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The surging popularity of graphic novels has brought sales of comics to a level not seen in many years, due partly to broadening distribution and audiences, but other forces could be contributing to the medium's popularity. A conservative backlash and fascination with fantasy entertainment are two possible influences. The Internet allows new fans to find information quickly, our globally connected world encourages readers to seek out the diverse viewpoints in graphic novels, and Japanese comics, or *manga*, attract teenagers and girls. Past information on comics publishing suggest the current popularity is part of a regular cycle. But the multitasking nature of our society and entertainment encourage information gathering over multiple channels, and our dependence on visual sources of information suggests that graphics-based literature will be more important in the future.

Headings:

  Comic books, strips, etc.

  Comic books, strips, etc. / evaluation

  Graphic novels

  Graphic novels / evaluation

ON THE RISE: INFLUENCES ON THE POPULARITY OF GRAPHIC NOVELS
AMONG READERS

by
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Introduction

In the last three or four years, a certain reading trend has grown from increased interest to a full-blown explosion. Graphic novels have recently surged in popularity among readers of all ages. According to Kyle Macmillan, in 2001, graphic novels saw sales of $75 million. In 2002, that figure reached $100 million. Although those figures are nowhere near the sales of traditional fiction and non-fiction, the explosive growth of the medium points to a closing gap. "At a time when book sales are stagnant, sales of graphic novels are bucking the trend by generating anywhere from 30% to 200% growth," said Kyo-Yu Liang, an executive at Diamond Book Distributors, the main comic book and graphic novel distributor in the U.S. (qtd. in Reid, "BEA's Graphic"). And Macmillan estimates that the yearly sales of new comics, back-issue comics and graphic novels together total $700 million.

All of the major comic book publishers had increased sales over 2002, and Marvel Comics had an increase of 400% from 1999-2002, just from sales in bookstores, a new playground for comic books and graphic novels (Macdonald, "Year of the Graphic"). These increased sales have also led to a higher profile for comics-based literature, and perhaps a measure of cultural legitimacy. Neil Gaiman's *Sandman: Endless Nights*, a collection of stories published as a graphic novel in 2003, made it onto the *New York Times* extended bestseller list (Sandstrom). Sales figures and media attention certainly indicate that graphic novels are gaining in popularity, but what exactly *is* a "graphic

novel," and what is its relationship to comics and comic books? Really, aren't they all the same thing?

For the purposes of this paper, the terms comics, comic book, and graphic novel will not mean the same thing, although they are closely related. I will use all three terms liberally in this paper, and I mean specific things when I use them. The term "comics" is not a genre or a particular format, comics is a medium. Roger Sabin, in his excellent history, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels*, writes, "…comics are a language: they combine to constitute a weave of writing and art which has its own syntax, grammar and conventions, and which can communicate ideas in a totally unique fashion" (8). In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud constructs more of a dictionary definition, "[Comics are] juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). Will Eisner, a legend among comics creators and one of the first to examine comics as a form of storytelling, coined the term "Sequential Art… an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea" (*Comics and Sequential Art* 5). By looking at these three descriptions of comics, we see that they are a series of visual images arranged in a sequence and combined with text to communicate some complete idea. It is the basic form used by newspaper comic strips, Superman comic books, and today's complex graphic novels, and it can be used to refer to all of these as a whole medium.

Comic books and graphic novels are formats. I use comic books to mean the flimsy, ephemeral periodical pamphlet-type publications usually bought from comic book stores and traditionally associated with superheroes and collecting in protective plastic

coverings. I use graphic novels to refer to longer, square-bound book-type works in the comics form. Some tell a single, self-contained story. Others tell a series of short stories or collect a series of previously-published material. Many are actually non-fiction, such as Joyce Brabner and Harvey Pekar's autobiographical *Our Cancer Year* and Joe Sacco's accounts of his times in Bosnia and Palestine.

There are a few other concepts important to this discussion. Trade paperbacks are those collected editions of material previously published in monthly comic books. They are usually square-bound and of higher quality than monthly comic books, therefore I include them in my understanding of graphic novels. Comic strips, the short, often one-gag format most often seen in the newspaper "funnies," are closely related to comic books and graphic novels. Comic strips are certainly the forerunners of the comic book and graphic novel (Sabin). However, this paper is mostly concerned with longer form comics, and, except as it relates comic strips to the history of comics, will not deal with comic strips.

Whatever your definition of comics and graphic novels, their presence in the world of bookstores and libraries hasn't been felt this strongly in fifty years. A large part of the new comics boom is due to their broadening distribution and appeal. Comic books and especially graphic novels are leaving the confines of the comic book shops and moving into the realm of bookstores where they have enjoyed a five-year, double-digit upswing in sales (Finney; Reid, "BEA's Graphic"; Wolk and Reid; Wolk). Over the last three years, I have observed first the arrival and then the rapid expansion of Graphic Novel sections in chain bookstores such as Barnes & Noble and Borders. Even monthly comic book racks are getting floor space. Beyond expanding their exposure from the

fairly narrow clientele of the comic book shops to the much larger audience in mass market bookstores, the placement of graphic novels in bookstores has a wider impact on the acceptance of comics as a literary form. As one fan from St. Louis, J. Todd Highnight, put it, "It's a measure of cultural legitimacy to have these works in mainstream bookstores…you're going to expand the number of people who are exposed to the truly great work…that appears in comic books" (qtd. in Finney).

