Preface: A Powerful Language

I've always enjoyed reading; maybe more than the reading, I enjoyed the pictures. I was raised in a strictly Spanish-speaking household, where English was only my second language at school. So reading (especially out loud) was always a bit more challenging for me growing up. Nevertheless, I always tried but I never got the same satisfaction of understanding when I read a regular book, as opposed to when I'd read a book with pictures.

Far from being interested in children's books, I was reading Jim Davis' collections of *Garfield* comic strips in my childhood. Though, many of the adults around me didn't consider this to be adequate reading for me.[1] They didn't see how I could ever benefit from reading three-panel illustrations. Well actually, these witty comic strips were the gateway into reading for me.[2]

Sometime around the beginning of high school, I got my hands on a copy of Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. It was the first time I experienced a graphic novel and I loved it. I loved it so much I became obsessed with that book and read it multiple times and shared it with others. And that's how I became hooked on graphic novels.

Introduction: Guess How I Started

I spent over two weeks reading graphic novels and comics…for fun. It was really relaxing, even though I had to go through all of my reads at a pretty fast pace because I had so many books. The ratio of books I read in that amount of time was astonishing. I can't ever recall having so many books in my arms and going through the stack like pancakes. It's not even because they were "picture books" (Craig Thomas' *Habibi* was almost a 700 page brick!); it's just that I was *so* into them. I couldn't stop reading them.

I took this liberty to explore my personal motives for being so interested in graphic novels. I want to understand the origin and history of graphic novels. My ultimate question is: How intensely can I learn about graphic novels so I can accurately share with others my enthusiasm? One would think that books are pretty straightforward; but when there are more than two kinds of art forms involved, it gets pretty complicated trying to keep up with all the information. How have graphic novels come to be? What are the different kinds? Are there legendary creators who haven't been shown the spotlight for awhile? What makes a good story great? And does it matter more to consider the audience who will read the story, or is the artist obliged to pursue her own expression first?

Context: The Evolution into a Graphic Novel

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[1] Which may be true, but it sure was fun reading all the gags Jim Davis had to offer in his *Garfield* collections. Isn't reading supposed to be fun, anyways?

[2] Not many kids in my school district like to read, much less read for "fun." There are a few I know of, but there should definitely be more. (That's all I can say without making a too much of a fuss about my graduating class.)

For those who are not familiar with history of comics, the beginning of graphic novels is *usually* affiliated with the end of the 20th century. That was when Art Spiegelman introduced the world to *Maus*, encouraging other cartoonists to come forth with new ideas for longer comics.[3]

There is no actual start date for the graphic novel industry. It's only been an evolution from cavemen drawings to Neil Garman's *Sandman.*[4] Although cave paintings are far from graphic novels, they serve as evidence that communication through visuals is universal and timeless. Storytelling through visuals has been one of the first methods of communication. The Egyptians used hieroglyphics, the Greeks decorated vases, the Mayans turned to carved stones as prophecies. Humans have adapted the term "sequential art."

The Japanese created their own version of sequential art called "Emakimono," picture-scrolls ("Emaki" for short). They were popular between the 11th and 16th century and had a range of different stories written/illustrated horizontally on scrolls to create narratives[5]. The Japanese considered these scrolls as precious art.

However, the oldest story actually considered to be a graphic novel wasn't found until 1837 in Switzerland. Rudolphe Topffer wrote and illustrated *The Adventures Of Obadiah Oldbuck,* a collection of sketches narrating Mr. Obadiah's attempts to win over his plump ladylove.[6] Touching common themes like love, separation, despair, and adventure, this story was relatable to its audience. It was whimsical and offered enough entertainment to be published in various countries. It was also unofficially the first comic book ever published in America in 1842 (Santo).

The Platinum Age of comics arrived in 1897 after *The Yellow Kid In McFadden's Flats* was published. People desired more entertainment as life became automated and efficient. They began turning to the comic book for entertainment. This is possibly the foundation for comics' success. This was the first time comics had been used to describe a kind of medium; the phrase "Comic Book" was written on the back cover of *The Yellow Kid In McFadden's Flats (*"See You In The Funny Pages…").

The next milestone is the Golden Age of comics. This is really when the industry boomed with popularity. Once *Superman* appeared in the first *Action Comic of 1938,* it seems like everyone wanted to read about good versus evil. (And by everyone, I mean boys.) Yes, comics were intentionally constructed to catch men's attention using themes of violence and destruction to represent masculinity. According to Sexton's article, "Comics were sent overseas to the GI fighting in WW II." When the soldiers returned home, they were hooked on comics. As a result, there were too many comics produced that had inappropriate content for children. So, there was a censorship of comic books carried out from the 40's to the 50's. It was lead by Frederic Wertham, a German-American psychiatrist. He believed we should protect children from these awful graphic stories, so the "Comic Code Authority" was in charge of illustrated media.

At the end of the Golden Age of comic books came the Underground Comix. All the kids who grew up loving the violent, graphic comics of the 40's became graphic novelists on their

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[3] Other than the ones found in comic book stores because in the golden age of comics, there were bookstores specially made for comics and such.

[4] One of TIME Entertainment's top 10 graphic novels, also including: *Watchmen, Fun House, Maus, The Dark Knight Returns, Ghost World*

[5] They were significant in Asian history because the Ekami "transmitted from China to Japan in the 6th or 7th century along with Buddhism. In addition to providing entertainment, these scrolls played an important part in the spread of Buddhism" (Washburn).

