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Graphic Novels
Short presentation
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Mice, Tampons and Headscarves

Graphic Novels:
The History and Anatomy of a Controversial Literary Term

Today, comics are reviewed in the literary and cultural press, showcased in museums and literature houses and in most bookshops at least one shelf is reserved for comics. Even publishers like Suhrkamp und S. Fischer publish comics – and they are not usually under suspicion of releasing trivia. In recent years the widely frowned upon comic, or 'graphic novel' to borrow the new German phrase, has enjoyed an awesome rise in popularity. It freed itself from the closet in the kids' playroom, becoming a contemporary medium of artistic expression with vast potential for content and aesthetics and winning new readers. And previously, they most likely handled a comic in secret.

Until recently, most contemporaries interested in art and culture classified characters like Superman, Fix and Foxi, Donald Duck, Asterix and Tim and Struppi as featuring in "comics". They assigned them as the permanent cast of genre series and, depending on their quality, with a high number of stereotypes and slogans. Of course, comic stars were much more famous than their creators.

Indeed, authorship was not a widely known concept across broad sections of the mainstream comic business. Yet during

the past 25 years or so, all this has changed. Suddenly, alongside the steady stream of new and run-of-the-mill Asterix and Superman adventures, comics appeared about growing up in Iran under the Ayatollahs, about Hiroshima and the Holocaust. Reportage emerged from the Gaza Strip and North Korea. Autobiographical everyday and biographical anecdotes, essayistic accounts and many more were also released. In literary terms, too, the comic's expressive powers potentially expanded thanks to the inclusion of sophisticated content, modern narrative techniques and individual illustration styles.

Many comic creators recognized that comics are not formulaic, serialized genre literature out of necessity, but an artistic form of expression that can adequately convey any content and message. And suddenly comics are no longer called comics but 'graphic novels'.

The term 'graphic novel' was coined by Will Eisner. In 1978, Eisner, the old master, published his first Jewish moral tales set in 1930s New York under the title "A Contract With God". He hoped his differentiation of 'graphic novel' from 'comic' would appeal to an adult readership who didn't care at all for superheroes, though potentially was open to non-comic sketches about Jewish culture, immigration and ethnic prejudices, or about personal and economic depression, love and heartache and also about God.

To this day, we still lack a precise and binding definition of the graphic novel. In simple terms, it can perhaps best be characterized as a non-serialized, yet closed story with a certain appeal of content, narrative and artistic quality. In particular, this genre is aimed at an adult audience. Additionally, most graphic novels are not created in classic teamwork involving a copywriter and illustrator, but are written and illustrated by a single author.

Previously, this was probably called the 'alternative comic' – analogous to the *cinema d'auteur*, 'author comics' or 'adult

comic'. Now, 'graphic novel' has taken over on a wide scale thanks especially to the media.

Even in France where the term *bande dessinée* (or illustrated comic strip) lacks any implied discriminatory comment on content like the word 'comic', it is becoming more and more common to use the term *roman graphique*.

'Graphic novel' is a highly controversial description in literary circles. But it turns out to be an ingenious marketing tool: anyone who regarded 'comics' as beneath their dignity can now read 'graphic novels'.

And so we've learned to live with this phrase ...

The debate about the sense and nonsense of this and other new generic terms is a sideshow. It is far more important that during the past 25 years the comic has undergone real change. It has opened up its content and aesthetics and now achieves things that nobody would have believed before. Defining the start of this trend is not easy. Obviously over the past 180 years of comic history since the Genevan pioneer Rodolphe Töpffer, fabulous artworks have repeatedly been created. However, to appreciate the situation today you have to identify the moment when not only the solitary artist, but also the protagonists of an entire literary scene took the step from service providers and publishing employees to self-confident authors.

This 'Big Bang' happened in the late 1960s in San Francisco's underground comix scene. In parallel to changes in society, artists such as Robert Crumb, Bill Griffith, Gilbert Shelton and S. Clay Wilson reinvented the comic: initially, they used it as a means of personal expression. They referred to the things that preoccupied their readers – sex, drugs, Rock 'n' Roll and politics. And they didn't shy away from making autobiographical revelations. This was all translated into an image language, which was more informal, wild, experimental and at times even more amateurish, than in mainstream comics. Therefore they

proved that comics could also be different: more adult, subversive and more personal.

Robert Crumb, a master of narcissist shamelessness, is one of the key pioneers of autobiographical comics. Later, he was to play a decisive role in the development of the graphic novel.

Art Spiegelman also made a name for himself in the underground scene as an illustrator and author. When underground comix ran out of steam, he returned to New York and became a pivotal figure in the new mood of change.

