

## Chapter One

### “Is this a book?” DC Vertigo and the redefinition of comics in the 1990s

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Not only comics publishing but also perceptions of it have changed radically during this century, and the comic book has become a graphic novel, invoking notions of permanence, literariness and artistry. In Chapter Three, Christopher Murray considers the emergence of literary themes and allusions in DC comics during the 1980s as a consequence of British writers crossing the Atlantic and entering the US comic industry. This chapter offers a complementary examination of the technological changes and marketing innovations that have contributed to the redefinition of comics at the end of the twentieth century, specifically with regard to the role of DC Vertigo and the rise of the graphic novel and trade paperback in the 1990s. It will draw on the expertise of Karen Berger, DC Senior Vice President and Executive Editor of the Vertigo imprint, and Steve White, Senior Editor at Titan Comics (who handle DC’s reprints for the UK market).<sup>1</sup>

Although independent and underground comics were already utilising a wide range of formats, Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978) is often cited as the first mainstream American graphic novel, as Eisner brought adult-oriented novel-length comics to a wider audience. Marvel claim their first graphic novel as *The Death of Captain Marvel* (1982), and the end of the twentieth century saw the rise of this form as mainstream comics began to ‘grow up’. Although adult comics and longer formats had in fact been around for many years, this cultural perception of the emergence of the graphic novel has affected the ways in which today’s comics are both marketed and received. For the purposes of this article the graphic novel (also known as a ‘prestige format’ single issue) is defined as a ‘permanent’ comic: it is often longer than the usual 24-page single-issue comic and consists of new material printed on higher-quality paper. Trade paperbacks use the graphic novel form to collect and reprint single issues (either reprinting entire mini-series, or typically runs between four and twelve issues from longer ongoing series).

This chapter will explore the graphic novel’s evolution and specifically its use by the DC Vertigo imprint. It will examine the processes and effects of factors such as digital production and computerised printing, expensive and permanent binding, distribution via bookshops, pricing, franchising, and the repackaging and reissuing of previously published work. These elements have shaped the medium by bringing the graphic novel closer to the aesthetic of the literary text, while also maintaining the status quo of the comics market in some respects – by allowing for the production of collectors’ editions, for instance. They sit alongside factors external to the industry such as the redefinition of the audience and emergent intellectual property and copyright laws, which have also affected the ways in which comics are created, produced and received.

#### A Digital Aesthetic

Traditionally, comics have been perceived as disposable, low-quality pulp fiction aimed at a child market. However, as the product of a publishing business the medium is shaped by its production

values and these have altered greatly since the early days of comics publishing. Early comic strips in newspapers and magazines were limited by thickset black line-work, due both to the letterpress method of printing (in which inked plates ‘stamp’ an image onto paper) and the poor quality of the paper used. In the 1950s this process gave way to offset printing, whereby comics were first laid out in pencil, then inked, coloured, shot to film, and finally printed: allowing for more delicate lines. By the 1990s publishers such as DC had their own “in-house computer colouring department” (Gold 1990, 3) and, as Steve White confirms, “computerisation [has] more or less brought everything in-house”. Today, the offset process still dominates, now via computer-to-plate production rather than the shot-to-film process (although entirely digital printing is now a possibility, at the time of writing this can still only produce limited quantities).

DC launched their Vertigo imprint in 1993, using six popular series from the 1980s, all of which were reworkings of older DC supernatural or horror characters (*The Sandman*, *Swamp Thing*, *Hellblazer*, *Animal Man*, *Shade the Changing Man* and *Doom Patrol*). There was a conscious move away from superheroics, even in their gritty and realistic 1980s incarnation. For example, in the hands of writer Neil Gaiman *The Sandman* became a mythological epic, sharing little more than a name with Jack Kirby’s golden-age series. Alan Moore had already redefined *Swamp Thing* as a plant elemental with social concerns, rather than a freak creature of horror. Peter Milligan’s rewrite of Steve Ditko’s *Shade: The Changing Man* incorporated a hefty dose of surrealism, as did Grant Morrison’s run on *Doom Patrol*. Morrison also revived Dave Wood’s *Animal Man* as a metafictional commentary on alternate realities and under Jamie Delano’s run the character would later be recreated again as an ‘animal avatar’ (a kind of animal god, similar to Moore’s redefinition of the *Swamp Thing*). *Hellblazer*’s antihero, John Constantine, had little to do with (super)heroics from the series’ beginning.

