1 Introduction: The Graphic Novel, a Special Type of Comics

Is there really something like the graphic novel?

For good or ill, there are famous quotations that are frequently repeated when discussing the graphic novel. They are valued because they come from two of the key protagonists whose works from the mid-1980s were so influential in the concept gaining in popularity: Art Spiegelman, the creator of *Maus*, and Alan Moore, the scriptwriter of *Watchmen*. Both are negative about the neologism that was being employed to describe the longer-length and adult-themed comics with which they were increasingly associated, although their roots were with underground comix in the United States and United Kingdom, respectively. Spiegelman's remarks were first published in *Print* magazine in 1988, and it was here that he suggested that "graphic novel" was an unhelpful term:

> The latest wrinkle in the comic book's evolution has been the so-called "graphic novel." In 1986, Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, a full-length trade paperback detailing the adventures of the superhero as a violent, aging vigilante, and my own *MAUS, A Survivor's Tale* both met with commercial success in bookstores. They were dubbed graphic novels in a bid for social acceptability (Personally, I always thought Nathaniel West's *The*

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> *Day of the Locust* was an extraordinarily graphic novel, and that what I did
> was … comix.) What has followed is a spate of well-dressed comic books find-
> ing their way into legitimate bookshops. Sadly, a number of them are no more
> than pedestrian comic books in glossy wrappings, and the whole genre, good
> and bad may find itself once again banished to the speciality shops….[1]

And more briefly, but in a similar vein, these are the views of Alan
Moore:

> You could just about call *Maus* a novel, you could probably just about call
> *Watchmen* a novel, in terms of density, structure, size, scale, seriousness of
> theme, stuff like that. The problem is that "graphic novel" just came to mean
> "expensive comic book" … it doesn't really matter much what they're called
> but it's not a term that I'm very comfortable with.[2]

Despite this inauspicious welcome, the graphic novel, as an idea and a
publishing phenomenon, has endured and has had a significant impact
on comics, literature, film, and many other media besides. If awarding a
"Special" Pulitzer Prize to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1992 had been con-
troversial at the time, for many reasons one can quietly state today that
giving the Nobel Prize for Literature to Chris Ware in 2016, announced
in advance here as a scoop by the authors of this book, will no longer be
received as a subject of comparable surprise. Today, the graphic novel
has escaped the cultural exclusion of much of the comics universe and
has gained great respect, not least in the United States, one of the pioneer
homes of comics and comic books.

Novelists discuss and refer to graphic novels in their fictional works
and critical writings; some, such as Jonathan Lethem and Chip Kidd,
have offered narratives for graphic novels, each scripting pastiches to
heroes Omega the Unknown and Batman, respectively.[3] Major works
such as *Ghost World*, *American Splendor*, *Persepolis*, and *Tamara Drewe*
were adapted into highly regarded and award-winning movies, while the
overall volume of publishing of graphic novels continues to be strong,
unhindered by the rise of digital media, such as Kindle. Indeed digital

media seem to expand the realm of the visual rather than contract it. For example, the enhanced e-edition of Michael Chabon's recent novel *Telegraph Avenue* includes additional illustrations by "Stainboy" Reinel and other visual and audio material that are unavailable in the standard hardback first edition. At the time of writing, DC Comics have announced that they will publish the screenplay to Quentin Tarantino's latest film *Django Unchained* (2012) as a graphic novel.[4] Readers, reviewers, publishers, and booksellers (in store and online) have maintained the currency of the graphic novel and continue to use the concept as useful shorthand for either adult readership comic books or single volume comics the qualities (content or artwork) of which distinguish them as exceptional when compared to regularly serialized titles or more generic material (superheroes, sci-fi, or fantasy). In academia the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) has published *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, a guide dedicated to supporting instructors working in the field, mainly focusing on assisting classes or courses taught in departments of literature.[5] Of course Spiegelman and Moore have contributed to this very process of growth and legitimization, but so too have David B., Kyle Baker, Alison Bechdel, Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, Robert Crumb, Kim Deitch, Julie Doucet, Will Eisner, Neil Gaiman, Andrzej Klimowski, Jason Lutes, Rutu Modan, Frank Miller, Grant Morrison, Harvey Pekar, Trina Robbins, Marjane Satrapi, Seth, and Chris Ware, among many others. In the last three decades they have produced graphic novels that are widely recognized as adding to our culture, and in this study we elaborate a series of analytical frames to better understand their important contributions.

