

## Class Notes from Day 3, to accompany September 26, 2011 session

### Origin Story – a brief history of comics – or, comics get a Bad Rap

- The history of comics is in fact a **retroactive** one – the history of things called “comics” is short, but in looking to the past we are able to trace a **lineage** of sorts and thereby establish a **legitimacy**.
- Also want to suggest through this look back, there was a time when art and language weren’t so far apart – and that perhaps with comics today – let’s not perceive them as something new – but as a return to a kind of wholeness of expression.
- This history of comics is perhaps better described as a **history of visual narrative or perhaps visual language**. And here we go...
- Visual narratives through the ages:
  - Lascaux – cave drawings
    - **An aside:** It is speculated that it is gesture (and not grunts/barks) and the ability to convey and draw meaning from gesture that serves as the foundation for our language (see Tomasello – “Origins of Human Communication”)
    - With this in mind, consider that gesture prefigures speech, and likewise image gives rise to text
  - Egyptian Murals → Hieroglyphics
  - Evolution of Chinese pictograms
  - Mayan Codices
  - St. John the Baptist in Russia
  - Bayeux tapestries



	oracle bone jiaguwen	greater seal dazhuan	lesser seal xiaozhuan	clerkly script lishu	standard script kaishu	running script xingshu	cursive script caoshu	modern simplified jiantiz
rén ('nín) human	𠤎	𠤎	𠤎	人	人	人	人	人
nǚ ('nǚ) woman	𡥉	𡥉	𡥉	女	女	女	女	女
ěr ('ěr) ear	耳	耳	耳	耳	耳	耳	耳	耳
mǎ ('mǎ) horse	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	馬	馬	馬	馬	馬
yú ('yú) fish	𩺰	𩺰	𩺰	魚	魚	魚	魚	魚
shān ('shān) mountain	山	山	山	山	山	山	山	山
rì ('rì) sun	日	日	日	日	日	日	日	日
yuè ('yuè) moon	月	月	月	月	月	月	月	月
yǔ ('yǔ) rain	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨
yún ('yún) cloud	云	云	云	云	云	云	云	云



- Superman fits in quite nicely in this lineage...
- As noted in class – these visual (and often verbal) narratives were available to a public due to their scale and visibility – what comes next in this lineage is made possible by the advent of printing technology and being able to put the work in people's hands directly
  - William Hogarth ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Hogarth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Hogarth)) in the early 1700s, series of engravings. Many of the tropes of later sequential art are here – including caricatured people conveying action/meaning through the very way they are depicted. Single plates – but linked in series





- Rodolphe Töpffer ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodolphe\\_Töpffer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodolphe_Töpffer)) - considered to be the father of modern comics
  - Caricaturized style, sequence of events in panels, with text throughout – clear links from this work to today’s comics



- “Comics” – stuck with a name of negative connotations
  - first – the word Cartoon – from “cartones” – the cardboard-like material that Italian muralists sketched their work on in charcoal that was then transferred to the wet plaster from which they would fully render their murals
  - After the burning of the house of Parliament in the 1830s in England, a viewing of proposed new structures was held featuring sketches. Punch Magazine ran these images with accompanying text, calling them Cartoons – the name stuck to all such things...

- These transformed into New Yorker like, commentary and comical cartoons – eventually called “comics” – but primarily created for ADULTS



THEY ARE SWALLOWING EACH OTHER.

*political cartoon by Thomas Nast*

- One prominent outlet for such material in the US was called the Comics Weekly
- In the 1890s, drawing on the comics and merger of text and image featured in magazine layouts, Outcault produced The Yellow Kid – to great popularity and copycats. Considered the first comic as we know them today. Prominently featured in Hearst papers and others – this led to the term Yellow Journalism...



