "the comix scene created a market of production and consumption outside of mainstream superhero comics. Here the artists owned their work and were not employees for a commercial comics concern." (Baetens, 56) The comix provided an alternate publishing model of the one-shot book rather than extended runs of serialized plots that prepared the creators, publishers, and readers for the upcoming graphic novels.

The success of Robert Crumb as the breakout star of the comix movement also laid the cultural foundation for the graphic novel, he was perceived "as a figure of comparable significance to a novelist, filmmaker, or any other important cultural worker." (Baetens) Crumb and his art gained attention from all the directions possible, his originally self-published work such as Zap Comix was quickly anthologized by mainstream publishing houses like Viking Press. His work was exhibited in art museums of New York and Berkeley. Crumb also designed the cover art for a musical album and himself became part of a blues and folk band. He was popularized by the national newspapers and was also praised in the Time Magazine as "a new world Breughel." Crumb's work entered academia when it was reviewed in The Journal of Popular Culture, a serious journal with high scholarly standards to be seriously taken by sociologists, literary scholars, and historians. Adding to his fame, his Fritz the Cat 1968 was adapted into cinema as Fritz the Cat - the movie in 1972 gained critical and commercial success. Notably, the fame Crumb garnered was through the mainstream forms of media like music, art, cinema, academia, etc. Therefore, it highlights the fact that experimental and niche forms of art still need mainstream forms of production and distribution to flourish. Unlike Crumb and a handful of artists, the comix movement could not expand beyond the pockets because of the contracting cultural and economic space. The comix movement declined with the contraction of the wider counterculture movement by the mid-1970s and the handful of publishers that used to publish comix now looked for commercially reliable works which created a mainstream underground instead of the older, indie, traditional underground of Crumb's age.

Figure 6 The cover, page layout, and drawing style of Binky Brown (1972).
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binky_Brown_Meets_the_Holy_Virgin_Mary#/media/File:BinkyBrownOriginalCover.jpg
https://comiconlinefree.net/binky-brown-meets-the-holy-virgin-mary/issue-Full/12

4. COMIX TO THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

The development of the graphic novel from comix can be traced through four major artists, Justin Green and Jaxon (Jack Edward Jackson) from the late Comix era, and Will Eisner and Art Spiegelman from the early graphic novels. All four of them established themes later to be associated with the graphic novel and shared some common features like innovation with form, original content, and longer narratives. Green and Jaxon were two of the first artists who published longer-length narratives and pioneered the historical and autobiographical content in the Comix space. Green's 1972 autobiographical comic Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary was forty-four pages long "critical self-exploration of a Catholic education" (Baetens) Spiegelman in a preface to a reprinted edition of Binky Brown writes that "Justin turned the comic book boxes into intimate, secular confession booths and thereby profoundly changed the history of comics" (Baetens)

"Dream, nightmare, satire, and self-obsession blur together into a complex meditation on Binky's life. The emphasis on Green's childhood daily reality was, however, new. So too were the more banal and semi realist frames that underlined the combination of boredom and oppression of a conservative upbringing surrounded by the requirements of strict Catholicism." (Baetens)

Figure 7 Page layout and drawing style of Comanche Moon (1978) (Left) and EC Comics (Right) compared.
https://not-bridget.tumblr.com/post/106662527341/from-jaxons-comanche-moon-born-jack-jackson.
http://www.dominicumile.com/howard-nostrand-ray-bradbury-ec-horror-comics.

Jack Jackson or Jaxon in the 1970s used long comic narratives to present extended histories of native America and Texas. He rejected the crude drawing style and content that had become the mainstay of the comix movement, he used highly detailed and thoroughly researched depictions of nineteenth-century Southwest America. In Comanche Moon (1978), Jaxon used a visually detailed, conservative, and meticulous drawing style with clear backdrops; his panels are bound in conventional page layouts, using wide panels for landscapes and narrower panels for closeups. He revived the old aesthetics of detailed drawing seen in Classics Illustrated of the 1950s and EC Horror that maintained regular and controlled panel layouts (see fig. 7). The title page of Comanche Moon reads as "A Picture Narrative about Cynthia Ann Parker." The use of the term "Picture Narrative" was used because the subject matter was historical instead of fictional and drawn in a refined, non-comix style. It highlights that longer-narrative comics were breaking out of the underground anti-commercialism and were transforming into commercially assimilable practices.

