The Routledge Companion to Comics

Edited by Frank Bramlett, Roy T Cook, and Aaron Meskin

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO COMICS

This cutting-edge handbook brings together an international roster of scholars to examine many facets of comics and graphic novels. Contributor essays provide authoritative, up-to-date overviews of the major topics and questions within comics studies, offering readers a truly global approach to understanding the field.

Essays examine:

- the history of the temporal, geographical, and formal development of comics, including topics such as art comics, manga, comix, and the Comics Code;
- issues such as authorship, ethics, adaptation, and translating comics;
- connections between comics and other artistic media (drawing, caricature, film), as well as the linkages between comics and other academic fields such as linguistics and philosophy;
- new perspectives on comics genres, from funny animal comics to war comics to romance comics and beyond.

The Routledge Companion to Comics expertly organizes representative work from a range of disciplines, including media and cultural studies, literature, philosophy, and linguistics. More than an introduction to the study of comics, this book will serve as a crucial reference for anyone interested in pursuing research in the area, guiding students, scholars, and comics fans alike.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2017
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Names: Bramlett, Frank, editor. | Cook, Roy T., 1972– editor. | Meskin, Aaron, editor.
Title: The Routledge companion to comics / edited by Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook, and Aaron Meskin.
Description: New York : Routledge, 2016.
Identifiers: LCCN 2015049684 | ISBN 9780415729000 (hardback)
Subjects: LCSH: Comic books, strips, etc.—History and criticism. | Graphic novels—History and criticism.
Classification: LCC PN6710 .R599 2016 | DDC 741.5/9—dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015049684

ISBN: 978-0-415-72900-0 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-85133-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon, UK

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to a number of people who provided crucial support, of various kinds, for this project. First, we would like to thank the impressive list of contributors who took the time to write excellent essays for the volume, which as a whole provide a penetrating and insightful overview of the current state of comics studies—a significant achievement in a field as interdisciplinary and as young as this one. An equally huge debt is owed to our wonderful editor, Erica Wetter, as well as to Simon Jacobs, Mia Moran, and the rest of the staff at Routledge, for providing us with the opportunity to put together this volume, and for all the support and guidance they provided along the way. They have been stalwart in the face of multiple delays and other minor disasters, and have been a joy to work with throughout. Andrew Craddock is a copy-editor extraordinaire. Finally, thanks are, of course, owed to our families, friends, pets, and other loved ones for tolerating us during the long process leading up to this book.

Roy T Cook would also like to acknowledge support for the project in the form of an Imagine Fund research grant from the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities.

INTRODUCTION

Aaron Meskin, Roy T Cook, and Frank Bramlett

Like many other art forms that have had to fight for acceptance as serious art within the relevant academic, institutional, and critical circles, the history of comics studies begins with works analyzing, and recording the history of, the comic art form. Many of these works were written by persons who lacked "insider" status within these academic, institutional, and critical circles. Of course, there have been exceptions, such as Gilbert Seldes and Robert Warshow's celebrations of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* in *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924) and "Woofed with Dreams" (1946), respectively. But much more typical were works such as Jules Feiffer's *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (1965), Les Daniels' *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (1971), and Trina Robbins and Catherine Yronwode's *Women and the Comics* (1985), which examined the comics form from the perspective of comics professionals and comics fans.

Before moving on to look at the transition from amateur to professional scholarship within comics studies, it is worth emphasizing that this comparison of early works on comics produced for the most part by fans and industry insiders, and later works produced by professional academics and critics, is not intended to devalue the importance of the former, or to suggest that the latter type of work is invariably (or even usually) better. After all, not every contributor to the volume you hold in your hands is a professional academic or professional art critic.

On the contrary, contemporary professional comics scholars owe a large debt to the early work done by so-called amateurs, especially the preservation efforts that often came along with this early scholarship. Nevertheless, professors, art critics, curators, and other professionals "inside" various research- or curation-oriented institutions have access to perspectives, theoretical tools, and material resources not available to the earlier researchers, including a less celebratory, more critical approach, that have been of immense benefit to the study of comics during the last few decades.

The growth of professional comics scholarship began in earnest during the last three decades of the twentieth century. One early, and important, work is David Kunzle's *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c.1450 to 1825* (1973). As the name suggests, this is a detailed history of the origins of modern comics, which was followed by a second volume on the nineteenth century in 1990. The second is Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, originally published in Chile in 1971 and translated into English (by David Kunzle) in 1975. This text contains a penetrating Marxist critique of the capitalist themes pervading Disney's Donald Duck comics, focusing especially on the depiction of billionaire Uncle Scrooge. These works, and a handful of other works like them, demonstrated the potential for serious academic scholarship on comics.

Such scholarship continued in fits and bursts, but it is fair to say that comics studies as an identifiable movement and interdisciplinary academic discipline finally got its bearings in the early 1990s. Ironically, perhaps, the most important contribution in this regard was not written by a professor or art world professional, but instead came from a professional cartoonist. In 1993, *Zot!* creator Scott McCloud published *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, his comic book study of comic books—a study that took a particularly formalist approach—and followed this up with *Reinventing Comics* in 2000 and *Making Comics* in 2006. As a perusal of the essays included in this volume will attest, it is hard to overestimate the influence that McCloud's ideas have had on the study of comics.

McCloud's book triggered an explosion in comics scholarship, and as a result comics studies has become a recognizable—indeed thriving—area of academic research. This introduction is not the place to catalog all of the important scholarship that has been produced since McCloud's groundbreaking comic. But two important works, and one additional trend, are perhaps worthy of mention.

The first is Charles Hatfield's (2005) *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Hatfield's book—a revised version of his Ph.D. thesis—has been extremely influential in terms of how contemporary comics scholars understand, interpret, and analyze comics—alternative or not. But the volume is enormously important in a second respect. Prior to Hatfield's book, much, if not most, of the academic work on comics being done in the English-speaking world was carried out as side projects by scholars whose primary interests, and academic reputation, lay elsewhere. The very existence of Hatfield's book, and of his subsequent career in comics studies, provides a kind of living defense of the idea that one can focus on comics studies as one's primary area of interest and nevertheless succeed in the academic world.

The second book we shall mention in this regard is Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics*. Originally published in France in 1999, and translated into English by Bart Beatty and Nick Nguyen in 2007, Groensteen's monograph has been extremely influential on comics scholars throughout the world. More importantly, however, the translation of *The System of Comics*, as well as the later translation of its sequel *Comics and Narration* (2013), is representative of the recent growth, and increasing sophistication, of comics studies in anglophone cultures: in short, comics studies has grown from being interdisciplinary to being international as well. The academic study of comics in the francophone tradition was up and running well before it was in English-speaking countries, but little of this work had been translated until very recently. The fact that Groensteen's work (and the work of other European scholars) is now being translated into English, and the impact that these translations have had on anglophone research, is an important indicator of both the breadth and the depth of current English language work on comics.

In addition to these two important works, studies began to appear that adopted the approach taken by Robbins and Yronwode's *Women and the Comics*, which signaled a new and important interest in both comics from other traditions and points of view, and research on comics that adopted different disciplinary perspectives. Notable works in this vein include Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (2000), Frederick Luis Aldama's *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (2009), and Hilary Chute's *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010). Works such as these widened the focus of comics studies beyond the demographically dominant straight white male reader and mainstream superhero characters.

Nevertheless, despite the progress made by comics studies over the past few decades, both in terms of the quantity and quality of work done in the field and in terms of the academic reputation of that work, there remains a significant lacuna: until now, there has not been a

single, comprehensive introduction to the subject that covers the wide variety of traditions, genres, approaches, and disciplines with which comics studies engages. Of course, many exciting and important collections of essays have appeared, but these tend to focus on a specific topic or trend within comics studies. Two typical examples are *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach* (2012), edited by two of the authors of the present volume, which focuses on approaches to comics within the analytic philosophy tradition, and *Linguistics and the Study of Comics* (2012), edited by the third editor of the present volume, which focuses on the study of comics from various cognitive and social approaches in linguistics. What has been missing is a single collection that can serve as a state-of-the-art introduction to and overview of the entirety of comics studies. This volume is intended to fill that gap.

The Routledge Companion to Comics has, then, been designed to serve multiple purposes. As an introduction to the study of comics, the book will serve students, scholars working outside the area of comics studies, fans of comics, and those interested in popular culture more generally. Reading through the chapters in this book will provide a solid grounding in most of the central issues that concern scholars of comics. But more than an introduction to the study of comics, this book will serve as a crucial reference work for anyone interested in pursuing research in the area. For this reason, most chapters include significant bibliographies and suggestions for further readings. In addition, we have encouraged contributors to the companion to provide a broad overview of their topic but also to expound their own views and opinions. Thus, readers will find a variety of styles, perspectives, disciplinary approaches, and personalities across chapters.

The volume is thematically organized into four parts: (i) History and Traditions; (ii) Comics Genres; (iii) Issues and Concepts; and (iv) Other Media and Other Disciplines.

