



The Graphic Novel

An Introduction

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Chapter

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Introduction: The Graphic Novel, a Special Type of Comics

Is there really something like the graphic novel?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the structure of this book

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A new definition of the **graphic novel**

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

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

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

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

LEVEL 1: FORM

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

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

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

LEVEL 2: CONTENT

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

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



the science fiction or, increasingly, fantasy content of the superheroes comic books), and they are not necessarily restricted to fiction. Many **graphic novels** are autobiographical or semiautobiographical, and several of them claim to be documentaries, reportage, or history. Let us underline: the three best-known **graphic novels**, which do not belong to the dystopian superheroes genre, definitely have an autobiographical foundation. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–2003, for the original French version), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) are all personal memoirs, even if the main character is not necessarily that of the “narrating I.” Let us recall that Spiegelman's story is about his parents as much as it is about Art Spiegelman; also, Bechdel's account has a double protagonist, *Fun Home* being about the coming out of both daughter and father; and the hero of *Persepolis* is not only Marjane Satrapi but also the whole generation of Iranians (girls, women, boys, and men) exposed to the essentially male, theocratic violence of the Islamic Revolution. It is also the case that Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* lends itself to being read alongside its author's life story, a position gestured toward in its end pages where Ware discusses his own father and dedicates the work to his mother. Though this **graphic novel** begins as a fiction, it is labeled in its conclusion as a “Semi-Autobiographical work of fiction.”¹² We can also add that such is the importance of autobiography as a theme that even creators and works that are not at all directly connected to this issue have reached out to be associated with it. For instance, when publishing a special edition of *Ghost World* Daniel Clowes highlights this aspect, stating: “[O]n another level, Enid (and even more so Rebecca) are all me, and their situation calls upon the dynamics of several friendships I've had over the years.”¹³ Even the conversation with Frank Miller in the important collection of interviews with creators published in the late 1980s, *The New Comics*, started with the personal: how Miller's changing living environment altered his perceptions. There Miller remarks: “In the *Dark Knight* series, there's a much more direct use of my real life experiences in New York, particularly my experiences with crime.”¹⁴

Other **graphic novels** are more object- than subject-oriented and may qualify as journalism or history writing rather than autobiography. The work of Joe Sacco is the ultimate example of this approach, but here as well it is easy to add other well-known publications including contributions from Kyle Baker (*Nat Turner*), Alan Moore (*Into the Light; From Hell*), Art Spiegelman (*In the Shadow of No Towers*), Will Eisner (*Last Day in Vietnam; The Plot*), Rob Morrison and Charlie Adlard (*White Death*), and Ari Folman and David Polonsky (*Waltz with Bashir*). Such categorizations are often problematic in themselves, with several works blending and blurring conventional borders of how critics and scholars organize meaning in the academy. Indeed it is arguably the ability of the **graphic novel** to work on the borderlines of first-person narrative, history-from-below, and oral history, as well as to introduce fiction with historical meaning (and vice versa), that makes it so fascinating and important a body of work. It would be a pity, however, to be hammering away at autobiography, testimony, memory, and history when discussing the creative possibilities of the **graphic novel**, as if the preservation of fiction and imagination would imply some genuflection before the “easiness and escapism” of comics. The creation of a compelling story world is no less difficult in fiction than in fact, and there is no reason to decree that it is only by exceeding or circumventing the rhetorical tricks of a fictional environment that the **graphic novel** can come of age. We hope therefore that through subsequent chapters of our book we will help give an idea of the incredible diversity and variety of content matter of the **graphic novel**. Indeed we believe such an approach is the only way to provide a helpful orientation, because otherwise only too narrow and limited an analysis would be possible.

LEVEL 3: PUBLICATION FORMAT

At the level of *publication format*, the difference between comics and the **graphic novel** is both very straightforward and unreservedly complex. It is easy to observe that the **graphic novel** has a strong preference for the book format, while it tends also to avoid serialization. In other

words, the **graphic novel** tends to adopt a format that resembles that of the traditional **novel** (in size, cover, paper, number of pages, etc.) and that is immediately recognized as something other than either a comic book (the infamously cheap brochures, where the strips are often truncated with advertising for other merchandise, that do not find their way into quality bookshops and that belong to the newsstand or the specialized comics shops) or the European BD format (close in general to the A4 album format, which could create confusion between **graphic novels** and picture books for children). In addition, it is also known that the **graphic novel** prefers the one-shot formula. Just as in the case of the book format, which proved crucial to the expanded cultural acceptance for the medium (the very fact that **graphic novels** started to be sold in bookshops contributed greatly to their legitimization), the refusal of serialization functions as a symptom of a craving for prestige that aimed at definitively cutting through the possible ties to comics. Moreover, the one-shot approach allows **graphic novels** to be distinguished from what many see as a classic means of selling out to the commercial demands of the “culture industry,” which converts an idea or a character into an endlessly repeated series.