[6] The original graphic novel is available for the public to read at The Dartmouth College website on their library database (link found in bibliography).

own in the 60's and 70's. They really "stuck it to the man" by rebelling against what society deemed as "acceptable." They created their little hearts' desires and it really stood out. Over 50 years and their work is still very much praised in comic communities established after this movement.

Yes, the underground comic scene sparked a whole chain of reactions. One of the most significant was the inspiration and motivation that caused Art Spiegelman to create *Maus* in the late 80's. *Maus* was the first of its kind, a biographical memoir of his father's recollections of life during the Holocaust. It paid tribute to all those who suffered, but even more important, it gave Spiegelman the freedom to express himself about the impact it caused him personally. It was a way for him to share with the world "a survivor's tale" and, at the same time, talk about himself and his hardships.

"Graphic novel" is a relatively new term that was adapted in our society "by Richard Kyle in 1964, mainly as an attempt to distinguish the newly translated works from Europe which were then being published from what Kyle saw as the more juvenile publications common in the United States." However, this term is most popularly known after publications such as *A Contact With God, and Other Tenement Stories* written and illustrated by Will Eisner, considered the first graphic novel of the graphic novel trend. Since then, many other graphic novelists went out to publish their own stories.

Artistic Analysis: Getting Technical

The first thing to clarify is that graphic novels are like any other kind of art. There are no concrete rules that can be broken once the artist masters the basics. And in doing so, they inspire others to follow them to create either a whole new genre or era in art.

The particular style of underground novelists was purposely planned out to be realistic and cartoony. It was a form of rebellion to what people considered "art" in the Expressionist era. It must have been frustrating wanting to create art in a specific manner, like your childhood heroes, but instead getting shut down by the art community because it was unacceptable. Spain Rodriguez dropped out of college his junior year because of it. He said that he had never felt freer until after he decided to leave art school on the East coast.

I spoke with Nora Rodriguez, daughter of (Manuel) Spain Rodriguez, classic underground comix writer/illustrator. Nora remembers her father spending every moment he got drawing. His ambition has definitely influenced her artistically because Nora works at an art boarding school as a math teacher and shows artistic interests and talents herself.

After having her father passed away last week at age 72, she said she was very proud of him and wants others to continue enjoying his work, "He never wanted to fit in and be part of the system," along with other legends of underground comics. And just how these underground legends were inspired by the revolutionist prior to the Golden Age, so were they. Everyone learns from each other in this trade.

There's scriptural evidence that all graphic novelists get their ideas, inspiration, and motivation from others in *Masters Of The Comic Book Universe Revealed* by Arie Kaplan. You can flip through the book, relating each author/illustrator's thoughts on one another.

Sometimes their work emerges from a collaboration between writer and illustrator. It's not as simple as it seems. Alan Moore, writer of *Watchmen* and *V for Vendeta,* revealed in an interview his script for *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, a thick block of pages just like

that of a movie script. Except when Alan Moore opens the script, he gets to explain how the full page of teeny tiny text can be just enough to describe one particular scene. In case you haven't read any of his books, that man puts a lot of thought into his works!

Even before then, the first half of the 20th century got to experience Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel, two of the greatest pioneers in graphic novel history. They told wordless stories about realistic life situations in the 20's and 30's. The impressive part of their graphic novels is that all of their illustrations were rendered on woodcuts; they are beautiful and detailed. Lynd Wards most classic is *God's Man*, published in 1929.

The magic of anything in comic book form is that "comics give you something to see in the panels and something to imagine between [them]" (McCloud). Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics,* has created a graph to help identify the different types of graphic novels. Picture in your mind, if you will, a square composed of four boxes. The upper left box represents all the "classical" style comics—these are the ones who go for beauty and embrace craftsmanship. Their subdivision focuses on giving the audience a sensational experience while reading the book. The upper right box contains all the "animist" style comics—the pure transparency of content, with a subdivision focusing on intuition. The lower right box is called the "iconoclast" comic—it wants to portray the authenticity of the human experience. It's subdivision focuses on feelings and emotional ties. And for the left bottom box, we have "formalist" comic—which is trying to understand how something works, using the subdivision of thinking. The upper two boxes represent more traditional comic styles while the bottom half push the boundaries and experiment in a revolutionary way. Both the left boxes represent more artistic ideas, while the left side represents the lifestyle of comics. Diagonally, there are two lines going through the box. On one end, there's beauty across from truth, while on the other end, there's form across from content. This chart is supposed to help classify graphic novels.

That is one method of trying to understand comics analytically; but a better way would be to just read, and read, and keep reading.

Conclusion: What Does This Mean?

There's a lot of hard work and effort that goes into making a graphic novel. Whoever makes one takes pride in their work because they had so much control over what the reader gets to experience. One can work alone or collaborate in a team effort. As Art Spiegelman puts it, "Comix are not simple, they're *rich!*" There's so much detail put into some graphic novels that it's all too overwhelming to soak in during the first read. Spiegelman says in another interview, "Comics don't move, they allow you to study and figure them out."

I feel they're easy to get into, though. No matter an individual's reading skill, every story seems understandable when visuals are incorporated. John Hogan was taught to appreciate the skill "of learning to pair words with images in order to more effectively communicate one's message. Comics taught me to love literature, to love reading, to love art, and to love writing."

They're also easy to share; it seems that whenever I ask people about graphic novels, the ones who are familiar with them show me their favorites. And for the ones who are unfamiliar with that style of literature, I find myself acting as an influence on which books to read first.

We can't forget there is something genuine about holding a book in your hands and seeing the craftsmanship put into it. Visuals are the universal language and sometimes the best way to tell people something is to *show* them.

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