The first part—History and Traditions—includes essays about the historical development of modern comics and the characteristics of comics in a variety of cultures around the world. It starts with a chapter considering the variety of artifacts that led to the development of what we now call comics, followed by a chapter surveying the history of the earliest well-developed form of comics: newspaper strips. The part then includes essays on important traditions within the subsequent history of comics, including chapters on particular formats, movements or influences (e.g. underground and alternative comics, and the impact of the Comics Code) and chapters on regional or national traditions. Importantly, this part provides a broad survey of comics traditions across the globe, including comics from East Asia, India, and Latin America, rather than focusing just on those traditions found in Europe and North America.

The second part—Comics Genres—contains essays focusing on the history and analysis of a number of familiar genres within comics. It is worth noting at this point that, for more than 100 years, comics were created via the application of pencil, pen, or brush to paper, and comics itself seems best characterized as a medium, despite its continued identification or strong association with one or a very few influential genres (e.g. superhero comics or funny animal comics). The essays in this part, then, examine a number of important subcategories within this medium. Taken as a whole, the part embodies the idea that different kinds of comics might call for different forms of analysis and different theoretical frameworks.

The third part of the volume—Issues and Concepts—focuses on concepts and theoretical debates that have, in one way or another, been central to the study of comics during the past few decades. Some of these essays explore some aspect of the comics art form itself, such as the essay on the definition of comics, which focuses on what, exactly, comics are in the first place, and the essay on comics and time, which examines the special role temporality plays in the representative mechanisms of comics. Others unpack the relationships between comics

and other aspects of our cultures and our lives, including chapters on fandom, ethics, adaptation, and translation. In addition, the role of identity within comics, and how identity affects our experience of comics, is a particularly important element of this part, and is addressed in a number of essays focusing on gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

Lastly, the essays included in the final part—Other Media and Other Disciplines—look at the connections and differences between comics and other media, and also examine the role played by comics in a number of disciplines. Most of the media discussed in these essays, including film, drawing, and printmaking, share a number of features with comics. Further, questions about, and approaches to, the nature and understanding of comics mesh in important ways with various schools of thought about other forms of (popular) culture. Particularly relevant in this regard are the literary arts and visual arts. These connections make comparisons between these media particularly fruitful for understanding the nature and mechanics of the comics art form, although these essays also keep the distinctive differences between such media clearly in mind. In addition, comics demand to be studied through the lenses of a variety of disciplines, such as literature, film studies, library science, linguistics, and psychology. The wide variety of approaches to comics cataloged in the essays in this part celebrate the wondrous fact that the fine arts, the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences all have important things to contribute to the ever-growing and complex network of scholarship on comics.

Finally, although the choice of topics summarized above does not reflect any overt attempt to set the boundaries of comics studies, it must be admitted that they do reflect our own particular view of the nature of comics studies and some (but not all!) of the topics and approaches we find most interesting, fruitful, and important. Central to our shared conception of comics studies as a field, however, is the belief that the intersection of comics studies with a multitude of different disciplines, issues, and approaches is absolutely crucial to both a deep understanding of comics as an art form and to the health of comics studies as a professional discipline. Of course, when reading this volume, you might find yourself disagreeing with this or that choice, emphasis, or approach, but hopefully our commitment to diverse approaches will guarantee that just about anyone will find much in this volume that helps them to appreciate comics in new and interesting ways. In short, we hope this companion will become your steadfast companion as you continue to read, and think about, comics.

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Part I

HISTORY AND TRADITIONS

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ORIGINS OF EARLY COMICS AND PROTO-COMICS

M. Thomas Inge

Throughout its nearly century-long existence, *The New Yorker* has been a major contributor to the comic arts through its exemplary devotion to publishing single-panel cartoons. In its final issue for the year 2014, a cartoon by Mick Stevens neatly proposed one theory about the origins of comic art. A Neanderthal couple, who appear to be primitive artists, have just finished a sketch on the wall of their cave of two stick figures who seem to be arguing. The female says to the male, "Maybe it needs a caption," and lettered into the drawing is a caption announcing "IT BEGINS . . ." (Stevens 2014).

The joke may well simply be that this is the beginning of the eternal arguments that lie ahead in human history between couples. Or it could be a reference to the age-old argument about whether or not *The New Yorker* invented the single-line caption cartoon, as is sometimes claimed. But it also suggests that the comics may have begun when the drawing itself began to mimic and satirize human actions and called for words to be complete. In any case, many of those who have written about the comics have felt it necessary to take the beginning far back into human history.

Ancient Antecedents

This was clearly the attitude of the organizers of the National Arts Club who mounted what must have been the first public exhibition devoted to the display of original comic art at the American Institute of Graphic Art in 1942. The exhibition was chronicled by Max C. Gaines, then president of All-American Comics and frequently credited as the founder of the American comic book, in an article for *Print: A Journal of the Graphic Arts* with the title "Narrative Illustration: The Story of the Comics."

Gaines began, "It seems that Little Orphan Annie isn't an orphan after all. Her ancestors include Sumerian army men whose exploits are celebrated in tablets burned under desert sands, and Nile women of far-off centuries whose daily lives are enshrined in ancient picture tales" (Gaines 1942: 25). Describing the arrangement of the exhibition, Gaines moved back in time to drawings on cave walls, and then moved forward through various presumed antecedents to the comic strip and comic book: Egyptian hieroglyphics, Sumerian mosaics, ninth-century Carolingian manuscripts, eleventh-century Japanese Kozanji scrolls, fifteenth-century printed block books of the gospels, and on down through the great caricaturists of

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He concluded with discussions of the popular strips of his day, and the comic books, *Funnies on Parade* and *Action Comics*.

Ever since Gaines, historians of comics have found it necessary to establish this noble lineage through a discussion of these ancient precedents. Partly, this has to do with the general sense of inferiority from which all comics have suffered—the notion that they lack the aesthetic qualities of traditional art and literature. It is a way of saying that comics are by no means the first efforts to tell stories with words and pictures, and such efforts occupy a respectable place in our cultural history. But it also results from a serious effort to discern the qualities that make comics special, and by going back to their antecedents, perhaps we can begin to establish the artistic and formal features that make them so powerful and appealing in the present.

What Is a Proto-Comic?

What constitutes an early or proto-comic is a difficult question. In fact, given the variety of forms and technical methods the artists employ, there can be no single satisfactory definition beyond the simple fact that they largely display a visual/verbal balance of some kind. Rather, it is a matter of identifying in the proto-comics certain features found in our familiar comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels—such things as panels, a narrative structure, sequential action, word balloons, the relative importance of words and pictures, onomatopoeia, and the potential for stretching all of them in new and experimental directions. Luckily, the work of identification has been pretty much done already.

Some scholars have located the origins of the comic strip in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in European broadsheets, large poster-like printed sheets of paper with a single-panel illustration on one or both sides. They were often religious in their subject matter but occasionally journalistic and even humorous. Usually depicting one scene, they sometimes formed story narratives of four or more sequential panels (Kunzle 1973). By the eighteenth century, word balloons were not uncommon, especially in the illustrations in the increasingly popular periodicals that largely replaced the broadsheets. With the development of humorous journals and comic almanacs in the nineteenth century, cartoons and comic drawings found a suitable and welcome home in their pages. The artists often used strip-like sequential drawings that fell into patterns similar to modern comic strips (Kunzle 1990).

Engravings as Graphic Narratives

Perhaps the most important and influential prototypes of early graphic narratives were the remarkable series of etchings and engravings produced by British artist William Hogarth (1697–1764), beginning in 1732 with *A Harlot's Progress*, composed of six sequential engravings, followed by *A Rake's Progress* (1735, eight engravings), *Marriage-a-la-Mode* (1745, six engravings), *Industry and Idleness* (1747, 12 engravings), and *Four Stages of Cruelty* (1750, four engravings). The progress of the narrative usually moves from innocence to debauchery and cruelty, and even to death, and the stories are told entirely through rich and carefully detailed drawings.

The scenes portrayed are not simply to be glanced at, however, but require full attention and study. There are no narrative guides and no spoken words within the pictures, so the story is implied entirely in the visuals. The narrative emerges only after a careful evaluation of the most minute details and continuous rereadings of each engraving. They prove to be highly charged documents that reveal enormous amounts of information about the mores, customs, ethics, and politics of the eighteenth century (Smolderen 2014: 3–23).

Insofar as the engravings establish a narrative sequence, and relate the trials and tribulations of a central identified character, one can argue that they can be considered prototypes of the comic strip. In that they reflect an ironic and judgmental attitude toward the hypocrisies and ethical incongruities of the times, and portray human nature from a humorous perspective, they can be considered comic. Also, the printing technology allowed for a fairly wide distribution among the reading public. But they lack any balance between words and images, the wedding of picture and prose, that most consider a necessary characteristic of the comics form. What is indisputable, however, is the powerful influence Hogarth had on all efforts to tell stories through pictures in all visual narrative to come, including comics.

The Father of the Comic Strip

Another seminal figure in the development of graphic narratives was Swiss schoolteacher, writer, painter, and cartoonist Rodolphe Topffer (1799–1846). Working out of his own imagination, because he had no known examples or models, he began to publish in 1833 a series of volumes composed of sequential pictures with captions at the bottom of each page. Beginning with *Histoire de M. Jabot* (1833), he would produce six more of these adult picture books between 1833 and 1846, each recording the satirical adventures of an individual or a traveler in pursuit of understanding, a place, a profession, or some advancement in society (Kunzle 2007).