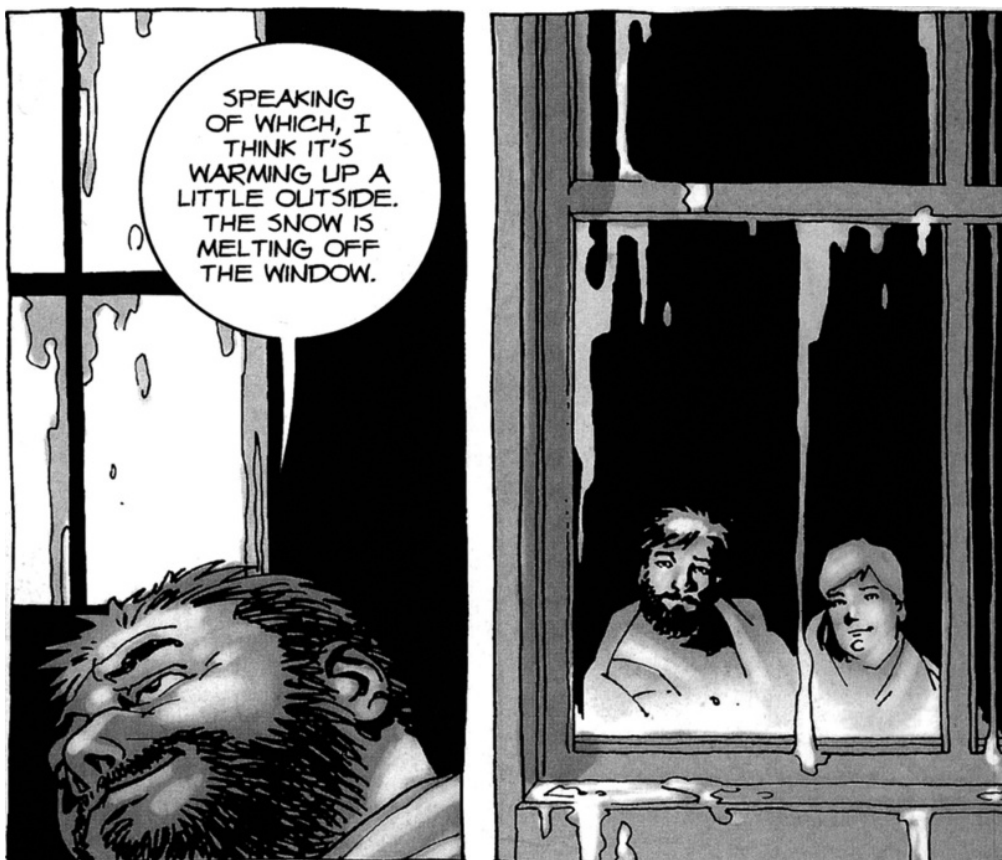
Format and serialization are real issues in the field, yet both aspects are far from raising analogous problems. If the transition from the comic book format to other more booklike formats was nothing more than the amplification of an evolution that was already taking place, the farewell to serialization proved more problematic, as one can see in the diverging attitudes of the **graphic novelists** themselves, whose current practice remains highly ambivalent in this regard. Serialization is far from absent (see, for instance, Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez’s *Love and Rockets* or Chris Ware’s *ACME Novelty Library*, among many other examples ranging from Daniel Clowes’ *Eightball* to the series *Palookaville* by Seth), and subsequent commercial exploitation in trade form is also not unknown. Most decisive in this regard is the stance that is taken toward serialization/episodic publishing, certain forms of which might be seen as a mix of the one-shot ideology (typical of the **graphic novel** philosophy) with the commercial necessities of serialization (inextricably linked with the comics

environment). Serialization makes possible the prepublication (and hence the selling) of parts of a work in progress, while simultaneously offering the **graphic novelist** better possibilities to interact with the living culture of the day.¹⁵ Working on a single, long one-shot **graphic novel** is by contrast so labor intensive that it inevitably draws a creator away from the world for the long duration of time that is required to complete the book.