In 1980, together with his French wife, Françoise Mouly, Art Spiegelman founded the comic magazine “Raw”, which soon became legendary and a real trendsetter. “Raw” printed comics by modern European authors like Jacques Tardi, Lorenzo Mattotti or the Argentineans in exile Muñoz and Sampayo. It simultaneously surrounded itself with a crowd of a new generation of comic illustrators like Gary Panter, Charles Burns, Ben Katchor and later also Chris Ware. “Raw” caused a graphic revolution: “Raw” illustrators redefined the comic image on large-format pages, working experimentally and in the spirit of Punk.

Every “Raw” edition contained a small comic booklet – in each case a chapter from Art Spiegelman’s comic novel “Maus”. In “Maus” Spiegelman described the fate of his parents – Polish Jews – during the Nazi era. From the relatively untroubled 1930s to the shock of the German occupation of Poland, the pogroms, the ghetto, years as refugees – until Auschwitz and the tough reality of life after Auschwitz.

Spiegelman not only linked world history and personal history, but also past and present as well as his parent’s fate with his own biography. He did so by reflecting on his shattered relationship with his father and the effects of the Holocaust on the survivors’ children.

A comic about the Holocaust? In which the Jews are drawn as mice, the Germans as cats and the Poles as pigs? The

undertaking seemed foolhardy, impossible even. When in 1991 Art Spiegelman released the concluding second volume of "Maus", he had proven that the comic is able adequately to process every subject, no matter how challenging and complex. "Maus" made it to the New York Times's bestseller list and into the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was also awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

From 1981 a significant third position was the "Love and Rockets" comic book series by the Mexican-born brothers Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez. Mexican-American culture and strong women are the central focus. Gilbert portrays life in the fictional Central American village of Palomar. Palomar is firmly controlled by women, but its authentic culture is about to be overtaken by the North American way of life. Jaime Hernandez on the other hand recounts growing up and growing old in the Latino and Punk subculture of Los Angeles, focusing on two young Latina girls, Maggie and Hopey, as the central characters of his stories.

"Love and Rockets" was quite different to anything that American comics had to offer at the time. It was authentic, true to life, sensuous, wonderfully illustrated, with narratives that revealed Latin American verve and love of spinning a yarn – and surprisingly successful.

In Europe, too, the *bande dessinée* freed itself from the rigid 44-colour page scheme of a short serialized episode. During the 1970s the French magazine ("à suivre") launched the comic novel or *Roman BD*. Usually, this was much longer, often black and white and always influenced by the signature of a single *auteur*. In the case of Hugo Pratt's "Corto Maltese" and "Alack Sinner" by Muñoz/Sampayo, the series idea was kept alive with the recurring main character. But Jacques Tardi, the most famous and most successful French comic novelists, also broke away in his historic novels from the compulsion to produce comic series. His uncompromising stories about the trauma of the First World War and the Paris commune landed him bestsellers with his editions running into six digits.

"Raw", "Maus", "Love and Rockets" and the *roman BD* were alternatives both to the overpowering mainstream comic as well as the outdated underground comix. They encouraged many illustrators to consider themselves as authors and to use material based on their personal stories rooted in everyday topics or associated with their own culture.

Hence in the 1980s and 1990s the "alternative" or "independent" comic scene emerged, which set up its own structures: independent publishing houses and magazines, as well as independent festivals. In Switzerland, for example, in 1980 the Verlag Edition Moderne was founded, followed in 1984 by the magazine STRAPAZIN and in 1991 the Fumetto Comix-Festival was held in Lucerne.

However, the most influential publishing launch was in 1990 in Paris when six comic authors set up their own publishing house, L'Association. Their early publications already highlighted that they had nothing to do with the commercial *bande dessinée*: their books were small, with a sober design and black and white. L'Association also emphasized literary sophistication of content, dispensing with series and genre stories and focusing instead on personal and idiosyncratic aspects. In doing so, L'Association newly defined the author comic for contemporary literature.

L'Association won back many adult and educated readers who had turned away from the comic. Their stories also appealed to female readers, who previously had not felt entirely at home in the male-dominated comic worlds, yet now increasingly began to illustrate comics. The success was a vindication for L'Association – it became a model for numerous publishing houses around the world.

How does one best differentiate from the mainstream – from superheroes, adventurers, fantasy, funny animals and tame humour? The answer is to concentrate on the things that are as small, most unique and unmistakeable as possible – preferably

on one's personal life. In about 1990 autobiography became symbolic for the independent comic scene.

That's not surprising any longer: there is no greater contrast to superheroes and sword-swinging fantasy warriors than everyday explorers like, for example, the French Canadian Julie Doucet who fights it out with unreliable tampons, empty beer bottles and vacant and disaffected boys.

But it isn't quite so easy processing your own biography so outsiders can enjoy reading it. Autobiography also froze to a genre when more and more navel-gazing mundane banalities from would-be adolescent young men with ambitions for this *metier* crowded the market.