As comics are being made available in a wider range of venues, their readership has also been broadening. In a recent *Denver Post* article, Kyle MacMillan wrote, "Although the adolescent male is still the comics industry's central customer, the client base has expanded in recent years to include nearly every demographic." Comics now "appeal to everyone from teenage girls to 40-year-old men" (Finney). Although traditionally considered a medium for children, the age of comics readers has been increasing since mainstream comics really began targeting adults in the mid-1980's (Sabin 162). This trend continues, as Michael Martens, a Dark Horse Comics executive said: "Our demographic is moving upwards…" (qtd. in Finney). In addition to attracting older readers, comics are attracting females, a huge market largely untapped by comics until now. An astonishing number of girls and women are being drawn to comics, mainly by English translations of imported Japanese comics, or *manga* as they're called in Japan (Arnold 4).

Graphic novels are even getting the attention of libraries and library publications. As they develop "a higher profile" in bookstores, graphic novels are now conquering the library (Finney). Graphic novels were the focus of the American Library Association's 2002 Teen Read Week, and school libraries use them to attract students through their

doors (Gorman 20). Publishers are also receiving more inquiries from libraries (Wolk and Reid). Graphic novels are periodically reviewed in *VOYA*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Booklist*. Several libraries in Wake County, North Carolina have created adult graphic novel collections and are working to expand their young adult graphic novel holdings. This "acceptance and acknowledgment by public librarians," believes Will Eisner, is "the most significant evidence of comics' arrival" (Eisner, Foreward ix).

Newspapers, magazines, and book industry publications all point to an explosion in the popularity of comics over the last several years. But why is there such a boom in the industry, and why is it happening now? The literature indicates that a number of factors may be involved. The rest of this paper identifies some of those possible causes and discusses how they might have influenced a surge in the popularity of comics.

Response to Conservatism

The current popularity of comics could be a popular culture response to the political and social conservatism of the past few years. The presidency of conservative Republican George W. Bush and the Republican majorities in Congress indicates a prevalence of conservative ideology in American culture now and over the past several years. And since the medium's early days, comics have often been seen as subversive and anti-establishment. In nineteenth century Britain, the so-called "penny-dreadfuls," cheaply published illustrated stories that were one of comics' precursors, were condemned by the upper class, ostensibly because of their violent content. However, their "politically subversive" nature and mass appeal among the lower classes "were considered much more of a threat" (Sabin 14). In the early twentieth-century

United States, the Sunday newspaper comics were criticized by conservative Christians for promoting leisure on Sundays.

The subversive tradition of the comics, however, really got going in the 1960's. From 1954 to 1955, comic books were the target of massive criticism and censorship. Largely initiated by *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book by noted psychiatrist Frederic Wertham that blamed juvenile delinquency on comic books, the creation of the Comics Code, a series of rules determining what kind of content would receive a seal of approval, by comic book publishers in response to all the criticism squashed much of the creativity out of mainstream comic books (Sabin 68). The suppression of comic books in the 1950's, writes Francisca Goldsmith, "stunted the development of a critical and maturing readership. The following decades, marked by youthful, rebellious energy, gave birth to a thriving underground comics movement in the U.S…" (1510). That underground movement created "comix," so-called to distinguish itself from mainstream comics and to denote its much more liberal (and X-rated) approach to subject matter (Sabin 92). Flouting every conservative stricture of the Comics Code, from depictions of sex, drugs, and violence to the language used, the comix were extremely radical and subversive. The hippies loved them, finding in their pages the ideas of free love and anti-establishment ideals they embraced. Karen Sandstrom writes, "the independent movement has a long tradition created by talents of the underground comics scene such as [Art] Spiegelman, Will Eisner, and Robert Crumb who built a faithful readership with stories that were, by turns, gritty, honest, political and sometimes sexually explicit."

Alternative comics again flourished in the 1990's, a "growing subculture of alternative comics aimed primarily at adults" (Nore). In Canada, certain comics had a

specific political agenda and were "used to get across subversive messages to kids" in stories such as comics tales intended to get young people to consider what enlisting in the military might entail (Nore). Certain personalities within alternative comics are certainly liberal. Art Spiegelman is something of "a liberal spokesman in the comics industry" (Judge). In addition to alternative comics' traditional attachment to the counterculture, the form's status as a medium rarely critically analyzed means that, "comics have become a place *par excellence*, for writers and artists to 'play'. There is a real sense in which they are a site where 'nobody is looking', and where it is possible to experiment and flex creative muscles" (Sabin 9). In essence, since comics are not analyzed in the same way that fiction and paintings are analyzed, that situation allows comics more freedom and creativity than traditional arts.

At this point, it certainly makes sense that the current graphic novel boom could be influenced by the subversive nature of many comics in a conservative era; after all, the rise of the second alternative comics movement roughly coincided with the rise of Newt Gingrich to Speaker of the House and that conservative movement. However, comics have been used to advance the ideals of more conservative agendas, as well. In nineteenth-century England, illustrated adventure stories were produced as an acceptable alternative to the "penny dreadfuls" that promoted "muscular Christianity" and provided "moral fibre" and other patriotic and conservative values (Sabin, 14). More mainstream comics can also have a more conservative bent, especially such giants of the superhero genre as Superman and Batman. Both of these characters and many other classic superheroes have rarely been interested in radicalism, liberalism, or even any kind of societal change at all. "As agents of the law," writes Matthew Wolf-Meyer, "the vast

majority of superheroes are intent on retaining the status quo, subservient to the popular

politics and will of the people they endeavor to protect." In fact, Wolf-Meyer continues,