A good snapshot of some of the ambiguities discussed here is the career of British artist Charlie Adlard. His oeuvre captures very well the different tendencies about which we are talking. On the one hand, Adlard has collaborated with partners to create two highly prestigious one-shot **graphic novels**, *White Death* (2002, with Rob Morrison) and *Playing the Game* (1995, with Doris Lessing). These look and feel like the **graphic novel** format and exemplify what we have just described about the one-shot, book-like format. On the other hand, Adlard is now the famous artist on the hugely successful horror series *The Walking Dead*. These are serialized adventures that have had a commercial afterlife as a popular television series and a video game. However, in fact the borders between these sites of production are very ambiguous indeed. Adlard's artistic style is relatively consistent throughout his works, and one cannot clearly differentiate a major variation based on format. It would also be simplistic to think that the long-forgotten one-shot **graphic novels** had any more depth than the famous zombie series that is a success precisely because it does contain intellectually stimulating material alongside its horror genre thrills (Illustration 1.b and 1.c).

LEVEL 4: PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

The fourth point of our discussion, generally speaking, suggests that the asymmetry of **graphic novels** and comics is once again very present. One cannot stress enough the importance of independent publishing in the rise of the **graphic novel**. After the do-it-yourself period of self-publication and distribution during the high days of the underground comix tradition and the not-always-very-successful attempts by Will Eisner to force a breakthrough in the general bookstore market, around 1980, the



1.b and 1.c. *The Walking Dead*: a work where philosophical questions about society are implicitly explored through a reworking of the genre of horror comics. Illustration with kind permission from the artist, Charlie Adlard.

production and distribution of graphic novels depended essentially, first, on the efforts of small independent publishers and, second, on the existence of specialty shops or head shops offering a mix of comic books, gadgets, and graphic novels, often with very limited sales figures (Spiegelman's 1977 *Breakdowns*, for instance, was met with relative indifference).¹⁶ Things had changed, although less rapidly than in later years, by the time of the publication of *Maus I* by Pantheon, as well as the launch of a new "line" (Vertigo) of more serious works by the comics publisher DC. Crucial in this regard is the manifestation of the new player in the market, Pantheon, whose industrial impact on the book market should not be underestimated in the success of the graphic novel. It is always difficult to interpret history for fear of seeing too much of the present in the past, but it does not seem absurd to think that the independent publishers that dominate today's graphic novel market, Seattle-based Fantagraphics and Montreal-based Drawn & Quarterly, owe something, despite the qualities of their backlist and their exceptional commitment to the field, to the commercial *force de frappe* of Pantheon, Penguin, Faber and Faber, and some other major publishers, first in 1986–1987 and then again through the 2000s. Once again, however, it would be absurd to reduce the work and the publishing practices of all graphic novelists and all companies publishing graphic novels to one single template. Various patterns compete, and what matters is to stress the possible impact of a given pattern on a given work. The degree of creative freedom given by Pantheon to post-underground figures such as Spiegelman or fiercely independent artists such as Ware (we return to the role played by Pantheon's editor Chip Kidd in Chapter 8) is light-years away from what is often said about the culture industries' intellectual and ideological disposition for the mutilation of creativity. And similarly, not all the works released by independent houses are examples of superlative creativity and personal thinking.

In beginning to knit together the four aspects that we have just discussed in isolation, another element to stress is that we do not necessarily embrace a definition of the medium in terms of "auteur theory," although artists themselves believe and use this fantasy, as do publishers, who

frequently publish auteur-style collections of interviews. The difference between comic books and **graphic novels** is *often* (it would be silly to deny it) but *not always* the difference between the collective and Taylorized way of working in the cultural industry (attacked and parodied by Will Eisner in his 1985 **graphic novel**, *The Dreamer*) on the one hand, and the personal and subjective mode of the individual artist who manages to pervade all possible aspects of his/her creation, on the other hand. Although subjectivity and personal expression are important in this debate, one has to admit that even within the comics industry certain authors find their way to deeply individualized creations (good examples are Jack Cole's *Plastic Man*, a figure invented in 1941, to whom Art Spiegelman has paid an impressive homage, and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four*, launched in 1961 by Marvel to face the competition with DC's more numerous and better established superheroes series) and that, more generally, the style and universe of the superheroes comics, to which the comics are often reduced, remains open to all kind of creative reappropriations in the **graphic novel** field. Furthermore, it would be naïve to think that all **graphic novels** are examples of the auteur ideology. In quite a few **graphic novels**, even those made singlehandedly by fiercely independent creators, there are many traces and aspects of popular mass culture and the culture industry. And as an author such as Charles Hatfield has highlighted, it may not be a smart move for the **graphic novel** to run away from its commercial and industrial roots, for the split between the (supposed or intended or imagined) elite culture of the **graphic novel** and the numerous constraints but also opportunities of popular culture may prove to be a dangerous evolution for the viability of the former.¹⁷

