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## **More than just Iron Man: A Brief History of Comic Books and Graphic Novels**

**Abstract.** Comic books and graphic novels are a significant part of today's culture. Popularity of blockbuster movies about superheroes such as *Iron Man* or *The Dark Knight* clearly indicates that stories created for the comic medium can captivate large audiences. Unfortunately, such stories are often considered to be lacking in substance and are often perceived as a very simple form of entertainment. The aim of this article is to briefly show how comic books and graphic novels developed throughout history. While observing how this form evolved, it is much easier to notice that this medium can actually be used to tackle serious subject matter and, contrary to popular belief, even superhero stories can have a significant level of depth.

**Key words:** comics, graphic novels, popular culture, visual art

The influence of comic books is constantly present in our everyday lives, even though we may not always realize this is actually the case. Actor Robert Downey Jr. scored number 1 on *Vulture's* list of the 100 Most Valuable Stars of 2013 (IS1). The list is composed of people who can positively influence the earnings of the films they star in. Downey's success is largely owed to his appearance in the *Iron Man* films. Thanks to those movies Iron Man, a comic book character unknown outside of specific fandom, has become a household name in just a couple of years. We may also point to the recent success of Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight Trilogy* in order to show how a story about a comic book character can be the basis for a successful box office hit. The fact that such acclaimed actors as Robert Downey Jr. or Christian Bale are chosen to portray superheroes in order to fully show the depth of their characters, can convince some that there may be more substance to the comic book medium than they initially thought. Of course others will still remain unconvinced. After all, cinema blockbusters are considered to be popular culture and do not always tackle serious subject matter. An argument can be made that even the simplest works have artistic merit. But what is more important is the fact that comics are actually much more than just stories about superheroes.

As a matter of fact, both comics and graphic novels (comics in a book form) can be successfully used to talk about subjects as difficult as loneliness, the existence of God, even the Holocaust. Comic books and graphic novels are simply a different medium from films or books. They use different methods to convey their message, yet can be used not only to entertain, as we may initially think, but to make us ponder serious issues as well. In order to understand this better, it makes sense to briefly look at the history of comic books and graphic novels.

But first, we should ask ourselves: what is a comic? The answer may actually be complicated. Comic book creator Scott McCloud suggests that the best definition of a comic book would be: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, invented to

convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). This definition is well formulated and thought through, in order not to exclude any important works. McCloud realises, however, that if we adopt this definition even Pre-Columbian manuscripts or the Bayeux Tapestry could be considered as ancestors of comic books (10-12). Of course there may not be a direct link between the development of comics and ancient works of art. Still, we should realize that humanity has created works based on principles similar to comics much earlier than we might usually think, and it is no easy task to pinpoint the exact starting point of the genre.

Throughout history, we may find many examples of people who created works increasingly similar to the comics we know today. We can look at the works of a painter William Hogarth (1697–1764) who created sets of paintings that made a cohesive story when viewed together. Another artist creating art similar in nature to comics was Rodolphe Töpffer, whose picture stories (stories told with pictures with a textual description) were sold in the form of albums. The next step in the development of the medium, were magazines with satirical illustrations such as the British *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* (1884), which helped establish some of the conventions now present in comic books. During that time, comic strips (short satirical stories) began to appear in newspapers in order to boost their sales. One of the most well known was *Hogan's Alley* (1894) by Richard Felton Outcault, starring the Yellow Kid. Comic strips began to be more and more popular, and soon were collected in anthologies and sold separately from newspapers. Because of their humorous nature, the name "comic" started to be used just as it is today, even though comics now are not usually funny in nature. It is important to note that comic strips as a subgenre continue to be strong today; such works are still present in newspapers. What is more, many characters known worldwide: e.g. Popeye (1929) or Garfield (1978) first appeared in comic strips. We also must not omit the fact that even though comic strips were originally funny in nature, we could still try to find some deeper meaning in them. *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman for example is said to "[...] have enough twists to give the plots true philosophical import [...]" (Estren 1993:30).

The most popular genre of comics is of course the superhero story. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith point out that the emergence of such comics should be linked to pulp magazines, which contained stories about heroes with unusual abilities like Zorro or Tarzan. Since the same companies were already publishing pulps and comic strip anthologies, it was not long before comics about uncanny heroes started to appear (28-29). After the appearance of Superman in *Action Comics #1* (1938) comic book magazines started to grow in popularity and began to develop rapidly.

It should be noted that analysis of how superhero comics changed throughout the years can give a pretty clear picture of the social concerns of a given era. For example, the attitudes of such iconic characters like Superman or Batman changed over the years to reflect the current socio-political situation. Sometimes one just needs to look at the cover of a certain comic issue to know when it was made, as with the cover of *Captain America Comics #1* (1941) which shows the titular hero punching Adolf Hitler. Many genres of comics for different types of readers were created throughout the years: war comics, westerns, detective stories, horrors, romance, or funny animal comics (comics with talking animals like Donald Duck or Bugs Bunny). Still, the superhero comic remained the most popular.