"…heroes that fail to conform to the conservative ideology [are] heroes that are often

seen as terrorists to the societies that they are a part of." In other words, those who

challenge the social structure, these "terrorists," are villains, the bad guys. Beyond their

devotion to the status-quo, these comic book superheroes usually follow a very

conservative attitude towards crime and punishment. Mark Judge writes, "Many of the

superheroes are grounded in a rigid ethic of right and wrong, where criminals…are

punished and their excuses for their actions are rejected out of hand by the hero." Some

readers saw Frank Miller's groundbreaking graphic novel about an aging Batman, *The

Dark Knight Returns*, as a "defense of vigilantism," reports Judge. Art Spiegelman

referred to Miller's Batman as "a rather fascistic Reagan-era hero" (qtd. in Judge).

  The fan culture surrounding this dominant genre of the comics also has an

inherent conservatism, one that doesn't necessarily refer to political views, but exists all

the same. The "subculture" of "comic book fandom," says Wolf-Meyer, has its own

"language of difference" and "vocabulary of names, places and events particular to the

community." Considering all of the different characters, storyline histories, and factual

minutiae that a so-called comic book "geek" might have memorized, it is easy for an

outsider to see this. These elements of the comic book subculture are "employed within

the culture to communicate, and outside of the culture to promote itself as culturally

important while retaining difference" (Wolf-Meyer). What this "language of difference"

does is differentiate their subculture from the mainstream, and fans are protective of that

difference. Comics fan-culture is very resistant to any kind of change, because change

could mean the destruction of that culture and of their sense of belonging. If fans of comic books came to accept non-traditional subjects, writes Wolf-Meyer, "then fandom, and its position of difference, would collapse, eradicating difference and solidifying comic book fans as *typical* citizens…deprived of their discourse and their difference."

Although the subversive tradition and reputation of comic books seems to support the conjecture that the current popularity of graphic novels could be at least partially a response to political and social conservatism, it is a theory that only partially makes sense. Comics carry both liberal and conservative messages. In the 1960's, underground comics satirized both the conservative "establishment and "the sacred cows of the counterculture," and one of the founding forces of that underground so embraced by the hippie culture, Robert Crumb, was not fond of hippies and has created work making fun of "the phony liberal hip of Generation X" (Judge). Comics have also been criticized by both sides of the political spectrum. They were certainly condemned by conservatives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but even the author of the anti-comics bible, Frederic Wertham, was a Marxist, even though he is often thought to be conservative (Judge). *Activists!*, a comic book created by a liberal non-profit organization, was destroyed by its creators after they decided it had racist stereotypes. Its destruction by its creators "points to the history of political hostility to comics, from the left and the right…comics have long been politically incorrect" (Judge). Comics is a medium, and as such, can be used to carry different ideological messages, determined only by the comics' creator. However, the medium's long connection to the counterculture does suggest that it is a ready forum to respond to conservative ideology.

The Rise of Fantasy

Another possible influence on the cultural popularity of graphic novels is tied to another recent phenomenon in the realm of popular culture, the surge in popularity of fantasy over the last several years. Comics are often perceived as a genre in the realm of fantastic fiction. The subjects of the most popular titles are generally outside traditional definitions of reality. Superheroes, by their nature, go beyond what is possible for real humans. Their stories are about aliens, mutants, and altered humans as well as other dimensions, timeless battles, and the constant resurrections of dead heroes. Horror and supernatural titles have always been popular, and comics certainly lends itself to the genre of sword and sorcery fantasy, like *Conan the Barbarian*, a genre that, until recently, was difficult to realistically portray in television and cinema, the other visual mass media (Sabin 66, 150).

Fantasy's popularity is even easier to identify than comics' popularity, and it is not a new trend. Fantasy in comics, pulp novels, and TV has been "flourishing at least since the end of the Second World War," and over the past couple of years, fantasy movies have been a huge part of Box Office and merchandising grosses (Scott). As Frank Rich reported earlier this year, "In 2003 the films that went through the roof—*Finding Nemo*, *Pirates of the Carribean* and *The Return of the King*—were all fantasies, set either in the briny deep or on Middle, as opposed to actual, Earth." A.O. Scott noted that fantasy film, while the focus of long-time popularity, has certainly had even more of an impact recently. He writes, "Perhaps more than ever before, Hollywood is an empire of fantasy…" And the movies are not the only arena fantasy has conquered. Fantasy franchises like Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter have been selling tens of millions of

books (Grossman). Furthermore, fantasy stories seem to grow more popular as time has moved along, They never really become old or lose their relevance for new generations (Scott).

The rise in popularity of fantasy has been thoroughly analyzed and seems to be a fairly powerful cultural indicator. Lev Grossman writes, "Popular culture is the most sensitive barometer we have for gauging shifts in the national mood, and it's registering a big one right now." Henry Nguyen, a Los Angeles psychologist points to a traditional source for fantasy popularity. "Since the Depression, people have gone to theaters to escape harsh realities…That's one reason fantasy films are doing so well" (qtd. in Bowles). Grossman agrees. He says, "At a time of uncertainty, American culture looks backward for comfort." Since September 11, 2001, Americans have certainly been facing "harsh realities" and "a time of uncertainty." Fantasy is a genre that typically portrays a sentimental picture of the past, specifically the European Medieval period. As Scott says, "The appeal [of fantasy] is perennial because it fulfills the widespread and ever-renewing desire for a restoration of innocence. The major texts of modern fantasy have all been pointedly, even deliberately regressive." In essence, we like fantasy because it recalls a past in which our current troubles were unknown, and time has dimmed the memories of the problems we had then. Comics can easily recall a simpler time as well. Since so many people read comics as children, and our society associates comic books with childhood, comics can certainly recall the innocence of childhood, when problems generally weren't as terrifying as adult concerns.