Their renaissance started when authors put their biographies into wider contexts, as Art Spiegelman had already demonstrated in "Maus". Take for example David B., one of the founders of L'Association. In "Die heilige Krankheit", he describes growing up in the shadow of his older brother's epilepsy.

"Die heilige Krankheit" is incredibly multi-faceted. There is the family story: David B. relentlessly describes the devastating impact of epilepsy on everyday family life. Then there is the personal story: David B. describes the influence of the illness on his genesis as an artist. And there is also contemporary history: David B. grants an informative insight into the spiritual confusions of the 1970s. To heal their son the parents sought help from all manner of plausible and unlikely esoteric therapists and gurus, whose curious worldviews David B. translates into impressive scenes.

David B. for his part discovered the Iranian Marjane Satrapi living in France. In "Persepolis" she described growing up in Iran under the Ayatollahs. She therefore highlighted the tension of the era: in the context of the antagonisms between the Christian and Islamic world, this personal insight into recent Iranian history blossomed into an international bestseller running into millions. "Persepolis" was the graphic novel's breakthrough to a new mass audience.

Joe Sacco chose a different route to assess reality. A journalist by profession, Sacco's several hundred pages of high-impact reportages about the Middle East conflict or Civil War in the former Yugoslavia brought to life events in an original way. He won acclaim well beyond the comic scene.

Even if the comics relating to contemporary affairs attracted special attention, the fictional comic also enjoyed a longer-term expansion of its potential. The most impressive example of this is Chris Ware's personally influenced "Jimmy Corrigan".

In "Jimmy Corrigan", Ware describes little more than the first and only weekend, which the almost 30-something, lonely and frustrated office worker Jimmy Corrigan spends with his father. The father had left his wife and child shortly after his son's birth.

Almost nothing happens during this encounter. But the actual events are less crucial than the emotions that Chris Ware dissects with almost painful precision. The moods are also important – the emptiness and alienation between two individuals, who attempt to communicate, yet fail to reach each other. Ware's clinically hygienic image language reinforces the vacancy and the silence. However, emotions ferment beneath this pedantic surface – they are deep, raw, oppressive and brutal.

Instead of staging the dynamic climax of each action, as in most comics, Chris Ware exposes the aspects, which normally get lost in the white margin between the individual images.

Chris Ware set the standard with "Jimmy Corrigan", both formally and as regards content, as a narrator and as a designer. He expanded and revolutionized the possibilities of comic-book expression, thus decisively contributing to the comic being taken more seriously as a literary genre today than ever before.

A golden age

Even comic-resistant German literary reviews could no longer ignore the plethora of relevant content and first-rate artistic and narrated comics published after 2000. This was especially obvious given the maturity of an independent and by now also internationally recognized comic scene in German-speaking countries.

Of course, to this day the graphic novel thrives on the charm of the new and unusual. The success of “Persepolis” or Joe Sacco’s reports is not only based on their qualities, but also on the fact that they convey serious subjects in illustrated image sequences that only shortly before were generally maligned as childish and trivial.

Hype is mostly short-lived and the fuss surrounding the graphic novel will also calm down. This is desirable because the present exuberance leads many publishers and critics to treat graphic novels too generously, publishing the works with loud fanfares. If these were prose creations or films they would scarcely be noticed or even receive scathing reviews. Many publishers venturing into this new market segment still have plenty to learn.

A comic is not automatically good because it deals with an important subject and is longer than 48 pages. Too many graphic novels are also published whose authors and illustrators have quite clearly hardly thought about the unique qualities of comic language. Lots of small image boxes on a single page by no means make a comic out of an illustrated sequence.

However, the positive sides of this hype are far more important. Twenty years ago “Maus” was an anomaly – nowadays such themes and aspirations about quality are the norm. Authors and illustrators have a genuine choice between genre and author comics. And because creative artists usually prefer to narrate their own stories, the traditional series are as trivial now as they rarely were before.

The new generation is also being catered for, as the acceptance of comics has also led to a mellowing at the universities of arts. That's especially noticeable in the German-speaking context: the most prominent representatives of the German 1990s comic scene – Anke Feuchtenberger, Martin tom Dieck, Atak, Hendrik Dorgathen – are now lecturers teaching their students the art of comic narrative. In recent years, the most outstanding debuts, for instance, Kati Rickenbach, Ulli Lust or Aisha Franz, were university graduates. It is pleasing to see many female authors among them.

Today, the comic is a fully mature and generally respected medium of artistic expression. From superheroes to the Holocaust, from reportage to the fantasy epos, from funny animals to high-flying literary novels, from philosophical essays to exotic adventures – the comic can and is allowed to do everything. Nothing and nobody sets limits for a comic author. This is why many authors – male and female alike – take every opportunity to emphasize that they are now living in a golden age of the comic – *sorry*, the graphic novel.

Christian Gasser