Indeed, Hatfield and others have expressed significant doubts around the comics/**graphic novel** split we discuss in this book. In the field of comics and **graphic novel** scholarship, Hatfield represents, in a very convincing and coherent way, the suspicion toward any too strong or sharp division between comics and the **graphic novel**. His arguments, advanced in his books *Alternative Comics* and *Hand of Fire*,¹⁸ are threefold. First, Hatfield stresses the very impossibility of maintaining a sustained and professional **graphic novel** production outside the

economic context of comics, where the existence of a broad audience and the possibility to republish **graphic novels** in serialized comic books offer the financial conditions no independent artistic production can do without. Second, he fears the elitist excesses and dead ends that may arise from the abandonment of the popular world of the comics. Third, and more positively, he has demonstrated that the economic constraints of the popular market can be important triggers for invention and creativity. In this regard, his position is close to that of many specialists of the modern cultural industries (not to be confused with the monolithic vision of the culture industry introduced by Adorno and Horkheimer after World War II), who defend similar stances on the productive aspects of the market.¹⁹ We are glad to take Hatfield's (and others') point, but believe also that our open approach toward the **graphic novel** leaves always the possibility to discuss the differences between comics and **graphic novels** in nonessential, context-sensitive ways. It also seems a little counterintuitive for a critical community (comics scholarship, visual studies, and cultural studies) to reject a concept and an idea that is being so widely used, even if in all sorts of different and changing ways, just because it has a loyalty to the world of comics. There is a danger of being left behind by practice and letting journalists, publishers, and booksellers make all the running, purely because of hairsplitting around terms.

Making room for differences: an open definition of the **graphic novel**

In summary, we contend that the **graphic novel**, though not necessarily a sharp break at the level of form or market conditions, represents at least some level of self-knowing "play with a purpose" of the traditional comic book form, and in some cases a radical reformation of it. Individual **graphic novelists** respect or disrespect form to their own ends, and a variety of approaches range from near to complete removal of grids altogether (e.g., Will Eisner's rejection of sharp panel edges and speech bubbles, or more recently Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner*, which

at points looks closer to a woodcut or illustrated storybook than a comic) to high aesthetic modeling to achieve maximal readability (e.g., Spiegelman's formal comics page layout approach on *Maus*). Regarding content, **graphic novels** have had some propensity for autobiography, reportage, and historical narrative. Underground comix established the autobiographical potential for text-image work (e.g., groundbreaking comix from Justin Green and Harvey Pekar and his collaborators), and they also expanded **graphic** narrative into historiography, not least in the work of Spiegelman but also in the work of figures such as Jaxon (penname of Jack Jackson), comix pioneer and lifelong fellow of the Texas Historical Association, who did not want to publish under his own name the historical **graphic novels** that offered a complementary vision to his own academically published research on the history of Native America and Texas.²⁰ However, the **graphic novel** does not equate exclusively to what could be called postmodern historiography or quirky history for countercultural academics interested in provoking their more earnest undergraduates. Works from Clowes, Seth, Ware, and many others show how **graphic novels** are capable of sophisticated fiction, as much as memoir or alternative history writing. Furthermore the worlds of literature and **graphic novel**-making have for the past decade moved much closer together than ever before (see our discussion on this in Chapter 8). Moreover, **novelists** have always been fascinated with symbols and images, and rich interactions exist between literature and comics that prepared the way for the **graphic novel**. For instance, E. E. Cummings appreciated George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, John Steinbeck wrote on *Li'l Abner*, and Dashiell Hammett wrote Alex Raymond's *Secret Agent X-9* script.