Our society's love affair with technology and other trappings of modern life over the past few years has dulled recently. The renewal of interest in fantasy began as people

lost faith in the technology sector, most prominently in the diving stock market, and new technology started losing its "magic," started becoming normal (Grossman). The fantasy and superhero stories of mainstream comics certainly provide some of the magic that so fascinates consumers of fantasy culture. Even horror, though it may recall some of the same anxieties of the modern era, is a fantasy horror, a safe anxiety, one generally removed from the horrors of reality.

Turning to fantasy as an escape from current reality is certainly not new. The first popularity explosion of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was during a time when America was "drowning in the moral quicksand of Vietnam and Watergate [and] found comfort in the moral clarity of Tolkien's epic story of a just, clear war" (Grossman). The ambiguity of current world conflicts is possibly one of the greatest attractions of fantasy to modern Americans. Stories like Tolkien's give us "a good clear war story" during a period our country is engaged in "a nebulous conflict against a faceless enemy" (Grossman). Moreover, it is a war (or wars) that news personalities, politicians, and regular citizens constantly debate the merits of. The classic fantasy war is one which has two distinct sides, one good and one evil, with no room for interpretation and no need for mercy. Conflict in the classic superhero tradition is traditionally in the same vein. Superman fights evil villains intent on destroying Metropolis or the world. Batman does the same for Gotham. There is generally little room for interpretation.

Another way in which fantasy looks backward is in the form of the storytelling itself. Scott writes, "Fantasy literature…depends on patterns, motifs and archetypes." The genre is a modern reflection of ancient storytelling traditions, coming from the sagas and quest stories of old. The characters in fantasy tales resemble and influence each other,

"following a convention so deep it seems encoded in the human storytelling gene"

(Scott). The heroes, Scott continues:

> …are…orphans, summoned out of obscurity to undertake a journey into the heart of evil that will also be a voyage of self discovery…All of these young men…discover themselves to be in possession of extraordinary gifts, and become…the central figure in a struggle against absolute evil.

These older-style tales written for the present are related to the ubiquitous and well-understood stories of superheroes that are known so well, they have approached the level almost of American myth, one of the oldest forms of storytelling. The character archetypes described by Scott also apply to comics. Take the story of the orphaned Spider-man or that of the adopted Superman and remember what you know about their journeys and use of their "extraordinary gifts." The oldest stories are often the most used. And we do look back in times of trouble.

Influence of the Internet

One factor that hasn't been around to influence public consumption of comics in the past is the Internet. Many professionals in comics publishing believe that the ubiquitous nature of the Internet has certainly had an impact on the recent "diffusion of interest" in graphic novels, introducing them "to people who might never have given them a thought before" (MacMillan). Chuck Rosanski, an Internet comics retailer says, "…the Internet provides…access to people who previously didn't even know that they wanted this stuff…without the Internet, I don't think we would be generating near the sales we are right now" (qtd. in MacMillan). It's not just in comics that the Internet connects with existing fans and creates new ones. Chris Nashawaty, in an article for

Entertainment Weekly, discusses how, even in its early days, the Internet spawned and supported a huge number of groups and resources for fans of anything. The Internet allows fans to "communicate instantaneously with like-minded strangers all over the world" (Nashawaty 65). The Internet has truly changed the way fanaticism for a celebrity, product, or random interest operates. Nashawaty writes, "Being an obsessive entertainment fan used to be so simple-and solitary…But thanks to the Internet, fandom is turning into exhibitionism" (65).

The way fans connect through and to the Internet not only functions to retain and satisfy existing devotees, the information shared online, the series summaries, pictures, and trivia that fans seem to accumulate, is also available to anyone searching for the word "super" or some similar term in Google. A simple search for a picture of an old car led one reporter "into a netherworld of classic-car collectors, club shows, inspection services, parts auctions and a whole new bag of used-car salesmen's tricks" (Broder). The reporter also found a community of classic car buffs larger than he could have guessed. The point is that Matt Broder wasn't looking for information on classic cars; he just wanted to remember what his high school car looked like.

In a similar way, a child who sees the X-men animated cartoon currently running on cable television might want to find out what the next episode is or how to spell the names of the characters. But searching for X-Men will pull up gobs of information on the various incarnations of the X-Men, including the long-running monthly comic book. As Broder writes, "The Internet opens an alluring window to this world and allows shoppers [or the curious] to indulge their fantasies from the comfort of their desks." John Kent, an adult, long-time comic book fan, agrees that the online world "has made comics more

easily accessible" (Macmillan). He says, "If something is available at all, you can find [that information] real quickly" (qtd. in MacMillan).