These core titles were reconceived in the 1980s, not simply as ‘more realistic’ superheroics, but instead as mythological, surreal, religious and metafictional commentaries upon the comics medium and industry. Rather than continuing the trend for gritty vigilantes and superhero politics, the content and style of Vertigo instead revolved around dark fantasy and sophisticated suspense. Karen Berger emphasises that Vertigo was conceived as a home for comics that were “led by the ideas, by the writers really wanting to do something different in comic books”. Along these lines, Berger also fought – and won – a battle not to have the DC bullet logo on the Vertigo covers, a “very very big deal”.

Similarly, many of the Vertigo titles used an innovative aesthetic that Karen Berger says was “very deliberate, we really just wanted to show different types of art styles too.” In an industry often reluctant to take risks, Berger continues that “at the time it was a big noticeable deal”. *Shatter* (written by Peter Gillis, with art by Mike Saenz and Bert Monroy, and published by First Comics in 1984) was the first comic to feature entirely digitally produced art. Produced on a 128k Apple Macintosh computer using MacPaint, it has an obvious computer aesthetic, as the maximum print level at the time was 72 dots per inch (a figure that is now up in the thousands) that results in a dot-matrix printing effect. The use of technology is also emphasised by its content, which owes much to films such as *Bladerunner*. *Shatter* illustrates how the early days of computer-generated comics were not only limited by the tools available, but also by the preconceptions attached to the process and software. By contrast, John Totleben was one of the first artists to use collage and paint for his 1980s *Swamp Thing* covers and this type of aesthetic experimentation was embraced in the Vertigo stable. *The Sandman*, whose covers declined to show the title character and instead featured Dave McKean’s idiosyncratic and abstract artwork, is the best-known example of this process. McKean’s materials range from pencil and ink, to collage

and acrylic, to photography and Mac manipulation. Other artists also embraced multimedia; for example Tom Taggart's *Doom Patrol* covers were sculpted in miniature, arranged in sets and photographed. Subsequent Vertigo titles (such as Glen Fabry's painted *Preacher* covers, or Gavin Wilson and Richard Bruning's computer-enhanced photographic covers for *Sandman: Mystery Theatre*) also had a distinct look. Innovation extended to the interior pages – certain stories of *The Sandman* are pencilled only (such as *Sandman* #70-72, “The Wake”, printed directly from Michael Zulli's pencils) or discard conventions such as panels or speech balloons (*The Sandman* #74, “Exiles”). In *Animal Man*, Morrison often used the artist's pencilled drafts alongside the finished artwork to visually reflect the various layers of reality and metafictional nature of the story. In this way the Vertigo books were conceived and marketed to be both conceptually and visually different from the mainstream and superhero fare.

#### Permanence and Packaging

New possibilities for colouring and digitisation also allowed for the re-release of older works around this time. While it might be argued that this process maintained the status quo of the comics market and audience by feeding the collectors' market, repackaging and reissuing also altered perceptions of comics by allowing for large, book-format bindings that brought comics closer to the notion of a literary text. “Marvel Masterworks” (begun in 1987) and “DC Archive Editions” (1989) were hardcover, full-colour collections of rare and classic series. They foregrounded their expensive, highbrow status through marble-effect or silver dustjackets, full colour restoration, and hardback binding. However, this also meant they were priced beyond the reach of many of their audience. Black-and-white paperback lines (“Essential Marvel Comics” and DC's “Showcase Presents” series) were subsequently brought in as a response.