Comics took a heavy blow in the 1950s with the publication of Dr Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent*. In it, he criticised comics saying they may have a bad effect on children and might lead them to committing crimes. Roger Sabin states that Wertham's

research was unreliable and the book was "academically unsound" (2010: 68). The damage was done, however, and it looked like the industry took a very heavy blow. Fortunately, instead of completely disappearing, comics reinvented themselves. Stan Lee was able to create new superhero characters, ones a reader could easily identify with. Characters like The Fantastic Four (1961), Hulk (1962), or Spider-Man (1962) showed that comics were not about violence like Wertham feared, but about flawed, relatable characters who ultimately try to do the right thing. These characters were not only able to entertain youngsters, but teach them some valuable moral lessons as well.

Throughout the 1960s comics began maturing while still remaining socially relevant. For example, comics about Iron Man (created in 1963) talked about the Vietnam War. In the 1970s X-Men comics became popular. The X-men are mutant superheroes who have decided to protect all of humanity, despite being discriminated against by the rest of society. One of the clear themes of these stories was the discrimination against minorities. What is more, in the 1970s well-established characters began to face even more difficult issues. For example, Spider-Man had to deal with the death of his girlfriend. Even themes such as alcoholism are tackled – Iron Man himself struggles with alcoholism in the comic arc "Demon in a Bottle". As Tim Morse explains, even though the authors of the comic did not purposely decide to include such a storyline in order to be socially relevant, Iron Man's addiction makes this hero very human and is an essential part of what the character is now (IS2). Tony Stark's (the man behind the guise of Iron Man) problem with alcohol is mentioned even in the *Iron Man 2* film. We can clearly see that comic books/comic art matured over time. Its characters changed as well, and the Iron Man we now watch in cinemas is a character shaped through many years.

More serious issues were not only present in the mainstream comics. In the 1960s and 1970s the phenomenon of underground comix existed (spelled with x to be differentiated from the mainstream). This counter-culture movement consisted of mostly self-published works in which artists like R(ober) Crumb tackled themes as varied as drug use, women's rights, anti-Vietnam protests, racism, sex, and many others. Some artists were interested solely in shock value, yet many wanted to simply express their opinions on controversial topics. The movement was rather short lived, but it later transformed into a wave of "alternative" comics which were sold alongside regular comic titles, though they dealt with more realistic and serious subject matter.

In the 1980s comic books sought a new readership and thus a new model of publishing comics was born – the graphic novel. The term is often considered to be just a marketing ploy to make comics more credible, as they were previously seen merely as a form of entertainment for teenagers. Even though the term is not always viewed in a positive light, many great works have been published as graphic novels. One veteran creator of comics, Will Eisner, paved the way for other works with his graphic novel *A Contract with God* (1978). In it, he portrays the life of Jewish immigrants at 55 Dropsie Avenue (a fictional street in Bronx) in the 1930s, similar to the neighbourhood he had lived in. Not only does this work tell us something about life in the depression years, but while reading it we can also ponder the justice of God's will, or sexual innocence, among many other topics.

Some more serious graphic novels about superheroes were released as well. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* contains many references that will be understood by superhero fans, and tries to show heroes in a much darker light than readers are used to. This book is not only a great read for a comics fan, however. It also comments on the anxieties connected with the Cold War and the usage of weapons of mass destruction. The strength of the book lies in its

characters, who have complex motivations rooted in the theories and philosophies of such varied people as Albert Einstein or Alexander the Great. This novel truly proves that stories about superheroes can be a mature and complex read.

The true gems of the graphic novel were created by creators linked to the underground or alternative comix. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (first part published in 1986) tells the story of Art's father Vladek, a survivor of the Holocaust. The title of the work may initially be puzzling. Everything becomes clear, however, when we begin reading. Every nationality in this work is depicted as a different type of animal: Jews are mice, Germans are cats, Poles are pigs, and Americans dogs. One may think that such a portrayal of the Holocaust is wrong and distasteful. In reality, however, this metaphor serves many different purposes, helping us to comprehend the contents of the novel better. Cartoons – the simple images used by Spiegelman – have the property called by Scott McCloud "amplification through simplification". As he explains, a simpler piece of drawing can act as a vessel that allows us to be more focused on the message of the comic, and partially project our own emotions into it (1994: 30, 36-37). We are able to be engaged in the story much more than if we were reading about it in a history book. Therefore, we are more willing to remember and to try to understand the Holocaust, a terrible tragedy that should never be forgotten. The Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus* proves that comics and graphic novels can successfully tackle even the most serious of issues.

The term "graphic novel" was intended to make comics more respectable in the American market. In some cultures, however, comics developed differently, and there was no need for the creation of such a term. In France comics are respectable enough to be shown in museums, and Japanese comics – *manga* – are a significant sector of the book market and can tackle issues as varied as wine tasting or the tale of a Hiroshima survivor.

Nowadays, it is easier than ever to find all manner of comic books and graphic novels from all around the world suited for all kinds of readers. Comics and graphic novels are simply a different medium, unlike regular books, paintings, or movies. They are collectively no better nor worse than other media, but simply different. All use both words and pictures in ways that can create a very unique aesthetic response in the reader. Whether you want to read a funny strip (*Garfield*), a work that talks about serious and important issues (*Maus*), or a captivating story that can be the material for a Hollywood blockbuster (*Iron Man*), there is always a comic or a graphic novel out there that can amaze you. If you have heard little about this medium, you should remember that comics are much more than just Iron Man. And even the old superhero himself is a more complex character than you might initially think.

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