Alternate Points of View

One thing that the Internet allows, the ability to gain information from all over the world and from different kinds of people, also seems to be influencing the popularity of graphic novels. Teacher Gretchen Schwartz writes, "An important benefit of graphic novels is that they present alternative views of culture, history, and human life in general in accessible ways, giving voice to minorities and those with diverse viewpoints" ("Graphic Novels" 264). This diversity of viewpoints is actually something fairly new to comics. Historically, comics have been written, drawn, and published almost exclusively by white men, even into the 1990's (Brown 81, 86). Partly as a result, and partly as reasons, the characters and consumers of the comics have also been white males (Lacher). Gary Groth, editor of the Comics Journal, identifies a self-perpetuating cycle. "The market is mostly white teenage boys. The reason is that the content has been aimed at white teenage boys" (qtd. in Lacher). Although many of comics' innovators over the years have been Jewish, including the original creators of Superman, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, their Jewish origins have rarely been apparent (Finkelshteyn).

Comics featuring black characters have been around for a long time (Brown 84). But even though African Americans were identified in 1994 as making up 30% of comics readers, early black superheroes, such as Luke Cage and the Black Panther, created in the 1960's and 70's generally "ranged from the culturally out of touch to the blatantly stereotypical," mainly because the creators where white ("New Adventures"). Even the

underground comix movement of the 1960's, for all its support of the alternative

lifestyles of the counterculture, was at first largely a boy's club. A spate of titles by

women published in the 1970's was really "the first time…that women creators [were]

given the scope to produce stories by themselves" (Sabin 104). Previously, only a few

women had worked as illustrators on newspaper comic strips or in less central roles. Gay-

and lesbian-created comix also didn't appear until the 1970's (Sabin 124).

However, some creators have explored multicultural topics and viewpoints, such

as Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1975), and Art

Spiegelman's *Maus* (1987 and 1992), which are both explorations of the authors' own

Jewish histories. And recently, "the landscape has broadened to include not just more

prominent characters of color, but comics companies owned and operated by minorities

as well as multicultural titles put out by other publishers" (Lacher). One example Lacher

gives, the series *Love & Rockets*, created by brothers Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez, is a

Latino-published comic that has been running for 11 years. Brown describes Milestone

Media, a comic-book company owned by blacks and focusing on creating comics by,

featuring, and for readers of color and women, which was started in 1991 (81). And

Gordon Nore describes *Supressed! History and Violence in America*, a title which

examines lesser-known acts of violence and suppression from American history, such as

the Zoot Suit Riots.

These forerunners have led the way for a current crop of graphic novels that

explores an amazing variety of cultures and viewpoints. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is a

memoir of growing up in the Ayatollah Khomeni's Iran. Lynda Barry, originally a

product of the comix movement, wrote *One! Hundred! Demons!*, a book that explores,

among other topics, the difficulties and delights growing up as a half-Filipino, half-Caucasian girl. And Howard Cruse's fictional story *Stuck Rubber Baby* examines one young man's struggle with his homosexuality against the backdrop of the civil rights movement. Even the rampant popularity of Japanese comics points to the widespread acceptance of comics as a medium for diverse messages. Stu Levy, CEO of manga publisher TokyoPop says, "manga is a very broad category and that diversity is very attractive to American readers" (qtd. in Reid, "BEA's Graphic").

The attractiveness of diversity to American readers, especially teens, can be traced to a number of observed factors, most plainly to the faster global communication brought about by easy Internet access and fast, cheap travel. As Henry Jenkins notes, "American teens…have developed more cosmopolitan tastes through travel or online chatting." He explains further by saying, "Rapid transportation and global communication and commerce accelerate change." The rapid communication and acceptance of change allow people, especially young people, to develop more global tastes and interests. Jenkins notes that young people often seek out foreign cultural products, such as African music. International cultural influences, especially from South and East Asia, also include Asian spiritual traditions, which young people mix with Western traditions, according to Carla Yu. It certainly makes sense that teens and young adults with a hunger for diverse culture would be attracted to the new diversity in comics.

The quick travel and broadening dissemination of information is not the only reason for the attraction of global culture. Global commerce, international exchange, and cultural displacement have led a large number of people to leave their countries of origin. International cultural exports of different kinds appeal to people from different cultures

who now live in foreign lands all over the world (Jenkins). Marjane Satrapi's memories of the circumstances that forced her to flee her repressive government perfectly illustrate this trend. Cultural exports also "express the experience of 'third-culture youths' who may be of mixed racial, national, or linguistic backgrounds, and have spent their early years moving between countries" (Jenkins). The work of Lynda Barry and artists like her especially speak to such people. Schwartz concludes that "the production of graphic novels allows for real diversity, which is essential for a literate democracy" (264).

Popularity of Japanese Culture

A direct consequence of the growing market for cultural exports is the wide-scale introduction of Japanese comics known as *manga* to the American comics market. In Japan, comics are a huge industry enjoyed largely by adults. In fact, manga, according to Nicole Gaouette, "are the most popular form of reading entertainment." In 1999 she reported, "one in every three books published in Japan is a manga…Sales last year were near $5 billion, 32 percent of the total revenue for all publications." Manga are read by children and adults in Japan, usually in weekly or monthly anthologies. In the U.S., English translations of manga titles are mostly published in trade paperback form, collecting stories originally serialized in the Japanese manga anthologies. And manga is a major force behind the surging interest in graphic novels in the U.S.

Manga sales in the U.S. doubled in 2001 and 2002, while other comic books and graphic novels increased sales by a lesser, though still impressive 8 percent (Reid, "BEA's Graphic"). Manga regularly hold many of the bestselling comics positions reported on by trade news website ICv2. In November of 2002, manga held 18 of the top

20 spots and 40 of the top 50 ("Manga Dominate"). In March of 2003, manga again held

40 of the top 50 slots ("Manga Continue"). Reid gives manga a huge amount of credit for

helping graphic novels as a whole. He writes:

> Since the late 1990's…manga have grown at such a phenomenal rate that
> they are transforming the landscape of American comics publishing…
> manga has emerged as the most popular comics category. Sales of manga
> graphic novels are driving sales of all graphic novels in the bookstore
> market. ("Manga Is Here").