- Comic strips on the increase, see Winsor McCay's Little Nemo, Gasoline Alley and their descendants Peanuts, Calvin&Hobbes



*Krazy Kat above, Little Nemo below*





- These comics strips are repackaged in books – the printers need something to print to keep their presses running
- This leads to the creation of original material created for this longer book form – Famous Funnies 1934 – the first Comic Book.
- AND THEN... SUPERMAN – 1938 – explosion of characters, medium



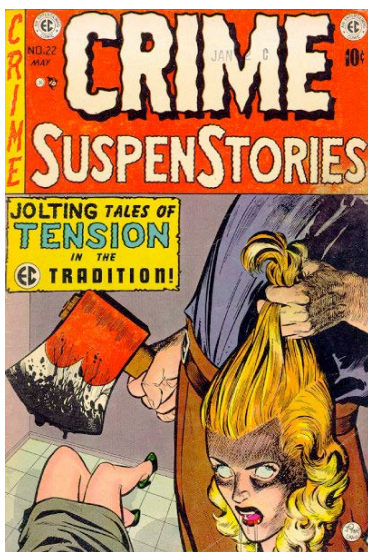
- Superheroes are primal as gesture and convey a lot through the simplicity of gesture and color – extremely well-suited for this medium



- A time (before TV) hungry for fantasy, escape, action – big stories/easy to produce
- Jewish immigrants create the field – arts background but couldn't get more respectable, better paid ad work, etc.
  - Superheroes are assimilation stories
- Genre hijacks the medium



- The popularity of the superhero (and funny animal books, things more comical) are identified AS the medium – preventing a critical look at the potential for narrative in this visual language
- 1950s – decline – TV certainly played a role and then Fredrick Wertham ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fredric\\_Wertham](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fredric_Wertham)) – blame of comics for everything bad with youth (like video games today) – his book Seduction of the Innocent led to the neutering of mainstream comics, with just a few surviving and limping along
  - See David Hadju's The 10cent Plague
  - The injury to the eye motif and other things in EC comics serve as evidence for violence and sex in comics
  - Comics Code instituted



- 1960s – underground commix – R. Crumb and many others
  - Harvey Pekar – American Splendor 1976

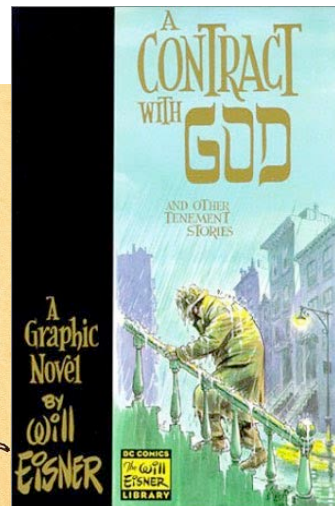
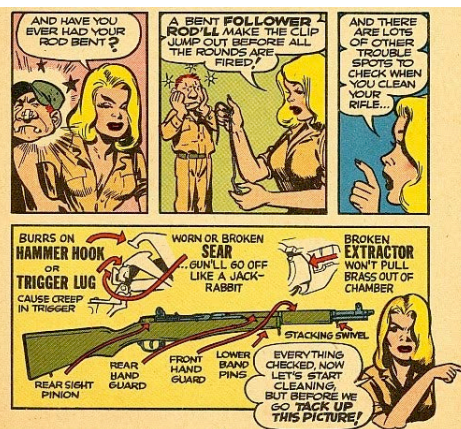
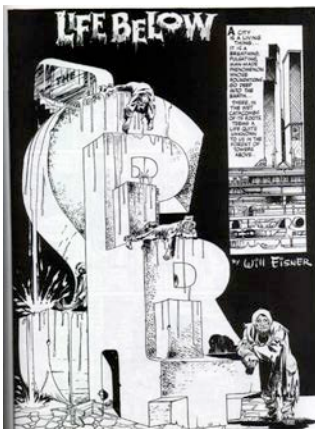


○ Will

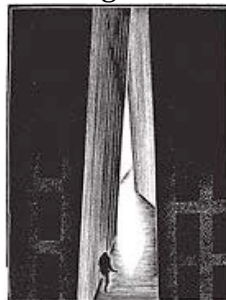


Eisner returns!