Perhaps they were partly inspired by *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a series of prose novels published by Johann Goethe (1749–1832) from 1774 to 1808. This was the beginning of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of education. Topffer knew Goethe, and it was in fact Goethe who first encouraged the young schoolmaster to publish his picture books. Topffer came to call them "*histoires en estampa*," which may be translated as either "engraved novels" or "graphic novels" (Topffer 2007: xiv). Topffer's style was more open and free-flowing than that of Hogarth and the British engravers, and there was a kind of joyous pleasure in the satire of Topffer that the others lacked. But the reader must still rely mainly on the pictures, and there is little integration of image and text. Nevertheless, Topffer has been nominated "the father of the comic strip" (Kunzle 2007).

His work would have a very direct influence on American comic art and popular culture through the translation and publication of his third book, *Histoire de M. Vieux Bois* (1837), as *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*, published on September 14, 1842, as a supplement to an issue of the literary periodical *Brother Jonathan*. Its popularity led to several editions, at least four issued between 1849 and 1888. This has now been called the first comic book to be published in the United States (Beerbohm et al. 2014: 349). This holds true, of course, only if we consider *Obadiah Oldbuck* indeed a comic book. Assuming that we do, then the first comic book to be both created and published on U.S. soil may have been *Journey to the Gold Diggins by Jeremiah Saddlebags* by James and Donald Read in June of 1849. It was similar in format and clearly inspired by Topffer's *Obadiah Oldbuck* (Beerbohm et al. 2014: 353). Many other such volumes would follow in the US and establish a tradition of such comic picture books.

Following the commercial success of Topffer's books in Europe and America, George Cruikshank (1798–1872) published in England several picture books of his own, such as *The Bachelor's Own Book* (1844) and *The Bottle* (1847), the latter a widely popular diatribe against the evils of alcohol. In the humorous vein was *The Tooth-Ache* (1849), a remarkable fold-out volume that relates its comic story in a series of panels that stretch out for over seven feet (Beerbohm et al. 2014: 350).

Wilhelm Busch and the Kids

Wilhelm Busch (1832–1908), German poet, painter, and cartoonist, began to publish in the 1860s in local magazines sequential picture stories, sometimes without words altogether, but most frequently with captions in verse. These then were collected into picture books. One series was about two mischievous children named Max and Moritz who played calamitous and sometimes murderous practical jokes on people—a widow, a tailor, their teacher, an uncle, a baker, and a farmer. In the final two stories, the boys are covered in dough and baked in an oven, and then thrown into a gristmill to be ground to bits and eaten by the miller's ducks. While the pictures fully convey the story, the captions in verse in trochaic pentameter have their own witty and satiric style of humor. They display the influence of German fairy tale and folklore in the tradition of the Brothers Grimm rather than contemporary literature.

The book, published as *Max und Mauritz* in 1865, caused some concern among readers and parents who found its grim sarcasm and dark humor unsettling. It sold slowly but soon gained traction for its humor and social satire and would continue in print edition after edition until the present. Among the many languages into which it was translated was English, and it appeared in the United States in 1871 as *Max and Maurice: A Juvenile History in Seven Tricks* from the Robert Brothers publisher in Boston. Numerous reprints and new editions would keep the book in print down to 1902, including a knockoff and badly redrawn version of one chapter published in 1879 as *The Adventures of Teasing Tom and Naughty Ned with a Spool of Clark's Cotton*, a promotional item for Clark's Cotton Company (Beerbohm et al. 2014: 359–360, 364).

Busch's small book had a widespread and profound influence wherever it appeared, with numerous imitators copying its broad and child-oriented but mordant humor in cartoons, picture books, and comic strips. Its most important connection with comics history in the US came from its direct influence on the creation of the early comic strip *The Katzenjammer Kids*, which began December 12, 1897. While undocumented, the story goes that Rudolph Block, editor of the *New York Journal*, gave a copy of the book to cartoonist Rudolph Dirks with instructions to create for his paper a comic strip about two similar boys out to create havoc and defy authority. While Hans and Fritz, as Dirks called them, were not quite as hellish as the originals, they sustained sufficient interest for the feature to become one of the longest-running strips in comics history. The Germanic background and folkloric qualities of Busch's tales were replaced by an unidentifiable island, while the characters all spoke in a German accented English. The notion that comic strips were primarily invented for immigrants who knew little English is belied by *The Katzenjammer Kids*' success. One had to know correct English to understand the broken English spoken by Hans and Fritz.

As the nineteenth century moved toward its close, the continued publication of books such as those of Topffer and Cruikshank, and the increasing number of comic periodicals and humor anthologies, which included panel cartoons, made it a rich period in the history of European and American humor, not to mention the emergence of Mark Twain as a figure of worldwide influence. Twain was a writer who understood himself the importance of illustrations and cartoons in his books, and he participated actively in selecting artists for them, sometimes even collaborating through editorial supervision. Whether or not all of this counts as a part of the history of comic strips and comic books is a question for debate among comics historians. It seems certain, however, that they must be counted as prototypes because their creators invented, tested out, and proved nearly all of the aesthetic and technical features of modern comic art.

Comics and the American Short Story

But there is another cultural strain that must be taken into account with regard to the American comic book in particular. Most discussions of the origins of comic strips and comic books usually stretch back into history by way of their visual characteristics, be they the features of the Bayeux tapestry or the picture books of Rodolfe Topffer. Admittedly, the pictures are the first things we notice. The text and words, however, receive scant attention. Yet the beginnings of the American comic book have very definite links with developments in literature, both highbrow and lowbrow, serious and popular. Without the short story revolution of the 1900s in American magazines, and the immense popularity of their bastard child, the pulp magazine, the comic book story might not have taken the shape that it did in form and content.

The short story was widely popular almost from the start of the nation, and it developed simultaneously in Europe and the United States. Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and nearly every writer of note produced stunning short fiction along with their lengthier novels. In fact, Hawthorne by his practice, and Poe by his criticism, established the lineaments of the successful short story. By the end of the nineteenth century, as realism and naturalism overtook romanticism and sentimentalism, scores of American writers specialized in the form to feed the insatiable appetite of the populace for short fiction: Henry James, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Bret Harte, Frank Norris, Jack London, Ambrose Bierce, and O. Henry among them. Another generation would follow with the turn of the twentieth century led by William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Pulp Fiction

Despite the popularity of these writers, a large part of the public wanted more exciting fare and less class consciousness. Publishers soon saw the benefits of issuing inexpensive magazines that contained more accessible stories that spoke to the public need for adventure and escapism, especially during the Depression. Cheap paper and quick printing and binding technology were also available to increase their profits. This heralded the arrival of the pulp magazine. Publishers found it especially profitable to address specific groups of reading interests, and soon the titles fell into categories: detective, mystery, crime, western, fantasy, war, and especially science fiction, which would outdistance the others.

Many of the pulp authors were excellent writers who were more concerned with making a living than literary reputation. But they learned from their belletristic mentors the value of such things as plot structure, realistic dialogue, character motivation, and verbal economy. Many now well-known writers emerged from this high-pressure, low-pay sweatshop (a penny a word): Edgar Rice Burroughs, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, H. P. Lovecraft, James Branch Cabell, and Ray Bradbury among them.

Coinciding toward the end of the 1930s with a decreasing interest in pulp magazines was the appearance of *Action Comics* featuring Superman. He was a figure largely drawn from several pulp heroes, such as Doc Savage, and science fiction, such as *The Gladiator* by Philip Wylie. Many of the early comic book superheroes were directly inspired by pulp characters or even moved intact from one publication to the other: Walter Gibson's Shadow (perhaps the first American dual-identity crime-fighter), Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian, and Clarence Mulford's Hopalong Cassidy, for example.

The popular heroes of the pulps, then, helped generate the gang of superheroes to come. This was true as well for the painted pulp covers often by outstanding artists who knew how

to capture action, fights, and alien invaders in grand style. Many a comic book cover was lifted almost directly from an eye-catching pulp cover.

A Literary Genealogy

Comic book stories were direct descendants of the American short story, by way of pulp magazine fiction. Each issue of a pulp was a collection of short stories, usually based on a single theme or genre, and often featuring a slightly longer lead story. Occasionally, a so-called "novel" took up an entire special issue, but this was simply a long story written according to the principles of short fiction and not a fully developed novel. Simple length often allowed for the designation "novel."

When the comic book appeared, it followed directly on the heels of pulp fiction as an anthology of short stories—with an important exception. They were illustrated. Like many of the early non-generic pulps, it was a general anthology, including a sampling of stories about superheroes, detectives, mystery, espionage, and adventure. This was true of the first issue of *Action Comics* and the issues to follow, as well as many imitators. Variety would be the watchword until the comic books too began to break down into specialized genres and categories.

There was no school or course the early comic book writers and artists could attend to learn this brand new art form. So they turned to popular short stories and pulp fiction to learn how to write an effective narrative. Ultimately, they would develop their own methods of making words and pictures work together, once figures such as Will Eisner and Jack Kirby arrived on the scene. In his opening class for his course on comics at the School of Visual Arts in New York, Eisner would often send his students out to read some short stories. Anyone could create a splash page, he said, but you had to have a story to back it up. If one is to understand fully the origins and development of the American comic book story, then, perhaps one should begin with Poe and Hawthorne and become acquainted with the remarkable body of popular and pulp fiction, all of which has helped shape the new form of comics, as well as its beautiful child, "the graphic novel."