Thus, in this book we return to explore the critical break in the history of the comic book that Spiegelman and Moore were once so skeptical about but gained greatly from, even while being critical. Mindful of their warnings, we certainly do *not* take an elitist stance against the comic book tradition, including the underground comix, nor are we concerned with writing about works that are contributing to the field of children's literature. Rather, we want to use this book to examine how contemporary graphic novels display genuinely significant, although rarely absolute, variation from the preexisting comics and comix traditions, to ask

how that change has happened, and to analyze what this means for us as scholars researching graphic narrative, visual culture, popular culture, and literary history.

This book is among the first full and detailed academic elaborations on the graphic novel that openly uses those two, sometimes unloved, words.[6] Many of the best preceding titles in the field avoid the terminological minefield altogether by employing other labels, including, "adult comics," "alternative comics," or "post-Underground." Our shared starting point was that we believed there was something to say about graphic novels and that there was a critical and historical meaning to them, beyond the marketing speak.[7] After all, the graphic novel is being widely used, and there continue to be comics that do not seem like the ones that we read in our respective childhoods. *Maus*, *Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight*, and other important titles in the 1980s (e.g., *Love and Rockets*, *American Flagg!*, and *Swamp Thing*) and their many successors over the last thirty years have found a fixed place in bookstores rather than speciality shops. The graphic novel is a vibrant form of literary publishing, and it merits a critical toolkit to read it better. Indeed, even Art Spiegelman has offered more positive and respectful commentaries that are less frequently cited than are his dismissive remarks from 1988. For example, when speaking with Joseph Witek in 2004, Spiegelman discussed the graphic novel as a genuine subform of comics. Although still declaring he held some reservations, he suggested that for him now graphic novels were works that were "well structured, tempered narrative … this thing of trying to tell a more nuanced story than before."[8]

On the structure of this book

It is noticeable that this book's structure and writing has developed quite organically from our first discussions on the project. After dealing with some basic further definitional questions (here in Chapter 1), we have often found ourselves repeatedly addressing three interlinking concerns: first, the historical and contextual explanation that aims to describe how and when comics were no longer being treated as being "just for kids"

(Chapters 2, 3, and 4); second, mapping out a formal analysis of medium features (Chapters 5, 6, and 7); and third, returning to two important thematic fields, how graphic novels have interacted increasingly with traditional notions of "literature" and how they have commonly become associated with nostalgia and historical representation (analyzed in Chapters 8 and 9, respectively).

Let us say a little more about each of these subjects, so as to explain why they are important for an introduction to the graphic novel. In this chapter we argue for an open definition of the graphic novel that acknowledges how definitional processes are about perception, scales of difference, variety, and impression. In it we aim to explain how in several key respects graphic novels do provide a significantly different set of cultural activities from comics, but that there is no fixed or absolute borderline. On the levels of form, content, and publishing context, graphic novels differentiate from comics. But it is not a case of one rule applying to all, let alone a once-and-for-all definition.

Part I, consisting of Chapters 2 through 4, provides the reader with a historical contextualization. Reviewing the development of adult comics since approximately 1945, these chapters explore the creative contexts out of which serious adult comics developed. Chapter 2 explores the 1950s to 1960s and underlines how creators such as Harvey Kurtzman proposed sophisticated new material. The term "graphic novel" did not have much, if any, popular currency in this period, but works such as *Harvey Kurtzman's Jungle Book* established adult, long-form, complex visual literary material.[9] The Pop Art appropriation of comics is also an important part of our history, for it set out several key ideas later taken up in the graphic novel: irony, appropriation, narrative dualism, and a tension between comics and more elite cultural activity.

In Chapter 3 readers are invited to explore underground comix, the milieu from which several graphic novelists of the 1980s and 1990s first learned their craft. It highlights the work of four important contributors: Jaxon, Art Spiegelman, Will Eisner, and Justin Green. In addition, the chapter points to how developments in sci-fi comics and fiction were promoting early graphic novels. Historical analysis concludes with an

overview of the scene in the late 1980s and a discussion of subsequent developments. How British and French graphic novelists impacted the American growth of the graphic novel in the 1980s and 1990s is also described and contextualized here. Chapter 4 concludes by outlining some of the main trends in graphic novel publishing that have developed since 2000.