Libraries are also getting into the market for manga. Reid suggests, "The enthusiastic

support of librarians interested in attracting teen readers as well as [the availability] of

anime are driving more and more readers to book stores and comic shops in search of

their favorite characters" ("Asian Comics"). Some people in the business worry about too

many titles being released and creating a glut, but no one has stopped or stepped back

their licensing and production of new titles ("Asian Comics").

Several observers believe that part of manga's success is due to its smaller size

and lower price in relation to other graphic novels (Maas 23). Perhaps even more telling,

manga is praised for attracting girls, a demographic generally neglected by American

comics. John O'Donnel, an executive for one manga and anime publisher, is "quick to

credit manga's rapid sales growth to being girl friendly" (Reid, "Manga Is Here"). And as

identified at the beginning of this paper, the expansion of the graphic novel to female

readers is one of the major influences on the explosive sales of the medium. Girls and

women make up 60 percent of American readers of manga (Reid, "Manga Is Here). A

recent article in *Time* credits that success with females to the subgenre of manga called

shoujo, a term that literally means "young girl" in Japanese. Shoujo manga are often

written by women and generally tell stories about teen girls and their romances and high school lives, often spiced up with magical adventures (Arnold).

Part of the success of manga with girls is because manga opened a source for graphic novels that is an alternative to the traditional comic book shops. Reid writes, "American girls and women generally do not go to comics shops and generally do not read traditional American comics featuring superheroes or extreme violence" ("Manga Is Here"). But now manga is more popular with girls and women than it is with boys, and these newly minted comics readers are seeking comics in bookstores in "numbers unheard of in the U.S. comics industry" ("Manga Is Here"). Manga companies such as Viz and TokyoPop, says Finney, "were among the first [comics publishers] to negotiate deals with major U.S. bookstores to distribute their product." The variety of subjects covered by manga as well as the medium's visual style are part of its appeal among both teens and adults ("Asian Comics"). In Japan, manga can be about almost anything, from the more expected genres of science fiction, horror and fantasy, to romance, economics, and even cooking (Gaouette). The form's visual style often has a different style from Western comics. Both traditions show sequences of events, but manga often employs a technique of showing the same moment from many different angles in a very cinematic effect, and manga frames are often divided in ways that are more varied than the more measured, regular boxes of traditional Western comics (Gaouette). And it's not just manga that is bringing in readers, Japanese animation, often called "Japanimation" or *anime*, is introducing cartoon watchers to manga, and other graphic novels as well (Finney).

It is not only manga and anime that are attractive to American consumers; many

visions of Japan are showing up all over the world. Douglas McGrey, in an article on

Japanese cultural power, describes how images from Japanese popular culture "show up

in MTV graphics, street fashions, bars and dance clubs, and even museums" (46). Jenkins

recalls, "American childhood has increasingly been shaped by Asian cultural imports.

Most parents now know about the Power Rangers, Tamagotchi and Pokémon, Sega and

Nintendo." (It is interesting to note that the kids of the Pokémon craze several years ago

are now pre-teens and teenagers, manga's target audience.) That classic and sometimes

ubiquitous artifact of Japanese popular culture, Hello Kitty, sells merchandise to the

yearly tune of nearly a billion dollars (McGrey 49). Even the Japanese way of reading is

catching on in the U.S. Manga published in the U.S. only a few years ago was always

reversed, or "flopped," mirrored so that the panels read from left to right, as in the

Western world, instead of right to left, how it is read in Japanese. These days, the

unflopped manga wins out. The practice of publishing manga in its original right-to-left

form is popular "because reading backwards seems cool to teen readers" ("Asian

Comics"). (It also helps to keep the price low because unflopped manga are cheaper to

make.) The practice is also popular because it's more "authentic," more Japanese.

McGrey recalls that Hello Kitty was Americanized for its introduction in the U.S.,

changing colors and characters from what was marketed in Japan to sell better in the

Western market. This is not the case now. Hello Kitty's status as a Japanese icon is part

of what makes the property popular (49). And it is not because Americans want some

kind of cultural "truth," it's because Japan itself has become the attraction. "Cultural

accuracy," says McGrey, "is not the point. What matters is the whiff of Japanese cool" (46).

Elements of Japanese culture have been invading for some time, explains Jose Tesoro. *Sushi*, *karaoke*, and manga have been making their way into American's lives for at least a decade (45). McGrey discusses the novelty of Japan's success, saying, "Japan has made deep inroads into American culture, usually written off by the rest of the world as aggravatingly insular" (46). The elements may be so deep, says Yu, "Asian artifacts in our world are soon likely to go from being exotic and underground to being fully mainstream." Perhaps part of Japan's success is due to its reputation for being a technological innovator, always providing new ideas and gadgets to the rest of the world. I remember that stores carrying the Nintendo Entertainment Systems sold in the 1980's couldn't keep them on the store shelves. Most young adults grew up knowing that many of their favorite entertainment options came from Japan. This has not changed. Japan's cutting-edge technology, says McGrey, coupled with luxury enhancements and models "inspire techno-lust in the levelest of heads, Japanese or foreign" (52).