Definitions and Anachronisms

Calling the prototypes discussed earlier in this essay outright "comic strips" and "comic books" is problematic. Is it not anachronistic to apply a recent contemporary term to cultural artifacts of the past? They were called different things in their own day, whether broadsheets, picture books, or cartoons, and the creators would not recognize the terms we use now. Efforts to move into the past to locate the beginnings of cultural forms can lead to erroneous results. For example, a major research tool in the field claims that the first use of the term "comic book" appeared in a publisher's advertisement in the 1850s (Beerbohm et al. 2014: 356). But the intention of its use in the advertisement was to promote that publisher's titles that were humorous or funny. They were prose books written to amuse the reader. Thus, they were "comic books." And it is doubtful that this is the first time the two words have fallen together by accident or intent. In any case, there is absolutely no connection with the kind of comic books under discussion in this companion.

Once the comic book in its modern format had gained its footing economically and found its place in popular culture, early on there were efforts to move it toward lengthier and more complex graphic narration. For example, the publishers of *Captain Marvel Adventures* ran a lengthy story, "The Monster Society of Evil," that continued for two years in issues 22–46

(1943–1945). Had it been collected into one volume, it might well have constituted the first graphic novel. In 1949, writers Arnold Drake and Leslie Waller collaborated with African-American artist Matt Baker to produce what they called a "picture novel," *Rhymes with Lust*, a 128-page political thriller. It easily fits any definition of the graphic novel. While he moved the format toward a combined comic strip and illustrated text style, Gil Kane published in 1971 the first volume of a science-fiction heroic fantasy novel called *Blackmark*, the second volume of which would not see print for several years. No doubt further research will uncover other such early graphic novel efforts. One should also consider of considerable influence in the 1930s the several wordless novels of Lynd Ward, inspired by those of Belgian artist Frans Mesereel, as well as the melodramatic parodic sendup of such works by Milt Gross, *He Done Her Wrong*. Whether something without words and only pictures can be a graphic novel is a legitimate question for consideration.

The earliest use of the term "comic strip," defined as a "sequence of small drawings telling a comic or serial story in a newspaper," according to the researchers for the *Oxford English Dictionary*, appeared in print in 1920 in a collection of poems by Carl Sandburg (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989, vol. 16: 928). The earliest use of "comic book," they found, defined as "a book of strip cartoons," was in a 1941 issue of a psychiatric journal (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989, vol. 3: 536). No doubt earlier uses will be found, but most of these issues about the origins of comics depend on definitions. Thus, they are not likely to be resolved easily. In any case, further research and attempts to establish a pedigree and family tree can only add to and enhance our understanding of comics history.

Related Topics

Defining Comics, Caricature and Comics

Further Reading

Harvey, R. C. (2014) *Insider Histories of Cartooning: Rediscovering Forgotten Famous Comics and Their Creators*, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi (has a chapter discussing the prehistory of comic strips and comic books).

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2
NEWSPAPER STRIPS

Pascal Lefèvre

Some kinds of (graphic) narratives are labeled by the material medium that carries them. This is the case for newspaper strips, a term that we can use to encompass other, often used, related denominations such as dailies, Sundays, comic strips, stop comics, funnies . . . Taken in its broadest sense, the "newspaper strip" might include every graphic narrative that was or will be published in a newspaper, but, for convenience, we will apply a somewhat more restrictive interpretation, one that construes the prototypical core of this kind of sequential art within its dominant historical development in newspapers. This chapter will, by consequence, focus on the graphic narratives (thus excluding single-panel cartoons) that were produced specifically for a daily or weekly publication in a newspaper. Of course, the life of those comics did not always end on that perishable paper; various newspaper strips got an afterlife in many other publication formats (such as books), in other media adaptations (live action film, animation series, game . . .), or in a wide variety of merchandising. Moreover, it is quite possible that a specific comic was at first mainly conceived for the daily reader in mind, but that, in later phases, other publication formats became the main lucrative tool. So, we have always to consider the precise historical and cultural conditions wherein comics were created and their further development in time.

Instead of trying fruitlessly to present a concise historical narrative of the worldwide evolution of newspaper strips since the early twentieth century, this contribution rather conducts a rough anatomy of the newspaper's constitutive aspects such as its two dominant publication formats (dailies and Sundays) and their particular affordances, its basic use of text and images, its dominant graphic styles and genres, its typical production and distribution process, and finally its scholarship. More detailed information about particular local traditions one can find in various publications (Nystrom 1989; Harvey 1994; Goulart 2005; Castelli 2007; Walker 2011 for the USA, Gifford 1971 for Great Britain, and Beyrand 1995 for France). The majority of this historical literature (e.g. Marschall 1989) is largely author-centered and by consequence less about how stylistic or narrative norms became established or how group styles evolved. Due to the limited space, this contribution will be furthermore limited to a few countries that had or still have an important tradition: in the first place, the USA, the leading producer, foremost in the first four decades of the twentieth century; and second, some West European countries (Great Britain, Denmark, France and Low Countries) that had, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, a proper lively newspaper strip culture. Also, various Latin American countries, or some South Asian countries (such as Japan or Australia) had, at a time, an interesting newspaper strip culture, but, unfortunately, it would lead us too far to also discuss these productions.

The Two Basic Publication Formats of Comics in Newspapers

We will first take a look at the historical conditions that shaped the two basic publication formats (Lefèvre 2000), the Sunday page and the daily strip. There have been, however, other publication formats linked to the newspapers, such as the "comic book" supplement (e.g. Will Eisner's *The Spirit*) in the 1940s, but such formats had often a comparatively brief existence in the context of the newspapers.

The first convincing successful use of graphic narratives in a newspaper occurred in the weekly format of the American Sunday supplements (also called 'Sunday pages'). The weekly publication of a graphic narrative in a Sunday supplement could take many forms; in the beginning, it was typically the complete space of one page and in full color; but in the course of the twentieth century, the size of the Sunday comic would shrink. The Sunday publication format had several affordances, such as the possibility of creating an interesting layout, which artists such as Winsor McCay or Frank King exploited in impressive ways.

The second major publication format, which started a little later in the late 1910s, was the daily strip, consisting of just one tier and in black and white. The single daily strip in black and white would become the standard format for the rest of the century. The concrete specific realizations have evolved in time and location. For instance, the dominant aspect ratio of the American tier has changed from 4.45 to 3.25; and in the late twentieth century, color made its entry. Outside the USA, other ways of presenting a daily installment could become normative. For example, in Flanders, the Dutch part of Belgium, the aspect ratio in the 1950s was 6.2, which later would be subdivided in half with one tier published below the other, forming half of a typical album page (see Lefèvre 2013). In Japan, four identical panels of a gag were often published in a vertical column. Even in the USA, deviations from the norm were possible; for example, during a time, the dailies of Segar's *Timble Theatre* were published in three tiers. Later on, a postwar comics artist such as Schulz used for his daily strip four panels with identical dimensions, so that they could be flexibly published in three different ways (as one horizontal strip, as one vertical column, or as two tiers of two panels).

Basic Narrative Types

Though characters were recurring in the American newspapers from day to day (or week to week), the individual installments of a gag comic could be read separately, because in the first two decades of the twentieth century they usually did not have a strong continuity (in the sense that events developed with strong cause and effect strings between subsequent published installments). The real interest of considerable continuity would only arise in the late 1910s with the success of Sidney Smith's *The Gumps*. Between 1900 and 1925, 90 percent (of a representative sample) of U.S. Sunday comics didn't have real continuity, but by the 1950s almost half of the Sunday comics used continuity (Barcus 1961).

Since a daily strip publication offers only a limited space (one tier) per day, authors had to adapt their way of telling to this particular format. As Gardner (2013: 248) puts it, the newspaper comics were "inherently elliptical and fragmented." In practice, we see that from the beginning, a lot of authors used the daily format to tell short gags. Furthermore, since a newspaper strip is conceived for running a long time, most artists/syndicates chose not to let the principal characters age a day, even over decades: for instance, *The Katzenjammer Kids* are still, after a continuous life of more than a century, as young as they were in 1897. A little evolution was needed, as in the case of family strips, where characters can marry and have children (think of *Blondie*), but generally newspaper characters are kept in some kind

of stasis regarding their looks. Series with really aging characters, such as *Gasoline Alley*, were rather exceptional.

In only one tier a day, one can't tell a lot of a continuing story, and moreover the reader has to remember what has happened in the episodes before. In case of continuity, every installment has to be read in the presented chronology of publication. It may seem that daily newspaper strips are strongly limited by their material publication format, but, on the other hand, they were, in principle, not bound in duration of their run and could lack an ultimate narrative closure—but work with many mini-closures. An author working for French newspapers could tell a story up to 800 strips (Beyrand 1995: 9), but usually the continuity strips in the UK and France comprised about 100 strips to tell a particular story of a hero or heroine. So, long before the marketing people would put certain graphic narratives as graphic novels in the market, nonstandardized (regarding their length) stories were already a characteristic of newspaper continuity strips. Standardization of those newspaper strips arose only from the moment the publisher of book collections preferred a standard format regarding the number of pages (Lefèvre 2013).