Part II discusses the formal strategies for "reading" graphic novels. Reviewing and explaining theoretical work, it outlines how to approach graphic novels critically. Thus, Chapter 5 explains the significance of panel and page layouts for interpreting the form. Drawing on critical works from Benoît Peeters and Thierry Groensteen, among others, we show how the visual constructions of graphic novels impact reader response. We do not erect a definitive model but rather show some of the ways through which individual graphic novels can be newly understood. Next, Chapter 6 explores artistic style and how combining word and image in single form have been key aspects for the making of graphic novels. Chapter 7 returns to a more formal analysis of content and narrative than was afforded by the earlier historical analysis.

The final part of the book explores the thematic areas that we suggest are two of the most significant current areas of debate for anyone interested in this subject. Chapter 8 provides an original discussion of the dialogues that are taking place between graphic novelists and more traditional forms of writing, notably literary fiction. This is shown to be a very productive field of activity, with graphic novelists staking a claim to literary material and literary editors adopting graphic novelists into their community, a notable strategy led by Dave Eggers's periodical, *McSweeney's*. In Chapter 9, we suggest that some of the initial tensions that surfaced around the popularizing of the term "graphic novel" have in the long run been played out through, and been sublimated into, the recurrent presence of the theme of nostalgia in several important graphic novels. Comic books are far from dead, but the break that the graphic novel established (if even only symbolically achieved) has prompted much fascination with comic book history, literal and metaphorical.

This has its consequences too, and they merit a detailed reflection for the conclusion to this work.

Our primary and guiding purpose throughout has been to elaborate on each of the aforementioned frames of orientation so that students and fellow researchers will be able to draw on our work and reapply it in their chosen specialism. We can also add that this is a work of meta-commentaries and not of close readings (though we are as precise as possible and have looked to include original insights). We do, however, suggest that the paradigms we elaborate can inform and shape future case work, even if only to stimulate debate and disagreement with our perspectives.

A new definition of the graphic novel

What remains sometimes unclear is what is actually meant by the label "graphic novel." Although we do not believe in a general definition (for there can be no single or definitive one), the objective of the following section is to help bring clarity to the often murky debates on the nature of the graphic novel, which for us is not just a genre but also a medium.

We propose that the graphic novel as a medium is part of other, more-encompassing cultural fields and practices (graphic literature, visual storytelling), and that within these fields and practices there are rarely clear-cut distinctions between types and categories, but rather more commonly scales of differences, that are known by creators and publishers, that are often deliberately exploited to achieve resonance with readers/consumers, and that are rightly contested and debated as part of their public reception. Within the domain of graphic literature, the basic categories are the difference between graphic novel and newspaper political cartooning or caricature (roughly speaking, the distinctive feature is storytelling: the graphic novel is a storytelling medium; short political cartoons or single-image caricatures can tell stories as well, but this is not their primary aim) and the difference between graphic novel and comic books (roughly speaking, the distinctive feature here is not

storytelling, for comics as well as graphic novels tell stories, but a whole range of features that cannot be reduced to one single aspect).

We consider then that the graphic novel is a medium, the key features of which can sit on a spectrum on whose opposite pole is the comic book. Roughly speaking, these features can be situated at four levels: (1) form, (2) content, (3) publication format, and, directly related with this, (4) production and distribution aspects. Let us discuss each area in turn before suggesting some more general remarks.