Figure 8 55 Dropsie Avenue, the setting of A Contract with God (1978)

5. WILL EISNER, THE FIRST GRAPHIC NOVELIST

Will Eisner used the term “graphic novel” for his 1978 collection of stories A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories; however, it was coined by a historian named Richard Kyle in 1964. Eisner having worked on mainstream comics in the 1930s and 1940s, saw the underground movement as an opportunity to create something new and different like graphic narratives for adult readers. “I had finally settled on the term ‘graphic novel’ as an adequate euphemism [for comic book], but the class I teach is called ‘sequential art’ — and of course that’s what it is — a sequence of pictures arranged to tell a story.” Eisner not only popularized the term “graphic novel” but also created a commercially reliable template by avoiding the overtly sexual content and irreverent satire of comix but keeping the self-conscious and autobiographical elements. He used themes like conflict, autobiography, and ethnicity; content that could cater to a wider audience while not being overly explicit. A Contract with God is a collection of four short “...stories drawn from his life experiences, particularly in the hardscrabble Bronx tenements of his childhood ...around the themes of betrayed faith, disillusionment, and the loss of innocence” (Hatfield)

The title story, A Contract with God is about Frimme Hersh, a deeply religious Hasidic Jew somewhere in Eastern Europe who is sent away to New York in the wake of anti-semitic violence. On his way to America, ten-year-old Hersh mulls over the question of justice and carves a contract with god on a piece of stone.

"-If justice is not in god's hands, where else would be it?"

"-If I am good will god know it?"

"-Why not? Does it not say that God is all-knowing!?"

"-Then I will make a contract with God" (Eisner)

In New York, he receives religious education, and strictly follows his contract. He adopts an infant girl abandoned on his doorsteps, names her Rachele, and devotes himself to her upbringing. But the girl falls ill and dies, Hersh is deeply broken, and furious, he curses at God for not holding up his end of the contract, spits on the stony tablet, and flings it out

of the window. Having recovered from the loss, Hersh goes through a drastic change, he buys the 55 Dropsie Avenue tenement using the synagogue money and turns into a shrewd landlord. He gets richer and acquires more property by rising rents and cutting corners, he took a mistress and a lifestyle suited to his level of wealth. Not living by a set of rules for a long time, he orders the elders at the synagogue to draft him a new contract with God. Excited, he vows to make a new life, to do charitable work, and wonders if he could marry and raise a daughter of his own. He yells at the sky "This time, you will not violate our contract!" and suffers a heart attack and dies. The epilogue shows a boy named Shloime picking up the stone and signing his name under Hersh's name, entering the contract with God. Conflict, ethnic identity, and autobiography are the central themes of the story. It has a contingent origin in antisemitic violence which forces Hersh to migrate and survive in an alien city; conflict acts as the anchor point to other issues like the autobiography, religion, ethnicity, etc. Hersh's story is autobiographical as it is based upon Eisner's experiences living in the tenements and the loss of his sixteen years old daughter named Alice to leukemia. Religion and the Jewish identity are highlighted in Hersh's character, he finds security from conflict in being religious, in being helpful to others, and in living by the rules of his contract. He believes, his good deeds will fetch him justice, he also tries to return to his old religious ways from materialism and dissatisfaction.

Stephen Tabachnik suggests in an essay that 18th-century artists' work like William Hogarth and the wordless comics of the early 20th century are the antecedents of Eisner's A Contract. "Hogarth …often shows the decline of a respectable member of society into a social outcast in a series of engravings – as in his "A Harlot's Progress" and "A Rake's Progress" – which are sequential panels." (Tabachnik) Hogarth's caricatures and stories are starkly didactic and moralistic, similarly, Eisner also uses similar characters but the didacticism is much toned down, his characters are individualistic, fallible, and rooted in ethnic and geographical roots.