Unlike radio or TV soaps, which have longer daily episodes, newspaper strips didn't generally have the space to develop various parallel plot lines in the short daily episodes. The daily publication demands, moreover, a daily rhythm of reading activity, but one that is, by necessity, spread out over a long period. Due to its episodic nature and its "nowness," the daily strip, like the soap, invites the reader to adopt some kind of a scriptwriter stance toward the series by using knowledge of the genre's general and the series' particular conventions. It was interesting for the reader to freely imagine how the story would continue during the interval between the issues. But by the late 1930s, as Gardner (2013: 248) argues, the short daily episodes in the newspaper had a hard time competing with the free radio serials with their longer daily episodes.

Furthermore, before the introduction of the Internet, the fastest way for a cartoonist to reach a wide audience was a daily publication in the newspaper: in principle, it was possible that only a few hours after the cartoonist delivered the strip, it was printed and widely distributed. All kinds of relations between the daily reading and the daily narrative might proceed from this unique rhythm, which is quite different from reading a manga pocket or a one-shot. In principle, the daily format affords that a comics author, almost like cartoonists of single-panel cartoons, refers to the news of the day or comments on current affairs (Lefèvre 2000: 103–104). Of course, this is more easily done in case of a single cartoon or a gag strip, but it becomes more challenging in the case of a continuity story, because authors have then to improvise a lot, having to interweave an already initiated continuous story with unexpected, new topics popping up (from the topics of the day). Nevertheless, due to the large-scale distribution by syndicates, most artists have been working with a longer interval between delivering their finished work and the actual printing. So, they could refer less to the news of the day.

Texts and Images

During the twentieth century, newspaper strips took basically three prototypical approaches regarding the use of text: the dominant model was the use of speech balloons, but newspaper strips were also produced without these devices: instead they used captions below the panels, or they didn't use any text at all (except for paratextual elements such as the title, the name of the author, the copyright) in the case of a so-called "silent comic." While the comic strip with balloons was almost immediately a commercial success in the USA, European artists

were remarkably slow in adopting this so-called "American model," and they continued making comic strips with captions (as the dominant convention was in the nineteenth century) for several decades. In the period before World War II, it was also quite common that American balloons comics were adapted to the caption model: balloons were erased from the drawings, and new texts were placed under the panel (Lefèvre 2006). While the captions under the panels became outmoded in West European countries after World War II, some nations such as the Netherlands clung to the older convention of captions until the 1960s.

Next to the two dominant verbal models (with balloons or with captions below), there remains another popular model as well, the wordless comic. We find this specific model throughout the twentieth century in newspapers and it is still thriving (see Postema, this volume). It is interesting to note that silent comics were foremost useful in the multilingual market of Europe. The Danish syndicate, PIB, distributed various silent gag series such as *Adamson* and *Ferd'nand* in other European countries (Madsen et al. 1997), soon followed by other European artists creating their own silent series such as *Professor Pi* (from the Netherlands), or *Nimbus* (from France).

Two Dominant Drawing Modes

In principle, a newspaper strip is drawn in a coherent graphic style (also when it is produced by various people in the same studio), but this style may change somewhat over time. Sometimes, the takeover of a series by another artist results in striking difference in graphic style; think of the change of *Tarzan* from the controlled academic style of Hal Foster to the more baroque renderings of Burne Hogarth.

Newspaper strips have been drawn in various graphic styles, but on the whole two dominant kinds of drawing style stand out: the cartoon mode and the naturalistic mode; both are, however, to various extents, influenced by a general principle for graphic style in graphic narratives (Lefèvre 2016): simplification. The fact that comics are published rather small on the newspaper pages imposes a particular way of drawing, as Lederer (1923: 69) advised already in his early guide for future comic strip artists:

> In a general way very little detail is requisite for a strip cartoon. I might almost say the less the better. [. . .] This is especially so because too much detail is confusing to the eye and is apt to dull the entire effect. The human figures should with few exceptions, dominate the picture—take up the greater space. The lines outlining the figures, human or otherwise, and the minor accessories in direct connection with them should contain heavier lines, more pronounced, than those indicating the background and minor accessories.

In addition to simplification, deformation of the normal proportions also became the norm in many series—in English, also known as "bigfoot" style. Since the printed panels are small, and characters are drawn from head to toe, the heads increase disproportionally to make their facial expressions more visible. Witek (2012: 30) states that the cartoon mode often assumes "a fundamentally unstable and infinitely mutable physical reality." A very selective listing of some popular genres of newspaper strips in the cartoon mode (including a few indicative titles) can be found in Table 2.1. It is important to be aware that each "genre" can encompass quite different realizations. For instance, while the British animal comic *Billy the Bee* was a continuity adventure comic (which also included comments on the issues of day, for its more adult readers), the French dog *Pif le chien* is rather a humorous gag comic destined to children.

Table 2.1 A few examples of combination of the cartoon drawing mode and genre

Genre	*USA*	*Europe*
Comical men	*Happy Hooligan* (1900–1932)	*De tre små mænd i Verden og vi* (1913–1940s, Denmark)
	Mutt and Jeff (1907–1982)	*Nimbus* (1934–1991, France)
		Ferd'nand (1937–2012, Denmark)
Animal	*Felix the Cat* (1923–1966)	*Rupert Bear* (since 1920, Great Britain)
	Krazy Kat (1910–1944)	*Peter og Ping* (1922–1949, Denmark)
	Mickey Mouse (since 1930)	*Tom Poes* (1941–1986, the Netherlands)
	Pogo (1948–1975)	*Pif le chien* (since 1948, France)
		Bully the Bee (1954–1964, Great Britain)
		Le café de la plage (1977–1980, France)
Family relations	*Bringing up Father* (1913–2000)	*De Familie Snoek* (1945–1954, Belgium)
	Blondie (since 1930)	*Hans og Gret* (1947–1983, Denmark)
	Hi & Lois (since 1954)	*Andy Capp* (since 1957, Great Britain)
	For Better or for Worse (1979–2008, Canada)	*Vader & Zoon* (1968–1987, the Netherlands)
Humorous adventure	*Alley Oop* (since 1932)	*Tintin* (1929–1986, Belgium)
		Suske en Wiske (since 1945, Belgium)
		Nero (1947–2002, Belgium)

Originally, the American newspaper comics had their roots in the European visual culture (think of Wilhelm Busch's *Max und Moritz*, which served as a model for the Dirks' *Katzenjammer Kids*). Moreover, it was various artists with European roots, often from Germanic countries (such as Opper, Dirks, Mager, and Knerr), that laid the foundations of the American newspaper strip. On the other hand, the American humoristic gag comics had a wide influence, because they were not only published in hundreds of newspapers around the world, but they were also imitated or adapted to local preferences by artists in other countries.

Also, from the 1930s on, another mode became quite popular in newspaper strips; Witek calls it the "naturalistic mode." This mode makes "the implicit claim that its depicted worlds are like our own, or like our own world would be if specific elements, such as magic or superpowers, were to be added or removed" (Witek 2012: 32). The use of this style coincided with the growing success of the adventure genre in newspaper strips. Not all adventure comics, however, were drawn in a naturalistic mode; Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy* is famous for its caricatured deformation of many gangsters. In the 1930s, several new popular genres such as science fiction, western, knight, detective, etc. would respond to the success of longer narratives on the radio (open-ended serials) and in the motion pictures (Gardner 2013: 248–249). Table 2.2 presents a very selective overview of a few important genres on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (the selection of the genres, for both drawing modes, is motivated by a need for comparison between creations from various national markets). There were certainly also local preferences, such as the boom of adaptations of novels in France in the 1950s and 1960s (Beyrand 1995).

The more illustrative style of Alex Raymond or the chiaroscuro effects of Milton Caniff gave these kinds of newspaper strips a completely different look from the older humoristic stories. While in the 1920s continuity strips were still drawn in the cartoon mode, in the

Table 2.2 A few examples of combination of the naturalistic drawing mode and genre

Genre	*USA*	*West Europe*
Science fiction	*Buck Rogers* (since 1928)	*Jeff Hawke* (1955–1974, Great Britain)
	Flash Gordon (1934–2003)	*Cosmos An 2200* (1963–1966, France)
Middle Ages	*Prince Valiant* (since 1937)	*Eric De Noorman* (1946–1964, the Netherlands)
		De Rode Ridder (since 1959, Belgium)
Detective, police, crime	*Secret Agent X-9* (1934–1996)	*Le commissaire Maigret* (1950–1953, France)
Western	*Red Ryder* (1938–1964)	*Bessy* (1952–1995, Belgium)
	Little Joe (1933–1972)	*Matt Marriott* (1955–1977, Great Britain)
Soap, romance	*Brenda Starr, Reporter* (1940–2011)	*13 rue de l'Espoir* (1959–1972, France)
	Apartment 3-G (1961–2015)	*Tiffany Jones* (1964–1977, Great Britain)

1930s a quarter of the American Sunday comics had opted for adventure stories, and a decade later these adventure comics reached their quantitative peak (Barcus 1961: 176). After the 1940s, the naturalistic adventure strip lost popularity (though many new genres such as soap opera were introduced), and by the end the century most of them had faltered. In the meantime, they had an immense influence on artists in other countries; many adventure comics in Europe or in Latin America were modeled on those American predecessors.