The process of reprinting and reissuing collections was adopted by Vertigo and the imprint quickly gained a reputation for using the trade paperback format as single issues were often reprinted and re-released as collections. *The Sandman* trade paperbacks (featuring new covers by Dave McKean) began to be released as early as 1990 and in this way the format was established by the time of the Vertigo launch in 1993. The releases were dictated by market demands: for example, *The Sandman*'s second story arc, *The Dolls House*, was the first to be released as a trade paperback, due to the success of the massively popular *Sandman* #8 (“The Sound of her Wings”). As well as imbuing the Vertigo product with a sense of permanence, this process again allowed for a further redefinition of these comics' aesthetic, as the collections were now emphasised by high quality glossy covers featuring new artwork. The process has continued as, after a second generation of *Sandman* trade paperbacks (with different covers), *The Absolute Sandman* began in 2006 – each oversized leather-bound hardback reprinting twenty or so single issues, re-coloured using the latest technology.

Experiments of format (such as the alternate cover craze) abounded in the 1990s. However, the trade paperback format was instead used by imprints such as Vertigo to redefine their product and collect a group of titles under a label with a clear identity and distinct aesthetic. Associated marketing also allowed different audiences to access it, as will now be seen.

#### Location, Location, Location

The publication of comics by mainstream publishers and their appearance in bookstores are two of the most important developments affecting the medium's creation and perception in recent years. Comics marketing was initially aligned most closely with that of magazines and other periodicals, and dog-eared copies were rammed into newsstand racks or sold at drugstores and grocery shops.

The speciality comics store did not become popular until the 1980s, with the advent of direct distribution.

The direct distribution system was invented in the mid-1970s by Phil Seuling, a New York comics retailer. The exact start date is difficult to establish; Mark Shainblum gives it as 1976, but contemporaries of Seuling state that his company, Seagate Distribution, was dealing with DC and Marvel in this manner as early as 1973 (Hanley 2000). The direct distribution system provided an alternative to the existing sale-or-return policy practised by newsstands and drugstores who purchased comics from periodical distribution companies; direct market sellers instead bought their comics stock directly from the publishers at a cheaper price, although they were not able to return unsold units. Direct distribution seemed to restore the industry's uncertain finances as it allowed the end-seller to make more money on titles sold, which led to the creation of more speciality stores, and the system dominated the market by the mid 1980s.

The speciality store encouraged a different kind of audience than the casual readership provided for by newsstands and drugstore sales. This in turn affected the creation and reception of comics – as they were no longer running the risk of returned units, publishers began to release comics aimed at more dedicated fans, which were often too obtuse to appeal to the casual reader. The stores themselves were also often characterised as intimidating and for this reason became unappealing to the general public. This, together with speculative sales (multiple alternate cover releases and similar), led to the market crash in the mid-1990s; it became clear that false 'collectors' hype' was artificially inflating prices, while a lack of new readers meant the industry was cannibalising its own market.

Vertigo survived the crash, and in fact benefited from it. As Neil Gaiman comments: "We were selling 100,000 copies [of *The Sandman*] a month and we were down at number 70 or so, and the bestselling comic was selling in the millions. And then the bottom fell out of the industry and all of a sudden there we are still doing our 100,000 copies and we're now at number 25. And by the end of it, we were *still* doing 100,000 and we were at number one. We were beating *Batman* and *Superman*." (Savlov 1999)

In recent years comics have surpassed previous publishing and marketing limitations and are now being released by mainstream publishers and situated in high-street booksellers. Using publishers like Barnes & Noble might be said to bring comics closer to the notion of the literary text, and many other publishers are now joining the trend. Random House UK has increased its output of graphic novels (published by imprint Jonathan Cape) threefold over the past year, publishing nine new titles since 2006. In July 2007 Harper Collins UK launched its first graphic novel series (the *Agatha Christie Comic Strip Editions*), Bloomsbury are set to publish their much-hyped first graphic novel in 2008 (*Logicomix*), and other publishers such as Faber & Faber are continuing to sign up-and-coming graphic novelists (Mulholland 2007). Genre limitations are much less apparent; for example, academic publishers Hill & Wang (a division of old-school company Farrar, Straus & Giroux) published a graphic novel adaptation of the 9/11 Commission Report in 2006. This expansion of traditional prose publishers towards creating their own comics imprints should be noted, and Vertigo was again at the fore of this trend, mostly due to the popularity of their trade paperbacks. A recent deal between Vertigo and Random House Distribution has further contributed to this movement (and brought in "significant sales increases in just a few months") and Karen Berger says that Vertigo is now "perfectly poised to increase our presence in the large bookstore chains, as well as expanding our reach into independent stores and alternative bookselling arenas." The graphic novel presence in bookstores has increased exponentially in recent years, with British retailer Waterstones reporting that their graphic novel