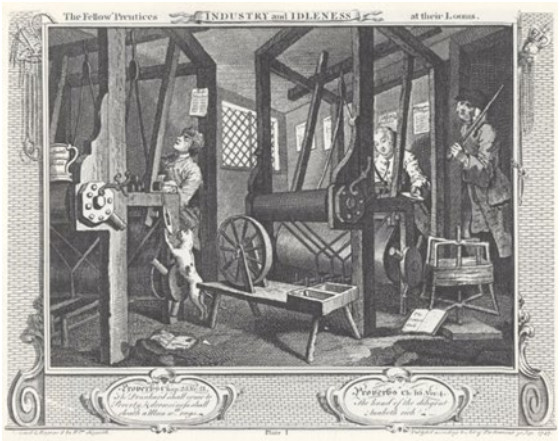

Figure 9 Plate 1 – The Fellow 'Prentices at their Loom, Industry, and Idleness (1747), the idle apprentice on the left and the industrious apprentice on the right.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industry_and_Idleness#/media/File:William_Hogarth_-_Industry_and_Idleness,_Plate_1;_The_Fellow_'Prentices_at_their_Looms.png

Figure 10 Plate 11 – The Idle 'Prentice Executed at Tyburn, Industry, and Idleness (1747).
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industry_and_Idleness#/media/File:William_Hogarth_-_Industry_and_Idleness,_Plate_11;_The_Idle_'Prentice_Executed_at_Tyburn.png

Hogarth's Industry and Idleness, a series of twelve engravings, portrays two young men (the industrious apprentice, and the idle apprentice) who begin their careers together (see fig. 9). One is shown to be upright, religious, and diligent, who goes to the church, marries his master's daughter, climbs the social ladder, and is elected as the mayor of London. While the other is insincere and immoral, he gambles, and indulges in prostitution, he is later arrested and hanged (see fig. 10). Hogarth's stories are cautionary tales that end with a strong finality, the morality of the characters decides their fate. His caricatures are one-dimensional, either good or bad, lacking nuance or a specific ethnic or historical background. His stories are moral paths for the industrialized youth to follow, a kind of contract.

Whereas Eisner's second story, The Street Singer is about an alcoholic man named Eddie who sings in the tenement streets for pennies (see fig. 11). He squanders a lifetime's opportunity because of his drinking when a former singer offers to coach him. Eddie loses her address and is never able to find her street again. Eddie is another example of a flawed character shaped by his surroundings, he doesn't take care of his wife or his infant child and still hopes to come out of his rut but falls prey to his habits. Eddie's story resembles Hogarth's other series named A Rake's Progress (1735), a story about Thomas Rakewell who inherits a large sum of the property after his father's death and soon squanders all his money on socializing, gambling and prostitutes, he soon falls in debt and eventually ends in a mental asylum. Eddie and Thomas, both represent the foolishness of the "regular" classes who waste away their chance to better their lives. Like Hogarth, Eisner also uses caricature but the story again is not outrightly didactic or sets a pathway to follow. His stories are cyclical where Eddie returns to his miserable, alcoholic life in the streets, and another boy named Shloime takes Hersh's place on the contract. The reader is not informed of the eventual end, in this regard, Eisner's stories show a modern element that skips the binary didacticism that Hogarth portrayed in his engravings.

Figure 12 Eisner places the character in the center of an open panel (left) and uses a closely-packed layout with stylized text (right) A Contract with God, (1978).

Eisner's themes were novel, and characterization partially resembled Hogarth's caricatures, it is the form that resembles Hogarth's engravings most closely. Hogarth used the rectangle engraving plate as a single panel, it contains the main character in focus, and secondary characters and objects are strewn across the panel. Hogarth drew in an enormous amount of information in a single panel; he used short captions below the main panel as word balloons were not common during his times and would have hampered the artwork. Hogarth in the eighteenth-century combined pictures and text and put them in a sequence, therefore he is called the first sequential artist. Eisner also played with text; his sequential arrangement of panels is not limited to drawings but also stylized text intertwined with the pictures. Eisner focuses primarily on a single subject and abandoned the formal grid layout, instead, he "...preferred a looser, more relaxed, and more radical mixture of layouts." (Baetens, 64)

Eisner put on display the thematic potential of the long comic form; it is in line with his "literary ambition and drive to bring serious comics – outside the conventional genres of superhero, science fiction or fantasy into the broader mainstream…" (Tabachnik) "Eisner saw A Contract with God as radical innovation: "A Graphic Novel." However, its themes and style drew on underground preoccupations. Eisner reorganized them into a nonsatirical, explicitly ethnically positioned narrative (Jewish) with historical setting disguising its tragic autobiographical content." (Baetens, 64) He experimented with form, themes, and characterization, his stories were a matured form of his antecedents, and he paved the way for upcoming comics artists by inventing the graphic novel.