Production Methods and Distribution

Another aspect relating to the production and distribution method needs to be stressed to understand the basics of North American newspaper strips, namely the central role of syndicates. Before the syndication system took root, a comic strip was produced for a single newspaper, but under syndication the same comic series could be published in tens or even hundreds of publications. While the cartoonist has to create a series, the syndicates were responsible for editing, promoting, and selling the series. Usually, the proceeds are split 50/50 between the cartoonist and the syndicate. It is evident that the more a syndicate can sell a strip and capitalize on merchandising and adaptations (live cinematic adaptations), the more both partners can gain. So, all the concerned parties, artists, syndicates, and newspapers saw foremost positive aspects of this system. The power of scale was not only effective within the U.S. market, but also offered syndicates similar possibilities to be very competitive on the international market.

Sometimes, this American domination met resistance, especially in France, which even adopted a law in 1949 to contain and regulate foreign comics (Vessels 2010). In Europe, there were also enterprises active in comics syndication; think of the Danish PIB, the French Opera Mundi and Paris-Graphic, the British Associated Newspaper (now DMG Media), or the Dutch Swan Features Syndicate. Sometimes, syndicates were oriented toward their own national market, while others also tried to sell their series abroad. Today, many of them have disappeared.

Nevertheless, the contracts in the USA usually included a "work-for-hire clause" (between the artist and the syndicate), which also had less positive effects, because the ownership of the artist's copyright was transferred, in whole or in part, to the syndicate. Harvey (1994: 68) explains: "This policy protected the syndicates interests: if the cartoonist of a popular strip

died, say, or failed to produce his work on schedule, the syndicate could continue to supply the feature to its clients by hiring another cartoonist."

From the early twentieth century, the most popular newspaper strips were collected in book forms of various sizes and shapes, both paperbacks and hardcovers. Also, in other countries with daily or weekly newspaper strips, book collections were made from the mid-twentieth century; in fact, sometimes the edition in album format became the major lucrative publication format. The clearest example is the Flemish region of Belgium, where, after World War II, several popular daily newspaper series (usually in the crossover genre of humorous adventure) got a successful album series—the "Flemish Dual Publication System" (Lefèvre 2013). As of today, more than a million of those newspaper strip albums (such as *Suske en Wiske*, *Jommeke*, and *De Kiekeboes*) are sold yearly for a population of about 6 million potential readers.

More recently, the introduction of the Web has given more opportunities to cartoonists to publish their daily or weekly strips (often in the typical newspaper format) directly, without any interference from a syndicate or publisher, but the problem remains how to reach the public in an ocean of billions of web pages.

Critical Reception

American newspaper strips did not affirm themselves as purely for children; on the contrary, they also aimed explicitly at an extensive adult readership—from the many soap operas to the experimental comics such as *Krazy Kat*. Nevertheless, it was foremost the "fate" of the consumers of children's comics that was often raised in early comic strip research from the 1940s on. Most representatives of the cultural elite considered this mass entertainment as low.

Academic publications often had to concede that there was yet no proof of the assumed bad influence. For instance, Hill (1943) was convinced that newspaper comics would help children to build vocabulary meanings. Some recent work of effect studies concerns, for instance, the interpretation by different groups of readers on ethnicity (Rockler 2002).

The most popular and enduring vain of proper academic research in relation to newspaper strips has been until today content analysis. If conducted in a proper methodological way, such content analysis can indeed offer good quantitative data, as in the case of Barcus' (1961) study. His content analysis of the first six decades of the twentieth century of 628 separate comic strip titles presented not only reliable statistical information about the evolution of the use of continuity, but also the ratio of humorous versus adventure comics, and the evolutions of themes. Scores of more recent content analyses (White and Fuentez 1997; LaRossa et al. 2000; Glascock and Presto-Schreck 2004) show that the fictional world of the strips was and still is populated by white people, the majority middle-class and straight male. If women appear, they are twice as likely as male characters to be depicted in the home and they are more likely to have parental responsibilities. The reason for this situation has usually been linked to the conservative policy of male creators, syndicates, and newspaper publishers. The increased participation of female artists (such as Tove Jansson and Cathy Guisewite) or non-white artists (such as Gus Ariola and Aaron McGruder)—or a combination of both (such as Jackie Ormes)—in the U.S. newspaper strip has, of course, broadened its spectrum.

In addition to content analysis, a rather different approach of newspaper strips is cultivated by the "fans," academic or not, which started after World War II. Collector Bill Blackbeard and Martin Williams' (1977) *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* is, as far as we know, the first specialized anthology of American newspaper strips. In the late 1980s in the USA, various extensive reprint projects of the classic newspaper comics started, such as *Prince*

Valiant (1982), *The Complete E. C. Segar* (1984), and many more. This practice of complete editions of old newspaper strips still seems lucrative because every year new titles are being launched. A comparable re-edition is also going on in countries such as Great Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands for their own products. By the late 1980s, various monographs were dedicated to the canonized authors, such as Winsor McCay, Charles Schulz, and George Herriman, whose *Krazy Kat* ended in the first place in *The Comics Journal*'s critics' list of the 100 comics of the twentieth century. By the time the USA was preparing, in 1995, to celebrate the 100-year birthday of *The Yellow Kid*, and by consequence of the newspaper strip, interest was booming with many new publications, both reprints of old newspaper strips and scholarly work (Harvey 1994; Blackbeard and Crain 1995), and various retrospective exhibitions.

There still remain major gaps in the study of newspaper strips worldwide. As with graphic narratives in general, the economic side of the industry has seldom attracted sustained academic attention (a rare exception is Gordon 1998). There are, for instance, no in-depth studies of the crucial role of the European syndicates, such as the Danish PIB. Nor are there gatekeeping studies regarding the selection criteria of newspaper strips. The choice of a newspaper is sometimes not only based on its perceived popularity and its financial costs, but also by the cultural or ideological values that a particular newspaper wants to be associated with: this is particularly the case for newspaper strips that are rather controversial such as *Doonesbury*, *Zippy the Pinhead*, and *The Boondocks*.

Moreover, it would be quite interesting for future research to look at why and when a particular genre becomes popular in a country, or how some genres are emerging and developing in parallel or, conversely, in diverging ways. Next to globalization (like the worldwide success of translations of *Peanuts*), glocalization (e.g. the Dutch version of *Winnie Winkle* featuring windmills) and "autonomous" local production and consumption have also played a role in the field of newspaper comics.

So, since the early 1900s, the newspaper strip has been a crucial publication format in various countries—and though its actual presence is less felt, scores of contemporary, much appraised artists such as Art Spiegelman or Chris Ware are still acknowledging the important source of inspiration that those early comics were. Some young artists such as Cole Closser (*Little Tommy Lost*, 2013) are stylistically explicitly referring to the pre-WWII comic strips. Newspaper strips are undergoing difficult times, like their carriers, the newspapers themselves. Their future may now look uncertain, but just as they have been doing for a long time, adapting themselves to the new conditions of their publication formats (the daily strip or the Sunday page), in the future comics will certainly venture into other constellations, such as the Web.

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3
THE COMICS CODE

Amy Kiste Nyberg

The Comics Code died a slow death. Born in 1954 as a response to the federal government's investigation into comic books, the industry's regulatory code governing content expired in 2011 with little fanfare. No one mourned its passing. This essay explores the impetus for the Code, details the implementation and enforcement of the Code, and provides an explanation for its demise after nearly 60 years.

The Impetus for the Comics Code

Criticism of comics led to the birth of the Comics Code and went through three overlapping phases: criticism of comics' detrimental effect on children's reading; criticism of comic book content's failure to uphold the moral values of society; and criticism of the behavioral effects of comic book content, which desensitized children to violence and promoted juvenile delinquency.

Author and literary critic Sterling North was among the first national critics of comics books. He began his career in 1929 as a journalist at the *Chicago Daily News*. Quickly promoted to literary editor, North wrote book reviews and essays, including an oft-cited attack on comic books published on May 8, 1940. Under the headline "A National Disgrace," North raised the alarm about both the popularity and the content of comics. He urged parents to provide an "antidote" to comic book reading by substituting better literature. The essay was widely reprinted in other newspapers, and the newspaper received millions of requests for copies.

Despite the early furor over comics, public interest in comic books died quickly. The debate shifted from a public forum to academic journals read by teachers and librarians. These education professionals embraced North's challenge to wean children from comics and provide them with more suitable material. Dozens of articles in education journals presented strategies to recapture the juvenile reader.

Research refuted the assumptions about the detrimental impact of comic book reading. The leader in this area of academic inquiry was Dr. Paul Witty of Northwestern University, where he was an education professor and director of the Psycho-Educational Clinic. He found comic book reading had little impact on other types of reading and, in fact, heavy comic book readers in general had a "varied, rich and generally commendable" reading pattern (Witty 1941: 109). Studies by other researchers, such as New York University education professor Harvey Zorbaugh, supported Witty's findings, noting that reading comic books had little impact on reading skills, academic achievement, or social adjustment.