sales increased by forty-one percent in the 2006/07 financial year (Mulholland 2007). A London branch of Blackwells began stocking a half-shelf of graphic novels (six titles) in early 2005, which increased to thirty shelves in eight months, and to forty shelves by 2007 (Gravett 2006). Here, as at other companies, initial separatist issues have given way to acceptance. For example, Foyles bookshop initially categorised its graphic novels by publisher rather than author, although with the caveat that they would sometimes categorise “by personality [...] because people’s purchases can be influenced by the popularity and status of an author” (Gravett 2006). This evidences a further movement towards aligning comics with ‘proper’ books as yet another distinction is broken down.

Assigning a singular authorship to the graphic novel has privileged the notion of the comics creator. Pitches for new characters and unsolicited series ideas also stand in contrast to the production-line processes of early comics and such new material is generally creator-owned. Neil Gaiman was given free rein to rewrite Kirby’s *Sandman* and, although DC retain copyright of the title, Gaiman has used his status to strike an agreement that, as such a radical reworking, his version will not be revived.

Changes in the industry’s creative practices have also contributed to redefining the comic book as an individual work rather than a mass-produced cultural artefact. Writer and artist teams are assigned to work on a long-running series or company-owned character, and their ‘run’ is well publicised to promote the new treatment of the character: placing the emphasis on individuality and uniqueness rather than continuity. For example, Jamie Delano killed off Buddy Baker in the first issue of his run on *Animal Man*. Similarly, Garth Ennis famously began his run on *Hellblazer* by giving lead character John Constantine terminal lung cancer. The migration of the Vertigo creators (documented in Chapter Three) altered the industry’s creative emphasis by the start of the 1990s, as Dave McKean comments: “We really just wanted to break it all apart, and remodel it in our image. We were very happy to do that and they were very happy to let us do that, because the books were selling very well.” (McCabe 2004, 24) The high profiles of these writers and artists meant an entirely different sort of creative process was taking place when compared to the anonymous factory lines of comics history.

By using highly publicised British writers, Vertigo’s production and marketing emphasises the notion of a ‘star creator’ (whether writer or artist) whose name sells the book. This produces a constructed notion of singular authorship that brings comics closer to the notion of literature. The marketing and genre-crossing allowed by this literary presence also creates a wider readership than was possible within the speciality stores, while dispensing with the overtones of disposability and casualness inherent to previous sales locations such as newsstands.

### A Literary Style

The value placed on individuality and uniqueness of style has led to a strong sense of creator recognition in today’s comics. Steve White reflects on conversations with Tom DeFalco (writer and ex-Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics) concerning the formation of Image Comics in the early 1990s, when a group of superstar creators coordinated a mass exodus from Marvel Comics and set up their own company in order to retain ownership of their work. The prevailing wisdom of the industry at the time was that readers were more interested in the characters than the creators, but this theory was quickly proved wrong when the first issues of *Spawn* and *W\*I\*L\*D\*C\*A\*T\*S\** (new titles published by Image) sold record-breaking numbers. White comments further “I used to follow creators, you know, you would pick up a book because it was

drawn by an artist whose stuff you really liked, that kind of thing, so that logic never really rang true with me.”