Japan also has a long tradition of exporting its culture. As McGrey puts it, "Japan has been perfecting the art of transmitting certain kinds of mass culture" (48). Anime is a good example of this, as Tesoro demonstrates. "Japanese cartoons aim for a visceral, physical wit," he says, not the cerebral, verbal wit of American cartoons. The Japanese productions have "more universal impact," largely because physical comedy more easily translates to other cultures than verbal humor, which can be difficult to transfer to different languages with its original meaning intact (45). McGrey sees this ability to market to other cultures as a legacy of Japan's history. He writes:

> Japan was post-modern before postmodernism was trendy, fusing elements of other national cultures into one almost-coherent whole. It makes sense: Japan's history is filled with examples of foreign inspiration and cultural fusion, from its kanji character system [which was adopted from China] to its ramen noodles. (48)

Even manga shows the Japanese tradition of absorbing other cultures' ideas and using them in a Japanese way. Although there are stylistic and content differences between Japanese and Western comics, they are strongly connected, mainly because the so-called "father of manga," Osamu Tezuka, was heavily influenced by Walt Disney, an influence clearly visible in the four-fingered hands and round faces of Tezuka's characters (Gaouette). But Tezuka's work incorporated Japanese stories and storytelling conventions, and his work has inspired generations of Japanese comics creators and animators.

One major difference for exported Japanese cultural products, submits McGrey, is that they don't promote any specific Japanese value, unlike American cultural exports, which often exude an attitude of freedom or self-reliance (47). Even Mickey Mouse cartoons promote American ideas about capitalism and other American values. In actuality, points out McGrey, The "Japanese culture" being exported isn't traditional culture but brings together elements from other cultures with a Japanese sensibility (48). And it's not that Japan doesn't have its own authentic culture and values, it just doesn't market them. Traditional cultural products, like Sumo wrestling, are not marketed to Western consumers (50-1). "Part of Japan's secret to thriving amidst globalization," says McGrey, "[is] there exists a Japan for Japanese and a Japan for the rest of the world" (52). Japan can take "a flexible, absorptive, crowd-pleasing, shared culture and balance it with a more private, domestic one," and has found the ways to harness those

complementary cultures "to build an increasingly powerful global commercial force" (53). As an example, McGrey again produces Hello Kitty, whose last name, White, identifies her as having a supposed Western origin. Therefore, says McGrey, "Hello Kitty is Western, so she will sell in Japan. She is Japanese so she will sell in the West. It is a market boomerang that [Japanese] firms…manage effortlessly."

This marketing savvy helps explain why Japanese culture is so popular; what we see are products of our own culture, just repackaged with some added Japanese elements, and delivered back to us with the exotic cool of coming from Japan. Stu Levy, who founded manga publisher Tokyopop after living in Japan, puts it a different way. He says, "I really think that mentality is perfect for the digital generation because everything is about remixing—using existing tools and turning it into something aesthetically more pleasing than existed before" (qtd. in Jarvis).

One other facet of Japanese culture can also shed light on the popularity of manga, especially among teens. A rarity of children in Japan, which has declining birth rates, has given those children, often spoiled, tremendous cultural and spending power (McGrey 52). That power, says Tesoro, can explain the attenuated pre-adolescent orientation of Japan's pop culture. The busy, pressure-filled lives of Japanese young people can temporarily go away as the children "take refuge in cheerfully fantastic characters and animations" (45). Much of the popularity of Japanese cartoons seems to derive from "their glorification of the dreams and imagery of youth" (45). The Japanese youth culture would certainly appeal to American teens who are rising in spending power as well. Stuart Levy believes, "Teenagers will help this market [manga] grow and penetrate the culture over the next 10 years' (qtd. in Reid, "Manga Is Here"). And

connecting the new products to old favorites can't hurt. Levy says, "[American youth] grew up on videogames. Now that they're adults, they understand that manga, animation and videogames all come from the same core" (qtd. in Reid, "Manga Is Here").

Cycle of Comics' Popularity

Another force that is likely acting on the public's taste for graphic novels is that of history. Trends in popular culture have always been quick to change, but something that was popular before is usually bound to become popular again when it is rediscovered by a new audience or generation. As noted earlier, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was a phenomenon in the 1960's and 70's. And it has become popular again. Comics have experienced multiple cycles of popularity and unpopularity. And when you compare those cycles, a definite pattern emerges, even in the early days of comics.

Most histories of the comics medium begin with the late Nineteenth century, although Sabin acknowledges that mass media combining pictures and text have been around since the days of wood-cut printed "broadsheets" (11). However, the beginning of the comics for our purposes was the introduction of *The Yellow Kid*, a publication widely regarded as the first comic strip, which was first published in 1896 (20). The success of *The Yellow Kid* provoked a circulation war among newspapers and spawned a host of imitators, including *Gasoline Alley*, a strip that started in 1918 (24). In response to the medium's popularity, especially among the lower classes and immigrants, some critics attacked comics as "lowbrow, trashy and detrimental to 'proper reading'" (25). Some Christians, as mentioned earlier, criticized the Sunday publishing date. However, these early attacks had little effect on the comics, a situation that would not be repeated.