Despite the evidence to the contrary, educators were genuinely concerned with this perceived threat to their young charges' educational development. Their alarm reflected an

underlying fear of the loss of control over children's reading choices. Before comics, children mostly read what adults deemed appropriate for them, and the authority over children's reading rested largely in the hands of educators and librarians. Comic book reading, however, was definitely not guided by these experts. Children spent their own pocket money on comics and swapped them with their friends.

The anti-comics sentiment of educators made a lasting impression on the comics publishing industry by defining comic books as a form of *juvenile* literature and the reading of comics strictly an activity for children. Once that happened, anti-comics crusades shifted from reading, which was largely concerned with the form of comics, to comic book content.

The second phase of comics criticism used economic pressure against retailers as a way to get objectionable material off the shelves and out of the hands of youngsters. The Catholic Church organized national campaigns against comics through the National Office of Decent Literature. The office drew up guidelines for sex and violence, as well as for the moral values depicted. Committees made up of mothers created an "approved" list of comics. The Church urged local parishes to carry out the so-called decency crusades. Armed with their lists, crusaders visited retailers and asked them to remove objectionable material.

NODL's campaigns were highly effective, and the vast majority of retailers cooperated. In addition, NODL's model was copied by community organizations. Examples include the Committee on the Evaluation of Comic Books in Cincinnati and the Citizen's Committee for Better Juvenile Literature in Chicago. Even *Parents Magazine*, which got into the comics publishing business in 1941, evaluated comics and published lists.

Criticism of comic books shifted from the review of content to the effects on behavior of readers in the late 1940s. The driving force for this phase of criticism was mental health professionals who turned their attention to comic books in a postwar society that saw an uptick of juvenile delinquency and sought its causes. The media made a convenient scapegoat, and the emphasis on crime and horror comics popular at the time led to concerns about how children might model their behavior on the acts depicted. At the very least, experts argued, such content desensitized youngsters to violence.

A respected New York City psychiatrist, Dr. Fredric Wertham, emerged as the leading critic. His concerns about comics were triggered by observations of young patients at the free psychiatric clinic he ran in Harlem. Wertham noted that these troubled youth were avid readers, and he set out to discover just what was in comic books. He shared his observations with Judith Crist for her article in *Collier's* magazine published on March 27, 1948, titled "Horror in the Nursery."

The resulting public backlash against comics spurred the first industry-wide effort to regulate content. A regulatory code created in 1948 was administered by the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers and provided guidelines for prepublication review. This effort was not widely supported by individual publishers. By 1954, membership had dwindled to three, Famous Funnies, Gleason Publications, and Atlas.

When his efforts to spur legislation of comics failed, Wertham once again took his case to the public. This time, it was his book *Seduction of the Innocent* that rallied public support for reining in comics publishers. The publication of excerpts in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1953 coincided with the announcement of a Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, which would conduct hearings into the causes of juvenile delinquency, including the effects of mass media. The senators' investigation began with comic books in April 1954.

Senators heard testimony from publishers, most notably EC Comics' William Gaines, and from various experts, including Wertham. Gaines' testimony made the front page of the *New York Times* on April 22 with the headline: "No Harm in Horror, Comics Issuer Says" (Khiss

1954). Publishers, alarmed at the negative publicity and fearful that the hearings would result in federal laws governing their industry, began discussing what should be done.

Although Gaines wanted to hire experts to conduct studies that would counter the claims about negative effects, other publishers wanted a more immediate, short-term fix. They resurrected the idea of a self-regulatory code administered by an industry trade association. At the Comics Magazine Association's organizational meeting on August 17, 1954, 38 representatives from publishers, engravers, printers, and distributors appointed a special committee to craft a code and agreed that the crime and horror comics would have to go in order to demonstrate they were making a good faith effort.

The Comics Code, 1954–2011

Little thought went into the creation of the Code. Committee member Elliott Caplin said he essentially rewrote the Film Production Code and also drew upon earlier ACMP regulations. The Code was divided into three sections. Part A provided 12 guidelines for comics dealing with crime. Part B addressed horror comics. Not only were the words "horror" and "terror" prohibited in the titles of comics, but the guidelines essentially made it impossible to publish a horror comic with its ban on "lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations" and on scenes incorporating "walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolves." Part C provided general standards for all comics and included rules for dialogue and costume, along with guidelines for handling religion, marriage, and sex. Advertising did not escape scrutiny; nine guidelines made sure all ads were in "good taste."

After Wertham rejected their job offer, publishers appointed Judge Charles F. Murphy as the Comics Code administrator. He undertook his review of comic book content with far more dedication than publishers had hoped. A team of five women examined comic book pages prior to publication. They specified changes to the artwork and edited the word balloons. In a press conference in December 1954, Murphy announced the staff had rejected 126 stories and required changes to more than 5,600 illustrations ("Comics Czar").

Comic books titles that passed muster carried the CCA's "Seal of Approval" on their covers. The trade association funding came from fees paid by publishers for the review of their comics. Most of the CMAA's money went toward paying Murphy and his staff and to publicizing the new Code. While the majority of publishers were supportive, one of the largest publishers, Dell Comics, refused to join. To stymie any negative publicity from not adhering to the CMAA Code, the company created a "Pledge to Parents," published in all its titles beginning in March 1955.

Gaines, too, refused to join the association. Although distributors and retailers proved willing to handle Dell Comics without the Seal of Approval, they shunned Gaines' new line of comics, even though he had eliminated all his crime and horror titles. He gave in, submitting his titles for review. A dispute over the content of an issue of *Incredible Science Fiction* was the last straw for Gaines. He gave his oral resignation at a meeting of the CMAA on December 14, 1955, abandoning comic book publishing in favor of *Mad* magazine in a format that did not fall under the purview of the CMAA.

The impact of the Code on comic book content became obvious in the mid-1950s, as the type of comics that had garnered negative publicity for the industry disappeared. Remaining titles included romance, teen, and funny animal comics. Shortly after the Code's implementation, publishers called for a re-evaluation of its regulations. At the first of its annual meetings, on June 14, 1955, CMAA members suggested revisiting the Code restrictions. The CMAA board considered, but rejected, forming a committee to evaluate the status of the Code.

A downturn in comics publishing followed on the heels of the Code's adoption. Although many have blamed the Code for decreasing sales, other factors contributed to the depressed market. An upheaval in distribution made it more difficult for publishers to get their titles on the shelves, and increasing competition from television cut into the reading audience. By 1958, however, the industry was showing signs of recovery.

In his annual speech in 1959, CMAA President John Goldwater told members circulation had increased by 150 million. The Archie Comics publisher called for the development of new material and new approaches to existing genres. The answer came in the form of revamped superhero titles. DC Comics brought its 1940s superheroes together in the Justice League of America, and Marvel created a team of superheroes christened the Fantastic Four. The superheroes of the 1960s were born into a period of social upheaval that challenged the social norms the Comics Code had been written to uphold.

The 1960s culture also led to the emergence of underground comics. These creators took delight in subverting the comics form, appropriating the storytelling techniques of text and image used to create wholesome entertainment to produce comics definitely not intended for children. Underground comics served as a reminder that there was nothing inherent in the *form* of comics that restricted them to telling children's stories.

While underground comics creators never aspired to have neighborhood retailers carry their titles, mainstream publishers needed to work within the system. If they wanted to change their comics, they needed to modify (or drop) the Comics Code. Marvel Comics provided the impetus for change by tackling the issue of drug abuse in a three-issue *Spider-Man* story. Although nothing in the Comics Code explicitly forbid stories about drugs, the Comics Code Authority refused to grant Marvel a Seal of Approval for *Spider-Man*. Marvel appealed to the CMAA board in June 1970, which ruled against Marvel, noting that "the Code Administration's ruling that no stories shall deal with narcotics addiction shall remain in effect" (CMAA minutes, June 9, 1970).

The issues, cover-dated May–July 1971, appeared without the Seal of Approval. The idea for the story arc came from a request by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, which wanted a comic book to warn readers about the dangers of drugs. Marvel's actions triggered the first revision of the Code. At the same meeting where Marvel was denied permission to put the Seal of Approval on its special *Spider-Man* story, the publishers decided the time had come to consider revisions to the Code. Each publisher was invited to submit suggestions to the CMAA board, and by December the board had a draft of a new Code. At its meeting on December 7, 1970, the CMAA approved most of the text. The sticking point was the catch-all provision from the 1954 Code that allowed the Code administrator to decide on the intent of the Code in all cases where no specific prohibition exists. At the January 28 meeting, National (DC) pushed for an amendment that would permit comics to deal with "realistic problems" such as race relations and would contain the stipulation that "[t]his provision shall not be unreasonably invoked." Publishers were divided on the proposal, and that part of the Code remained unchanged. The new Code was adopted and implemented in February 1971.

This Code included a preamble affirming the industry's commitment to "sound, wholesome entertainment." Although acknowledging that comic books contributed "social commentary and criticism of contemporary life," the preamble stressed that comics must not violate "standards of good taste" that would corrupt their development as "a tool for instruction and education."