More recently, the star artist has given way to the star writer. Online forums have discussed “how the whole industry shifted from artist driven (Lee, McFarlane, Miller et al.) to writer driven (Ellis, Rucka, Straczynski, Bendis, Morrison, etc.)” and comment: “It was a change for the better” (Mayer 2004). Vertigo has certainly followed this route, as Karen Berger states: “it was totally writer-led”. This new emphasis on narrative has further redefined comics as literature. Fuller scripting may also have contributed to re-emphasising narrative elements in contemporary comics. For example, Neil Gaiman’s detailed panel descriptions, examples of which are reprinted in *The Sandman: Dream Country* trade paperback and the *Absolute Sandman* series, a scripting method Gaiman learnt from Alan Moore (Comic Book Rebels 2008).

Karen Berger explains “it was really Alan Moore who changed the perceptions of writers in comics [...] he really showed that you could do comics that were literary, but modern and popular, but could really stand next to a great work of fiction, of prose fiction, and that really changed everything. There was no going back after Alan did *Swamp Thing*” – which went on to be one of the Vertigo core titles, although Moore’s run was long finished by this time. Other titles such as Grant Morrison’s *Animal Man* and *Doom Patrol* (although the latter was being written by Rachel Pollack at the time of the Vertigo launch) picked up on the literary trend by breaking down the fourth wall and incorporating a heavy dose of metafictional commentary. For example, in *Doom Patrol* #21 (“Worlds in Collision”) Robotman/Cliff Steele asks “...IS THIS A *BOOK* OR IS IT *REAL*?” – ostensibly talking about an object in the comic (the ‘black book’) but while looking out from the panel, directly at the reader. In *Animal Man* #5 (“The Coyote Gospel”) Morrison juxtaposes various realities (cartoon, comic book, and ‘real life’) and the final panel features an artist’s hand and paintbrush. In *Animal Man* #26 (Morrison’s final issue), *Animal Man* becomes aware he is living in a comic book and confronts his creator. Morrison would continue his exploration of coexistent realities and the notion of creator-as-god in subsequent Vertigo work such as *The Invisibles*.

The adoption of the graphic novel format, the move to bookstores and a new self-awareness and literary style brought the scope and structure of the Vertigo comics closer to the notion of the literary text. Steve White comments that “there definitely seems to be an attitude among creators that they’re writing for the trade paperback” and stories are now structured around “the bigger picture”. Karen Berger also says that “Vertigo is seriously amping up its acquisitions of original graphic novels” and that in 2008 they will be dedicating two editors to this area. She also emphasises Vertigo’s move away from genre work, citing memoirs such as Percy Carey’s *Sentences* and Mat Johnson’s *Incognegro* that, it is hoped, will follow comics like Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* in reaching out to a different audience.

Finally, the label itself has helped redefine the medium. Paul Gravett attributes much of the graphic novel’s success to its rebranding and notes the “cachet” of this new label (Mulholland 2007). The new location of the bookstore emphasises this redefinition, and both elements align to produce structural and aesthetic similarities that now associate books and comics more strongly than ever, as both content and appearance use a template that owes more to the ‘novel’ than the ‘graphic’. Of course, these changes are not without consequence and it might be argued that, with a novelistic plot and structure and a material product resembling a book, comics today are becoming unrecognisable. Steve White is certainly aware of this potential pitfall; saying that, if the public stop buying single issues, then companies may decide to produce graphic novels alone and that this “cuts out the middle man, the comic buyer”. That said, he also notes the positive

aspects of such an expansion, such as a new readership.

### Redefining the Audience

As a consequence of all these production and marketing changes, the audience for comics is changing. DC market research at the start of the 1990s defined their average reader as “twenty-four and male and very literate” (Pearson and Uricchio 1991, 29) and it seems clear that an adult readership for comics has been perpetually present. Evidence of this might include propaganda comics for servicemen in the 1940s, underground comix in the 1960s, and publications such as Marvel’s *Epic Illustrated* in the 1980s. However, the gender bias in the audience is less of a fallacy than its child readership, and the majority of comics readers are indeed male.