LEVEL 1: FORM

Form is the logical starting point when discussing the properties of a medium, yet in the case of the graphic novel, it is important to stress the complex and variegated nature of form. At this level, differences between graphic novels and comics are not always very clear-cut, as shown by the major works that first introduced the notion of the graphic novel, such as Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (four-issues comic book version in 1986) or Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, the dystopian reinterpretation of superheroes comics (twelve-issues comic book version in 1986 and 1987). That is to say, in terms of form these works started life as comics and then were republished as graphic novels. Drawing style is of course crucial, and many graphic novelists will try to give an individual twist to their work, but here it is more important to emphasize two other, more encompassing dimensions of form: the page layout and narrative. As convincingly analyzed by Thierry Smolderen, the basic model of comics that will be questioned if not replaced by the graphic novel is, apart from the issue of personal drawing style, that of the "grid" and that of "sequentiality." For almost a century, comics have followed the same fundamental structure: their images are juxtaposed in a grid, which intertwines horizontally and vertically organized images that are supposed to be read in a sequential order – that is, a successive way – and that determine the supposedly "natural" narrative status of the medium. Formally speaking, comics are a way of storytelling that is based on the sequential decoding of juxtaposed images that are gathered

page by page. Graphic novels can follow all these rules perfectly: first, and as already mentioned, they can borrow the drawing style of the "typical" superheroes comics (to repeat, there at the public consecration of the term with *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*); second, they can also respect the layout rules the comics industry has been using for many decades; third, nothing forces them to abandon the narrative dimension of their juxtaposed images. Yet at the same time, the graphic novel does also *explore* each of these rules, trying to push the medium beyond the limits that have restrained it for so many years. First, the graphic novel tries to foreground more individual styles, although individuality should not be confused with notions such as the beautification of the clichéd comics style; what graphic novelists are craving for is a *recognizable style*, and this does not necessarily mean an "embellished" version of the traditional comics style (which can be very gratifying from an aesthetic point of view, as we all know thanks to the blow-up appropriations by Roy Lichtenstein et al., circa 1962). Certain graphic novelists, for instance Julie Doucet, are even in pursuit of an "ugly" or apparently "clumsy" style, which they consider paramount for the achievement of personality and street credibility. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the graphic novel tries also to turn away from the conventions, including the conventional ways of breaking the rules that characterized the comix field in the late 1960s and 1970s. Hence the generalization that preference is given to either unusual layout techniques, which tend to break the basic grid structure, or the return to classic formats that the comics industry thought too boring to maintain. An example of the first option can be found in the work of one of the founding fathers of the graphic novel, Will Eisner, who liked working with unframed panels, creating a more fluid dialogue between the various images on the page (Illustration 1.a). Examples of the second option are frequent in the more recent production, where several authors seem to refuse any aesthetic upgrade or variation on the grid, preferring a return to layout sobriety in order to avoid any distraction from what they think really matters in their work. After all, a work such as *Maus* displays a surprising appearance of cautiousness as far as layout issues are concerned, especially when

compared to the underground experiments of its author in a preceding collection, *Breakdowns*. The same can be said of other great successes, such as Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a rather traditional and easy-to-read work that ironically enough has been produced in the context of the extremely hard-core avant-garde French publishing house, L'Association. Finally, graphic novels may also innovate at the level of narrative (and we return to this aspect in much greater detail in Chapter 7), either by refusing it – a stance illustrated in the so-called abstract comics that used to be ignored as simply unthinkable until quite recently – or by emphasizing a dimension of storytelling that was hardly prominent in comics: the role of the narrator. In the graphic novel, and for reasons that have also to do with issues of content (see our next point), the narrator is much more present, both verbally and visually, than in the case of a comic book, where the story seems to tell itself, without any direct intervention from the narrator.

LEVEL 2: CONTENT

Next to form, *content* is a second element that underlies the divergence between the graphic novel and the comic. Here as well, and perhaps even more conspicuously than at the formal level, the graphic novel has tried to distinguish itself from comics, more specifically from the superheroes comics. Content matter is "adult," not in the sense of pornographic, but in the sense of "serious" and too sophisticated – or simply uninteresting – for a juvenile audience, although of course there have been pornographic works of note, as well as graphic violence on show in some notable examples (one may think here of Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's *Lost Girls*,[10] for its steaming eroticism, or Frank Miller's *Sin City* or *Holy Terror*,[11] for their hard-core violence). Graphic novels are also disposed toward realism (here we mean contrary to

Opposite page: 1.a. The reworking of the classic grid-structure: visual and narrative dialogue between unframed panels. Illustration from *Dropsie Avenue: The Neighborhood.* Copyright © 1995 by Will Eisner, from *The Contract with God Trilogy: Life on Dropsie Avenue* by Will Eisner. Used with kind permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.