Comics as Art

by Owen O’Riordan

Comic book culture is not typically considered intellectual. If anything, it is viewed as a children’s literature. However, that’s not completely true. How can a child understand the sexual abuse shown in Alan Moore’s Watchmen? Is a child able to cope with Robert Kirkman’s post-apocalyptic world in The Walking Dead? Will a child comprehend the symbolic caricatures of Jews as mice in Art Spiegelman’s Holocaust story Maus: A Survivor’s Tale? While children’s comics do exist, they are the minority of the art form. But the stigma still sticks; it even goes beyond the reputation of childish picture-stories. Comics have been reborn in recent years as fodder for mindless, million-dollar Hollywood action movies. In response to these claims, the medium has attempted to rename itself in a more literary, adult way. Comic books have become graphic novels. But the label graphic novel is misleading. Comics are much more than that; they are their own art form and not simply an extension of the written word.

In the years since the comic book legend Will Eisner accidentally created the term graphic novel, it has become the go-to name for defending the art of comics. However, Eisner admits to creating the label minutes before he pitched his renowned collection A Contract with God. His reason being that publishers would not buy a comic book, but they might buy a graphic novel. The difference was that graphic novels were for adults and comics were for kids. Unfortunately the name stuck and became the politically correct term for a previously disregarded art. Now, bookstores have graphic novel sections; magazines review graphic novels; and high schools and colleges teach graphic novels in literature class.

The newly found interest in comics is due to the re-emergence of the genre in popular culture. There is intellectual interest in comics because now they can be viewed as “real literature.” Even though the two different mediums may share some similarities, the differences are stark. In Scott McCloud’s exploration of the medium, Understanding Comics, comics are defined as such: juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer (McCloud, 20). The definition never states that comics must follow a narrative form, nor convey a story. So the term graphic novel falls short as a name for comics. Furthermore, the issue of comics as its own art form is completely ignored. Under the label graphic novel, comics become a part of literature.

Comics operate on a different level than literature does. The space between panels functions differently than sentences or punctuation. Boundaries on the page are explored and broken. Images and words work together to create an entirely different experience for the viewer. Most importantly, comics are viewed more so than they are read. The combined experience of pictures and words brings a new sense of detail to the viewer. Ideas can be juxtaposed against each other to create a tension in the viewer that is difficult to achieve in prose. Fewer words can be used to bring an idea to life. Words can be powerful, but the combination of pictures and words sharpens both the intent of the words and the feeling of the image at hand.

Some might argue that the word comic is an antiquated euphemism for a genre that has outgrown it’s own roots. It is true that comics have developed far past what they began as in the 19th century, but they have grown into their own form. Therefore it is much better to use the word comic, which acknowledges the rich history of development of the form. The word comic book simply implies that the comic strips are collected in a book or magazine format. There is no implication of an association with literature. Comics respects and recognizes the
independence of the form, whereas graphic novel assumes that comics are simply a part of a larger system when there are only small similarities between the two.

Graphic novel is essentially a marketing ploy. Major publishers like DC, Marvel and Image have admitted that they lump single issues together in trade paperbacks in order make comics more approachable. The end product is by no means a novel in the true sense of the word, but simply a convenient and easily marketable collection of comics. The major comic publishers use the term to lure unsuspecting, pretentious readers into the form. The term only implies that comics are nothing but a subset of literature and that they are prone to the rules and weaknesses of prose. When in reality the roots of comics can be traced back further than the written word. Ultimately, it was the ancestors of comics that lead to the creation of written language. So why should comics be relegated to a lower position than the written word?

Works Cited