Karen Berger says that one of her aims for Vertigo was to “get people who don’t read comics to discover them, because that’s what happened to me”, and Vertigo has brought DC a substantial new readership as titles such as *Y: The Last Man*, *Preacher* and, of course, *The Sandman* drew women into the comics mainstream. Karen Berger ascribes this not only to a move away from superheroics and the presence of strong female characters, but also to ‘the emotion and the love and passion’ in titles such as *Preacher*. As she concludes “People don’t think men respond to relationship stuff when they do”. Certainly the imprints following Vertigo, such as DC’s Minx (2007), are built on the same foundations. Minx is aimed at this expanding audience but, like Vertigo before it, without the restrictions of genre and style. Just as Vertigo moved away from the superhero mainstream, Minx is moving beyond the manga sensibility that originally inspired it. Headed by long-standing Vertigo editor Shelly Bond, its titles have the same formula of star writers (such as Mike Carey, who co-writes a title with his daughter) and focus on well-written, literary stories that cover a wide range of subjects.

Fifteen years ago, comics conventions were a male-only zone.<sup>2</sup> Today the expanding popularity of science fiction and fantasy television (such as *Buffy*) has resulted in a preponderance of gender-neutral merchandise in comics stores. This, together with the move to the bookstores and the variety of mainstream titles available, has resulted in an expanded audience, and the closed-front comics store is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. The fan culture that sustains this medium is more widely spread than ever – but has it also been redefined in the process?

### Intellectual Property and Multimedia

Fan culture has always shaped comics: the initial recognition afforded to artists snowballed from the letters pages carried in the earliest mainstream comics where fans attempted to guess which unaccredited artist had worked on a strip. This led to strips being credited with artists’ names and the successful were given more strips to work on. That fan recognition now favours the star writer as well as the artist (as noted on online forums such as [www.quartertothree.com](http://www.quartertothree.com)) has further contributed to comics’ recent redefinition as literary, rather than visual, entertainment.

Since the 1970s creators were given credit for their own work (in contrast to the anonymous factory-line production of the early days of comics) and subsequently began to demand ownership of their material. This stands in contrast to the previous corporate mentality, and accredited authorship has brought about a new form of collaboration where both the writer and artist’s input is more closely observed, if only for the purposes of ownership. In contrast to previous arrangements where comics were created anonymously in a publisher’s house style, individuality of style and voice is now crucial to the narratology and production of contemporary

mainstream comics.

Although the Vertigo core titles were all reworkings of established DC characters, the radical nature of most of these rewrites emphasised original and creator-owned material. Karen Berger explains: “we set the stage with the six titles that became Vertigo and a few creator-owned ones, like *Skreemer* and *World Without End*.” She continues “We [DC] did a few creator-owned books, the very first ones, before we even started Vertigo.” Specialist creator-owned imprints are now part of both DC and Marvel and creators generally retain copyright of original material. The new diversity of the industry is reflected in this coexistence of multiple imprints within a main publishing company.

Copyright and intellectual property restrictions are well publicised in both the UK and the US. Within comics, although intellectual property law has restricted the freedom of writers to play with industry-owned characters, the same restrictions have also aided the coherent formation of a character (by limiting the body of work featuring them to that approved by the owner) and implicitly encouraged individuality of expression for those creators working on long-running titles. The law has also made space in the industry for creators’ rights: DC now pay a ‘creator royalty’ as well as writer and artist royalties and the lion’s share of most royalty money goes to creators in creator-owned projects. Partiality towards the creator (whether writer or artist) continues to emphasise the concept of literary authorship but, essentially, the coexistence of creators’ rights and copyright restrictions has allowed the industry to sustain its dual status as both a business and a creative enterprise.

