Comics: A Better Means to an Artistic End
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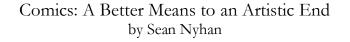

Comic book art is the Pez dispenser of modernism. The aesthetics of this accessible medium walk side by side with pop culture. No other art form can reach so many people due to its incredible volume. Each Wednesday of every week brings new issues of titles that have been in circulation for decades. Despite the vast numbers that arrive at retailers each month and the respect they sometimes receive (like Art Speigelman's Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus*), comics are underappreciated in the literary world, but why? They use a clever organization of symbols to express concepts shared by all people in their own social environment, and provide more tools than conventional art to truly show artistic intention.

Comic artists choose to express personal thought with universally complex themes through a symbolic medium. No one refutes the idea that comics do not demonstrate realistic form. Comic artists do not attempt to portray the simple beauty of the natural world; rather, they try to relate a universal idea with a stylistic approach. Magritte's painting of a pipe with the inscription, "this is not a pipe," at the bottom demonstrates the way in which comic books are misunderstood. In his explanation of the art form, Scott McCloud uses pictures of various characters following Magritte's structure. For example, he draws a picture of a cow and states that "this is not a cow" (McCloud 26). The pictures only resemble what we associate with them. Just as humans assign arbitrary symbols, or words, to familiar concepts, the comic book character stands for what the observer has to take from it. By simplifying the subject matter enough, the artist makes a representation that can apply to everyone. Perhaps those who identify with Charlie Brown can do so because of his lack of detailed, discernible features. Charlie Brown can look like any one of us, representing universal low self-esteem.

Mike Allred represents the population of comic artists who use the most simplistic style of symbols. The piece that I have chosen to look at is a pin-up he did for a collection of short Batman

stories. A "pin-up" gives the artist complete freedom to express human nature through one image without a plot that needs to conform to the character's continuity. The villain in this isolated battle is surrounded by symbols. Although I have never actually seen a standard alarm clock set on sticks of dynamite, I know this symbol means a time bomb. And the proximity of the little hand of the clock to its starting point probably means that Batman has little time left. I realize that the color of cigarette smoke does not resemble the color of human skin, but in this context I see that the uniformity of color of the smoke and the character's skin should be disregarded. The individual lines of the drawing play an important role during interpretation. One editor states, "It's in the inking stage that Ted [McKeever] transforms his calm and orderly pencils into the high-contrast world of nightmare and noir" (Crain 62). The exaggeration of line formation throughout a work applies mood. In Allred's piece the wavy lines of the smoke pattern add to the chaotic environment. The eyes symbolize environment as well. The villain has small black circles where normal eyes should be, which grants paranoia to his unwritten state of mind. The straight, downward-sloping eyes of Batman show a fearless hero with a plan to foil the catastrophe at hand. Illustrators take advantage of symbols to avoid reality and focus on meaning. Although an attempt at universality is made, the artist's meaning can never fit exactly with the reader's, thus creating a challenge for meaning to survive transition from one mind to the next.

Another useful tool to comic artists is the fictional history that surrounds all characters. The relative histories become resources to strengthen the bond between artist and observer. Both must construct interpretations from the same stories of each hero or villain. The writers can create a frame of reference for the artwork, unlike the classic examples of art where the painter merely presents a single image open for interpretation.

Batman, or Bruce Wayne to those readers of comic books who know him more personally, watched his own parents fall at the hands of common thieves. He has sacrificed his personal life to defend a city that fears him, and he continues to see friends of his crusade fall to the evil forces of a nearby insane asylum. Seldom does anyone come to his aid, which has forced him into rigorous training schedules for all kinds of combat. All of these factors enable me to realize Batman's eventual triumph over a madman determined to destroy some aspect of Gotham City (Batman's home city) in this example of the sort of casual fight scene he frequently engages in. Gombrich states, "No sooner is an image presented as art than, by this very act, a new frame of reference is created which it cannot escape" (qtd. in Carrier 88). Despite a concrete chronology of the comic personalities, the medium remains one to be explored in many unique ways. However, the more an artist tries to abstract real life to suit his or her meaning, the more the survival of interpretation from creator to observer becomes compromised.