Figure 13 A prototype version of Maus was published in Funny Animals (1972) (left); Spiegelman atop a pile of corpses, Maus (1991).

6. ART SPIEGELMAN AND COMIX

Having discussed the achievements of Will Eisner as a bridge between comix and graphic novels, it was Art Spiegelman who laid the foundation of the autobiographical graphic novel. The origins of Spiegelman's canonical work Maus lie more in the comix movement than the emergence of the early graphic novel. Spiegelman first published a four-page strip prototype of Maus in underground comix collections named Funny Animals in 1972 (see fig. 13). Similarly, a brutal narration of Spiegelman's mother's suicide was first published in the underground collection Short-Order Comix (1973) and Breakdowns (1977). The comix movement allowed Spiegelman to develop a subversive comics like Maus, a comic about the Holocaust that no mainstream publisher would have picked. With Maus, Spiegelman changed the attitudes of readers about the history and the Holocaust by using mice as the representative figure for Jews.

"...it is a clever attack on the Nazis' own anti-Semitic mindset that identified Jewish people as vermin. Yet it was also a way of making contemporary readers ask why they were comfortable and sympathetic to Holocaust victims when imagined as gentle mice, yet were maybe less willing to come to terms with the scale of the crimes of the Nazis when presented with straightforward images or detailed historical documentation." (Baetens)

The success of Maus can be attributed to the fact that the Holocaust was not a part of the public conscience until the release of the Hollywood movie Schindler's List in 1993. The Holocaust and anti-Semitic genocide were rarely portrayed by Hollywood except in the 1959 adaptation of The Diary of Anne Frank, even then, the explicit reference to Anne's religion was taken out. Spiegelman wanted to tell a straight story and allow his readers through his experiences. However, some pictures reveal the hidden critical and subversive politics of Maus, in a renowned image, Spiegelman is

seen at work drawing, sitting at his desk on top of a pile of corpses (see fig. 13). It opens to "a more radical and violent politics in the work that asks what images mean and why some are comfortable and others not so palatable." (Baetens, 65) It is the juxtaposition of images and themes that evoke affect in the reader.

In summation, several factors contributed to the arrival of the graphic novel. The underground comix helped establish publishing structures like self-publishing that were outside of the traditional comics industry; it bypassed any kind of censorship and allowed creators to tell stories that were explicitly produced to be read by adults. Another factor is the cultural acceptance of an underground artist and "art-media celebrity" like Robert Crumb. The early graphic novels were influenced by underground comix and the works of artists like Green, Jaxon, Eisner, and Spiegelman populated the most of the 1970s decade. They introduced novel themes like conflict, autobiography, history, ethnicity, and formal elements like anthropomorphism and unconventional page layouts. The late 70s filled the gap between comix and graphic novels of the mid-1980s. With time, "...the publishers also shared a common appreciation that the titles were not comix but something different, precisely because they were lengthier, more serious, reflexive, and sophisticated." (Baetens) The difference between comix and early graphic novels popularized the term graphic novel and a separate category of comics had now arrived. It was a matter of time until the next wave of graphic novels got published like Maus and Watchmen in 1986-87 established graphic novels as a genre.

In conclusion, the American graphic novel is not a spontaneous creation but the direct descendant of the revolutionary underground comix movement. This paper has demonstrated that in reaction to the creative suppression of the Comics Code Authority, a counterculture of artists forged a new, uncensored path for sequential art. Pioneers like Robert Crumb established an independent publishing ethos, while figures such as Justin Green, Will Eisner, and Art Spiegelman built upon this foundation to introduce complex themes of autobiography, history, and ethnic identity. The evolution from the satirical pages of comix to the historical weight of works like A Contract with God and Maus marks a profound shift in artistic ambition. This journey ultimately transformed sequential art from disposable entertainment into a legitimate and serious literary form, capable of nuanced storytelling and profound expression.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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