This diversity is also echoed in other areas of the industry’s evolution. For example, the changes in the distribution system and the introduction of the speciality comics store have led to an increased focus on associated merchandising and marketing (for example the introduction of collectable cards, toys, games, and so forth). Licensing and merchandising have replaced sweatshop-style production to alleviate the financial strain, albeit to the point where Marvel and DC might even be described as divisions of a toy company. As a subsidiary of Warner Bros, adverts for their projects appear prominently in DC publications. Along similar lines, Marvel owns “over 4,700 proprietary characters” which it licenses “in a wide range of consumer products, services and media such as feature films, television, the Internet, apparel, video games, collectibles, snack foods and promotions.” (Gotham Comics 2001) Crossovers to other consumer media are commonplace, such as movie tie-ins, fast-food promotions, and big-screen adaptations of comic books. With regard to the latter, like the move to the bookstores, this relocation of comics material again expands the market and audience (as smaller films such as *American Splendor* and *Persepolis* sit alongside the latest *Batman: The Dark Knight*). A movie-inspired aesthetic has also redefined the medium to a degree. When speaking of the trade paperback repackaging process Steve White comments that “The publishers are following the DVD market and are now doing ‘extras’” (cover galleries, sketch books, reprinted scripts, interviews and so forth). *Preacher* artist Steve Dillon comments further: “Most of us think we have more in common with the TV format than the film format [...] superheroes, the best superheroes, tend to be more soap opera-ish – like the X-Men, and the old Spiderman stuff. But that’s for a continuing-forever sort of series” (Osborne 1998). The new focus on the trade paperback and creator-owned work has instead led to a preponderance of one-shot graphic novels or mini-/maxi-series with a finite end. Comparisons with the cinema therefore seem more relevant to today’s industry and look set to continue.

Critical Interest

Before concluding, it seems important to note the import of some of the changes noted above. Critical interest in comics has increased exponentially in the latter half of the twentieth century; despite the initial negativity of editorials and other press, which began as early as 1940 and resulted in the infamous Senate investigations of the mid-1950s.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent media and critical attention was similarly negative and focused on comics' advertising; discussing consumer culture and specifically the role of the mass media in exploiting childhood. However, these treatments were soon offset by other critics' work, much of which offered a cultural and/or historical perspective in recording comics' evolution.

Comics today enjoy a new respect and have invaded the literary award scene: notable examples of which include Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, winner of the 1992 Pulitzer Prize; Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*, which won the Guardian First Book Award in 2001; and Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (*The Sandman* #19), which won the 1991 World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction (after which the rules were changed to exclude comics from this category). Comics and associated publications are now reviewed in national newspapers, such as Douglas Wolk's reviews in the *New York Times* (USA), and Roger Sabin and Paul Gravett's writing for (amongst others) *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Independent*, and *The Daily Telegraph* in the UK. Mainstream newspapers such as *The Independent* (UK) have also devoted entire issues of their *Sunday Review* to comics (1 October 2006) while in the USA literary journals such as *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* have published special editions on comics (Issue 13, July 2008).

Comics are also gaining strength in academia and an ever-increasing number of universities now offer dedicated comics courses.<sup>4</sup> The medium is also now receiving attention from academic subject areas as diverse as literature, art, cultural studies, history, philosophy, graphic design, pedagogy, visual language studies and many others. Empirical surveys and evaluations of comics history now stand alongside studies of the medium itself, which have in turn contributed to the inclusion of comics in more traditional studies of visual language theory. More recently, comics criticism has focused on the superhero archetype in terms of its modern-day cultural functions.<sup>5</sup> Critical attention has even extended to include metacriticism of the subject, such as Umberto Eco's 1999 article "Four Ways of Speaking about Comics". The increasing acceptance of comics into academia is evidenced at both an international and grassroots level. Examples include international academic journals such as the *International Journal of Comic Art*, *ImageText*, *SIGNS*, *European Comic Art* and *Studies in Comics*. These are supported by resources such as the Grand Comic Book Database and the Comics Research Bibliography, and by both international discussion groups (such as the Comix Scholars List) and localised initiatives (such as the Scottish Word and Image Group). Although space does not permit a full discussion of the much-valued efforts of both individuals and institutions here, it seems clear that both critical and academic interest in comics is increasing at an exponential rate.