By attaching personal reflection to what appears in a comic book, the reader attempts to steal meaning from the artist. When the artist has the idea of what the art should mean in his or her head, the result to other individuals may be entirely different. Readers of comics must learn to negotiate when they read, and not poach meaning. A reader has as much responsibility as the artist does when applying meaning to art. After the initial feeling arises within the observer, he or she must then study the artwork, looking at every detail that might help the connection to the artist. Wolfgang Iser believes that the observer's connections "are the product of the reader's mind

working on the raw material of the text, though they are not the text itself - for this consists just of sentences, statements, information, etc." (qtd. in Carrier 79). Although writers and artists attempt to force meaning into their texts, the viewer ultimately manufactures the end product. The reader has a responsibility to recognize the work that is put into comic art. Jules Feiffer expresses that " . . . the Wonder Woman mythos paralleled every Jewish boy's idea of how to cope with reality" (qtd. in Thompson 227). This idea appears to be too specific to have any bearing on the artist's intentions, but it shows an attempt at giving real meaning to the work. The artist would be proud to take credit for influencing this man's life. By using all the available resources to interpret comic art, Feiffer makes a great effort at seeing the symbolic representation of the world we live in.

Without a writer to interpret this piece of art from Allred, I am forced to look only at the art and to uncover purpose through procedure. I see what is relevant to my own experiences followed by an attempt to understand the artist's vision. McCloud writes, "When cartoons are used throughout a story, the world of that story may seem to pulse with life" (41). I see this living environment with the acknowledgement of the Band-Aid on the villain's knee and the cigarette resting loosely between his frail fingertips. This image forces recognition of a symbol of a strange and weak outcast. Men of strong character never smoke cigarettes as those do with a habit, as this man appears to have, due to his smoking at a moment of such dramatic interaction. After the surface reality has been identified, I now look for the hidden world of artistic symbolism. I am introduced into the artist's mind by examining the structure. Batman flies, with the aid of his rope, over the lower class of human significance. The mighty hero sets himself above the criminal as the aristocrats set themselves above the proletariat. The criminal looks forward, not upward, to see what might become at a higher level, while Batman looks down upon the waste of human life with little sympathy. The hero strikes a pose similar to those the Greeks and Romans admired, while the villain's stance shakes under intense pressure. His unstable mind shows itself through the artist's choice of wavy, chaotic lines. The lines on his shorts are not part of his body, but they do add to the motif of paranoia. After dissecting the individual traits of each character, something striking leaps out to grab my attention. Both Batman and the villain have very similar upper-body formations. The arms and heads are drawn to mirror one another. If a line of symmetry were to be drawn down the center of the paper, it would seem that each character rests within his environment about to collide with the other. Even without words, a vivid story begins to formulate in my mind, and hopefully I share the artist's vision.

With darkness as an ally, Batman enters undetected. He passes the eerie, neon lights that the madman works under night after night. A smooth, dark flash interrupts the stream of smoke flowing from the hands of this unknown criminal. The bones underneath the rubber-like suit he wears ache for the comfortable, king size bed that waits in his safe mansion, away from metropolitan insanity. He subdues the misguided criminal with force, but there is no need for lethal means, for the Batman never kills.

Just as comics do, movies give descriptive story through images. However, they are polar opposites within the same style of storytelling. Movies hide symbols within the plot or the acting of certain characters, but comics have many places to symbolically relate human nature to the story. In movies, the universality of the symbols is limited due to the reality of actors. Actors are real people

with individual physical features. Comic book characters lack the detailed faces and environments, which enhances possible symbolism. Everything in comics must be called a symbol. If the symbol does not show an aspect common to everyone's life, it is something that can be accepted as part of the character's life. With this common interpretation of the symbol comes the greater ability for the artist to convey the intended theme. Comics help the artist to become talented at giving life to shared human nature.

Comic heroes, villains, environments, and the medium itself must be treated as symbols and not reality. Comics are tools that alleviate the pressures of connection. A conventional expressionist must assume that the observer realizes the purpose of his or her art. Many people see a portrait as just a portrait, when the mood and the intricate detail of the face add to its meaning. Comics, on the other hand, are expected to be symbols enveloped in a detailed history that replaces the wobbling bridge between reader and artist with a strong one suspended by invisible messages from creator to potential viewer, messages anyone can see.

Works Cited

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        1973.

Note: The image at the top of this essay is a pinup by Mike Allred and is the property of DC Comics. It is published in *Batman: Black and White*, Dale Crain editor, DC Comics, 1998.