- Eisner had opened the first comics producing studio in the late 30s, then went on to create the Spirit and innovate in that through the 40s, early 50s.
- Disappeared, or so it seemed, but was working for the military creating PS Magazine – a comic for soldiers on preventative maintenance – in essence showing that comics were for more than entertainment, a TEACHing tool.
- Mid 70s, Eisner invited to attend underground commix convention, excited about the possibilities for the medium to speak to adults
- 1978, he creates “A Contract with God” has it published by non-comics publisher and sold in bookstores, and to help that along attaches the (likely existing) name Graphic Novel to it.
- Eisner was a visionary for what could be done in comics and a champion of the medium in all phases of his long and celebrated career – the industry’s Oscar equivalent, “The Eisners” are given in his name

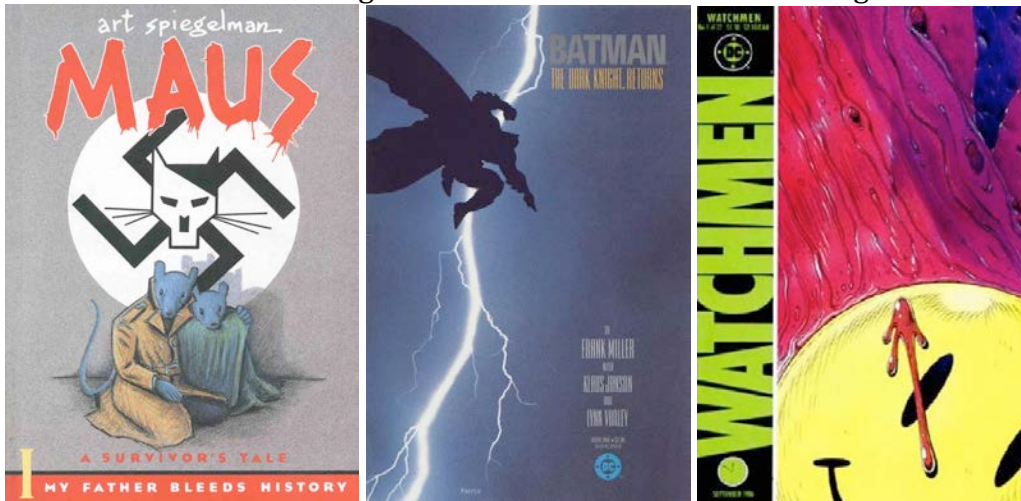


- Lynd Ward – a novel in woodcuts in the 1920s – helpful again to look back to see lineage

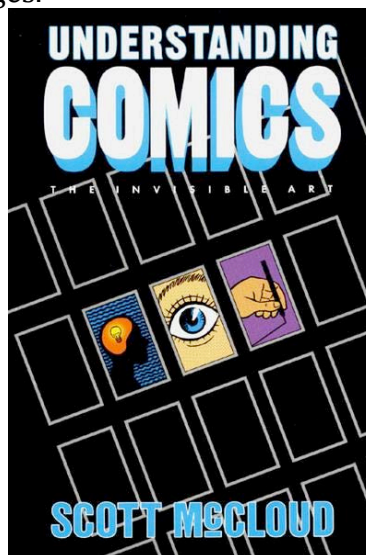


- 1986 – trifecta of important works in comics and now considered graphic novels (though note, none of them came out as stand alone books initially):
  - **Frank Miller's** genre-transcending take on Batman *The Dark Knight Returns*

- the first collected installment of **Art Spiegelman's** Pulitzer prize-winning *Maus*
- **Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's** *Watchmen*, the only graphic novel on Time Magazine's 2005 list of "ALL-TIME 100 greatest novels."



- 1993 **Scott McCloud's** *Understanding Comics* – a comic on comics – opened the doors wide for legitimate discourse about the medium and what it might take on within its pages.



- Librarians get involved...
- In classrooms – comic book project, world comics, more...
- A new name? – (Duncan & Smith "Power of Comics" p. 18) offer the following list of alternative names for comics:
  - Comix, comixx, drawn books, drawn stories, dual-writing, encapsulated narrative, graphic literature, pictorial literature, picto-fiction, pictured stories, rendered writing, sequential art...