The key changes to the Code came in relaxing prohibitions against horror comics and in including eight guidelines on depiction of drug use. Although the words "horror" and "terror"

were still banned from comic book covers and the titles of individual stories, they were allowed in the text. The walking dead were still banned, but vampires, werewolves, and ghouls were allowed to return if handled in "the classic tradition" of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Publishers responded with a spate of horror titles. Much of the material was recycled from pre-Code comics, and comic books were creatively titled to avoid running afoul of the Code: *Vault of Evil*, *Dead of Night*, *The Unexpected*, and *Weird Mystery Tales*.

Although the horror craze did not last, publishers pushed the limits of the Code in other titles as well, occasionally triggering warning memos from Code administrator Leonard Darvin, reminding artists that "running or dripping blood, or pools of blood" were not permitted, although a small blood stain around a wound was allowed. Artists also needed to provide more covering for buttocks, making sure that there were no instances of picturing them "so insufficiently covered as to amount to nudity" (CMAA minutes, August 13, 1977). More worrisome than Code restrictions in the 1970s were declining sales. Publishers experimented with a number of genres and titles in an effort to attract readers, but new titles failed spectacularly, most of them within two years (Jacobs and Jones 1985). In addition, the two major publishers, Marvel and DC, made changes in corporate management accompanied by cost-cutting and staff reduction. Only four publishers remained active in the CMAA in the 1970s and into the 1980s: Archie, Marvel, Harvey, and DC.

The need for a Code continued to be challenged. At a CMAA board of directors meeting on October 19, 1976, Marvel President James Galston questioned whether the industry still needed a Code. The others, however, saw the Code as essential to the "viability of the comics magazine industry." Little did they know that the death of the Comics Code was being ushered in not by those who created and printed comics, but by the distributors and retailers.

Compliance with the Comics Code resulted largely from pressure by the distributors and retailers who generally refused to handle any comics without the Seal of Approval. The CMAA had no authority to impose penalties or prevent the distribution of comic books without the Comic Code Authority's seal. Publishers such as Gaines bypassed the industry regulations by switching to a magazine format. Comic books were handled by distributors who delivered to newsstands, drug stores, and other retailers who carried magazines. Retailers had no say in which titles they received or in how many copies. Unsold magazines, including comics, would be returned for reimbursement.

The idea of bypassing the traditional distribution system originated in 1973 with Phil Seuling, a New York comic book dealer. He persuaded publishers to sell steeply discounted comics directly to him on a nonreturnable basis. He then redistributed comics to a handful of comic book stores based on demand for particular titles through his Sea Gate Distribution. The rise of an alternate distribution and retail chain was fueled in part by readers and collectors for whom comic books were more than a casual interest. The number of distribution companies grew, feeding the demand from a growing number of specialty stores. By the end of the decade, the number of comics retailers had grown to an estimated 3,000 shops.

In 1981, Marvel released *Dazzler* #1, a comic book that did not go through traditional distribution channels, but instead sold exclusively through direct distribution. In addition, the 1980s saw a rise in so-called independent publishers, which produced comics solely for comic book retail shops. Early publishers included Pacific Comics (1981–1984) and First Comics (1983–1991). These companies did not belong to the CMAA, and their titles did not require Comics Code Authority approval.

The CMAA raised the possibility of revising the Code in 1982, when its supply of booklets explaining the 1971 version of the Comics Code ran low. Members agreed to solicit suggestions for changes before reprinting the booklet but ended up making no changes

(CMAA minutes, December 17, 1982). Five years later, though, publishers undertook a major overhaul of the Comics Code.

The CMAA hired Wally Green in February 1987 to revise the Code. In the mid-1980s, Green was writing for Marvel's Star Comics imprint, which was geared toward young readers. The publishers gave him a copy of the current Code, as well as the various interpretations made in specific instances. He met with each CMAA member publisher and examined comics published by each company.

Green's draft reflected the changes in society in the nearly two decades since the previous Code. Crime and horror comics no longer figured into the regulations. He liberalized standards on handling sex and violence, although the preamble specified Code-approved comics would be wholesome, intellectually stimulating, and morally sound. This version of the Code, however, went beyond policing objectionable content to mandate that controversial social issues be treated fairly, without bias, providing all sides of an issue. Blatantly partisan politics had no place in comics under Green's regulations.

Green submitted his draft, which took more than a year to craft. The publishers unanimously rejected it and argued about whether they should just leave well enough alone. Gladstone, Archie, and Marvel all indicated they'd be willing to continue with the 1971 version. Harvey wanted a revised Code, suggesting that perhaps a separate designation be created for children's comics. DC, however, called the 1971 Code too restrictive and threatened to drop the Seal of Approval from its titles if the old regulations remained in place. The publisher pushed for general guidelines that gave comics creators more leeway in both scripts and artwork.

The CMAA appointed an editorial task force in April 1988 to write a new Code, which produced a two-part document. The first part, "Principles of the Comics Code Authority," was intended for public distribution. The regulatory portion, "Editorial Guidelines," became an internal working document for editors, writers, and artists. In fact, the CMAA explicitly barred its members from releasing the guidelines to the public. A key provision of the task force-generated Code initially distinguished between adult-oriented comics and those intended for children, but the publishers decided against separate standards, insisting that Code-approved comics be suitable for all ages.

The 1989 version of the Code also made provisions for non-Code titles. The CMAA members who wished to distribute non-approved titles agreed not to do so through the newsstand distribution system. Their justification: comics retailers could be expected to be familiar with the content of non-Code titles, but magazine distributors would not know which titles were appropriate for newsstand display.

The new Code took effect in 1989 with a simple announcement, a deliberate strategy on the part of the CMAA. Executive Director J. Dudley Waldner cautioned against too much publicity, since drawing attention to the new Code might be seen as a major change for the industry. As a result, the adoption of the Code received little attention outside of the industry and fan press.

By the mid-1990s, only Marvel, DC, and Archie remained in the CMAA. The executive director of the comics trade association doubled as the Code administrator and sole reviewer. The three publishers each paid a membership fee based on the number of titles released. In addition, a nonmember publisher could pay the CMAA to review a title. The Code administrator reviewed about 150 titles a month.

In April 2001, Marvel announced that issue 116 of *X-Force* had been denied the Seal of Approval and would be the first "core universe" Marvel comic released without it since three issues of *Spider-Man* in 1971. Shortly after, Marvel dropped the Seal of Approval in favor of its own ratings system.

Three publishers continued to use the Seal of Approval. Bongo Comics, which did not join the CMAA, was founded in 1993 and publishes *The Simpsons*, *Futurama*, and similar titles. The publisher paid for review of its comics on a per-issue basis, and its titles carried the Seal of Approval. All of Archie Comics' titles were also Code-approved. For several years, DC had been submitting only a handful of titles intended for its youngest audience members, as well as some of its superhero books. Bongo Comics dropped the Seal of Approval from the cover of its comics beginning in April 2010.

On January 20, 2011, DC announced a rating system to replace the Code. Archie Comics had quietly withdrawn from prepublication review in 2010, although the company's titles continued to carry the Seal of Approval. The CMAA simply assumed Archie's content was wholesome enough to pass muster. However, the company held off making a formal announcement about the Code until DC made its intentions public. On January 21, the day after DC's announcement, Archie officially dropped out of the Comics Code Authority.

Some sources indicate the CMAA was in decline even before 2011. The CMAA was administered by the Kellen Company, which provided management services to trade associations. Its arrangement with the CMAA ended in 2009. Holly Munter Koenig, who served as CMAA executive director as a Kellen employee, continued to review titles submitted by DC and by Bongo until Kellen's contract with CMAA ended in summer 2010. For a short time, the CMAA itself was taken over by Paul Levitz, and later Steve Rotterdam, both of DC.

The CMAA's archives and documents were turned over to DC, which took the legal responsibility to officially end the CMAA, and with it the Comics Code. In an ironic twist, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund acquired the rights to the Seal of Approval on September 29, 2011.

The Impact of the Comics Code

While the Comics Code proved to be a good public relations strategy, it had a detrimental impact on the commercial success and creative growth of the medium. The effect on the comics publishing industry was felt almost immediately, when a number of companies went out of business within two years of the implementation of the Code. The best known of these was William Gaines' EC comics, but Comic Media, Fiction House, Eastern Color Printing Company, United Features, Sterling Comics, Star Publications, Ace Magazines, Avon Comics Group, and Quality Comics Group all closed up shop in the mid-1950s.

A number of factors—not just the Code—affected the industry. The bad publicity comic books received, changes in ownership, issues with the distribution companies, and an increasingly competitive environment for readers' attention (and money) all depressed the market. This boom and bust pattern repeated itself in the 1970s and the 1990s. Although the most popular titles prior to the mid-1950s recorded sales of over a million copies, sales of comics never achieved the same level of success after the Code was implemented. Today, a comics title selling 30,000 copies is considered a success.

The advent of direct market distribution in the 1970s, which allowed publishers to disregard industry regulations on content, led to a change in the audience for comics that had a lasting impact on the industry. Initially, readers regarded comics the same way they did newspapers and magazines. Comics were disposable, to be discarded after reading or passed along to others. Titles featured stand-alone stories; readers did not need an insider's knowledge of the history of the characters and the continuity of the fictional universe to follow comics. A corner newsstand might not carry the same titles from month to month, so readers bought what was available.