For many commentators the publishing format has been inextricably linked to definitional questions of naming publications as either **graphic novels** or comics. Thus, for some purists, **graphic novels** are always and exclusively so-called one-shot, longer narrative works that have no pre-history of serialized publication in shorter, episodic comics. That format and production have contributed greatly to the invention of the **graphic novel** tradition goes without saying. However to establish the **novel**-like

one shot as the critical or exclusive criteria for labeling a **graphic novel** a **graphic novel** is reductive and counterintuitive, especially when considering how many now-famous seemingly one-shot **graphic novels** have long publishing histories as (regular or infrequent) serializations,²¹ or, for that matter, how these fanzines have themselves been the exclusive auteur-driven publications exhibiting a sole creative achievement and are no longer collections from multiple creators, although these editions do also continue.²²

Although the times of self-publication and special forms of distribution have changed a lot since the period of the underground comix, there still exist major differences in the ways comics and **graphic novels** are published, printed, distributed, reviewed, and marketed. In our discussion, we try, however, to critically engage with the superficial opposition between independent publishing and publication by major trade publishers, who are now playing an important and creatively very challenging role in the development of the **graphic novel**.

Finally, and most crucially, to define does not automatically mean to reduce or to fix, for there are ways of defining that are perfectly compatible with an open approach. What we are looking for in this book and in this chapter is not a closed list of essential features of the **graphic novel**, and their systematic opposition to those of comics (itself a much more heterogeneous domain than is often acknowledged), but to open up new spaces and offer new tools for the critical analysis of what is being published in this dynamic and rich field. For this reason, we do not mean for our definition to be taken as a universal or eternal approach of the **graphic novel** (this may have been the error committed by some comics scholars, who quite shortsightedly have been proclaiming the paramount importance of the one-shot publishing format as a quintessential feature), but admit – and appreciate! – differences in time and space (although for practical reasons we shall concentrate mainly on U.S. production).²³ The **graphic novel** is something that changes all the time, although not always at the same rhythm, and that is characterized moreover by strong cultural variations. In short, and to repeat, we are context-sensitive to both space and time.

Regarding spatial variations, the field of comics/**graphic novels** follows three great models or traditions: the U.S. model (with rather sharp distinctions among cartoons, comics, and **graphic novels**), the European model (in which these distinctions are more blurred; the European model might be called the *bande dessinée* or BD model, although it is much broader than just the French corpus), and the Japanese model (massively dominated by the local equivalent of comic books, namely mangas). It is true that globalization has abolished some of the frontiers between these three models, but in practice the relationships between the U.S. and the European models seem to be more powerful than the ones between the U.S. tradition and mangas. For this reason, in this book we will focus more on the former than on the latter,²⁴ not because mangas are not important in the American market (on the contrary, mangas have been booming business for more than a decade, and their success is still growing), but because, contrary to the BD tradition, they have played a rather marginal role in the rise of the **graphic novel**. The fact that mangas clearly influenced Frank Miller, Chris Ware, and others proves that a creative and challenging dialogue between the U.S. and Japanese production exists, yet this does not imply that it has the same intensity, depth, and breadth as the almost-continuous exchange with European models. For that reason, and to repeat, our approach, while concentrating on the American **graphic novel**, will not neglect those interactions that have proven capital to the development of U.S. practices: the influence of the French BD world and the surprising story of how the British comics and **graphic novel** scene made such an impact on the **graphic novel** (see Chapter 4). As readers no doubt will appreciate, these international dialogues have been hugely rich, longstanding, and too often overlooked in histories of American comics.

Regarding temporal variations, we reject any transhistorical or essential approach toward the **graphic novel**. We foreground instead the dynamic aspects of the medium, making room for *retrospective* reading; although the notion of the **graphic novel** is quite recent (the term was coined in the late 1970s by Will Eisner, among others, although he was not the first to use it), we consider it incongruous to state that there had

been no **graphic novels** before that period.²⁵ The very existence of the label “**graphic novel**” enables modern readers to reinterpret works and models of the past that had not been read as such but that clearly belong to the same universe. Good examples include David Beroná’s archaeology of the woodcut **novel** tradition (1920–1950 and beyond), which he sees as a forerunner of the **graphic novel**,²⁶ and Jonathan Lethem’s self-assessment of his fascination with Jack Kirby’s *The Fantastic Four* and Marvel comics as a way of reading “comics as **graphic novels**” before the **graphic novel** era.²⁷ This does not mean that one should be anachronistic; instead, we argue that the origins of the **graphic novel** are ably mapped in U.S.-American history through the 1950s to the 2000s.