### The Next Step

It therefore seems that changes both within and outside the industry have brought the comic book closer to the notion of the literary text. Observable changes such as technological advances, in-house employment changes, the replacement of disposability with permanence, and a shift in distribution methods stand alongside the less quantifiable – a perceived shift in audience composition and attitude, the redefinition of the creator as singular author and the expansion of academic and critical attention. This has had consequences for notions of ownership within the

wider cultural context of licensing and copyright law. The current shift towards graphic novels using original creator-owned characters and concepts are a consequence of the recognition afforded to the star creators through the redefinition of comics as literature, as well as having their basis in the new distribution system and associated merchandising.

Using a reworked aesthetic, new technology, ideological departure and innovative marketing, DC Vertigo has thrived by building on 1980s trends in a market that has redefined both the material product and cultural status of mainstream comics throughout the 1990s. The result is an industry where both the dominant and independent publishing companies are now spending much of their energy on producing literary, creator-owned, book-length material. As well as an alignment with literature, the technological and marketing developments used in this process are also producing parallels between comics and other visual media such as film and television. Therefore, it may not be too much to say that, despite their expanding popularity, the traditional understanding of comics as a medium is perhaps under threat in the current cultural context.

There can be no doubt that not only comics publishing but also perceptions of it have changed radically over the last seventy years. Although Karen Berger states that Vertigo “have no current plans for producing original content for the web”, advances made in Internet publishing are bound to bring about a whole new set of changes. Despite differences of tactility and physicality, the possibilities of the web for creation and distribution are immense, and Berger believes that comics can exist successfully both in print and online. Digital developments will continue, and it may be that the next evolutionary step for comics will have an even greater impact than the graphic novel.

#### Notes

1. All quotations drawn from personal interviews. Full versions are available online at [www.juliaround.com](http://www.juliaround.com).

2. Personal experience of author, reinforced by Steve White’s observations and further evidenced by sites such as [www.girl-wonder.org](http://www.girl-wonder.org) which founded the Con Anti-Harassment Project in 2008 (<http://www.cahp.girl-wonder.org/>).

3. Sterling North’s article “A National Disgrace” in the *Chicago Daily News* (8 May 1940), and the *National Education Association Journal*’s “An Antidote to the Comic Magazine Poison” (December 1940) are commonly cited as the first ‘anti-comics’ articles. However, Dr Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1953) is certainly the most famous ‘anti-comics’ text. See Amy Kiste Nyberg’s *Seal of Approval* (1998) for a full discussion of this fascinating history. More recently, Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester’s *Arguing Comics* (2005) offers primary evidence of the initial cultural studies reaction towards comics (1900-1960s) by collecting essays from major writers and critics such as Umberto Eco, Marshall McLuhan, Dorothy Parker, e.e. cummings, and C.L.R. James.

4. A brief internet search undertaken in January 2009 produced the names of over fifty universities offering dedicated comics courses. ComicsResearch.org lists over one hundred and seventy doctoral dissertations on the medium.

5. For a summary of early comics criticism see above. Please refer to Ron Goulart, Ian Gordon or George Pumphrey for critiques of comics, consumer culture and childhood exploitation from

various perspectives. The work of Roger Sabin, David Kunzle and Paul Gravett offers historical surveys of comics. Will Eisner and Scott McCloud are at the forefront of those whose analyses of the medium have contributed to the inclusion of comics in other visual language studies, such as the work of Neil Cohn. Will Brooker, Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, Richard Reynolds and Stephen Rauch are among those providing various contemporary approaches to the superhero.

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Groups and online resources:

Comicsresearch.org (Comics Scholarship Annotated Bibliographies):

<http://www.comicsresearch.org/>

*European Comic Art*: <http://www.eurocomcart.org/>

Grand Comic Book Database: <http://www.comics.org>

*ImageText*: <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext>

*International Journal of Comic Art* (IJOCA): <http://www.ijoca.com>

Scottish Word and Image Group (SWIG): <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/english/swig/>

*Studies in Comics*: <http://intellectbooks.co.uk/journals.php>

*Studies in Graphic Narratives (SIGNs)*: <http://www.graphic-narratives.org>

*The Comics Journal*: <http://www.tcj.com/>

The Comix Scholars List: <http://web.english.ufl.edu/comics/scholars/>

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