Forty years after *The Yellow Kid* was introduced, another innovation in the comics field sparked another round of popularity. In 1938, Joe Schuster and Jerry Seigel created Superman. Even though anthologized comic books had appeared earlier in the decade, the creation of Superman established the real popularity of comic books (55, 57). Encouraged by the popularity of Superman, other costumed heroes, like Batman and Captain Marvel, were created. Other genres then entered the comics fray, spurred on by the success of Superman and his imitators. Detective and crime comics appeared in the 1940's, followed by war, science fiction and horror comics in the 1950's. Every time a successful title would appear, imitators would follow, trying to take advantage of a proven demand (66-7). Many of these titles were far inferior to their predecessors. Horror comics especially tried to imitate then one-up the competition. And it was the horror comics, as well as crime titles, that first provoked the backlash of the 1950's, leading to the creation of the Comics Code, discussed earlier (68). The effects on the comics industry were immediate and far-reaching. Sabin writes, "Sales slumped almost immediately as lines of comics were cancelled. Whole genres were virtually destroyed…[Comic book publisher] EC very nearly went under…while other publishers were not so lucky. It all added up to disaster" (68).

Comic books did survive, although the censorship campaign left few genres other than the superhero comics intact. The Comics Code has a lot to do with the continuing prevalence of superheroes in the comics medium. Despite the sales crash of the 1950's, comics did rise again. In the 1960's, Marvel Comics' introduction of Spider-Man and other new characters reawakened the superhero genre. War comics and even toned-down horror comics also experienced a resurgence in sales, though not on the same scale as in

the early 50's (74-6). The late 1960's saw a new innovation in comics, the underground

comix movement. Unhampered by the restrictions of the Comics Code, which they

bypassed, comix really got started in 1968 with the publication of Robert Crumb's *Zap*

(92-4). Other titles followed, inspired by that first successful pioneer, just as happened

after Superman launched the first wave of superhero comics. Again, the rash of imitators

created some really shoddy work alongside the good. "In fact," writes Sabin, "if

anything, the underground actually encouraged poor work because its central ethic that

'anybody could do it' meant that anybody did" (103-7).

Then the underground's success, like that of the mainstream before it, attracted

the ire of the censors. Conservative publications began criticizing comix in the 60's. In

1973, the U.S. Supreme court allowed localities to define their own obscenity laws, then

other laws were created restricting the sale of drug-related paraphernalia. The state of

New York banned one issue of *Zap!* for being obscene and the new drug laws lead to the

closure of many headshops, a major outlet for many comix (116-7). Legal costs and the

resultant toning-down of some material, coupled with the decline of the hippie culture,

busted the comix market (117, 126). Even the mainstream comics lost ground in the early

1970's, although they didn't face the same challenges as the underground (131). Again,

neither mainstream nor underground comics completely went away, they just lost much

of their audience and influence.

So, the comic book industry had experienced two periods of popularity which

were ended by criticism and censorship of the medium. And in the 1980's, it started all

over again. In the 1980's, a new group of alternative comics appeared on the market, led

by Art Spiegelman's anthology series, *Raw* (126). At the same time, mainstream comics

were also experiencing a rebirth. The major comics companies started targeting adult

readers with more complex superhero storylines and specialized comics shops targeted at

"hardcore" fans and not casual readers (157-60). These more mature comics reached a

new level in 1986 and 1987 with the publication of Frank Miller's graphic novel of a re-

imagined Batman, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore's aging-superhero title,

Watchmen (162-4). Alternative comics also reached for, and found, a level comics had

never been at before. In 1992, Spiegelman, a product of the comix movement and a

pioneer in the alternative comics scene, received the Pulitzer Prize for his two-part

graphic novel, *Maus*, the only work of comics literature to ever be so recognized (182-8).

The critical and commercial successes of Miller's and Spiegelman's works helped raise

the profile of graphic novels as a form and highlighted the advantages that graphic novels

have for writing longer, more complex stories with more interesting characters (165).

Then, in the mid-nineties, comics again found themselves in a crisis. The level of

diversity and creativity in the alternative titles, which included controversial subjects, as

well as sex and violence, "provoked the ire of the establishment" (214). Again. The more

mature mainstream titles were being produced in a medium still largely seen as for

children. Sabin writes:

> Mainstream and alternative titles were attacked, but it was the alternative
> comics that caught the brunt. They were vilified in a fashion that had not
> been seen since the height of the underground: their sexual and violent
> content was sensationalized, while their creators were portrayed as
> 'barbarians at the gates'. Newspapers and magazines reproduced panels
> out of context… and went to town on shock headlines. Once again, the old
> Mcguffin that the comics were 'dangerous' because children might get
> hold of them was wheeled out. (215)

Even the creators themselves were targeted. Mike Diana, one artist, was jailed for a few days on obscenity charges. And as happened both times before, when comics were challenged, the market went bust (215).

This time the decline was compounded by a strange twist in the mainstream comics world that developed in the early nineties. As Tim Jones reported in the *Denver Post* in 1996, many comics titles, especially superhero series, were the focus of a speculators' market. Collectors who often had no intention of reading comics bought new titles in the hopes they could someday be sold for astronomical sums of money. A few rare comic books actually went for hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction (Jones). Mainstream comic book sales once again leapt into the millions (Wolk; Jones). However, the speculators' hopes of striking it rich depended on the comics they bought eventually becoming rare. With so many being sold, the possibility of eventually making money on a rare comic was non-existent. When the mainstream market abruptly died shortly after the alternative market, thousands of comics shops closed (McCloud, *Reinventing Comics* 10).

Now, nearly ten years after the last comics bust, graphic novels are becoming popular again. They are exploring new territory and targeting new audiences and new sales venues. The forces of history are very powerful. The question this time is, "Has anything changed?" Will it always be boom or bust for comics, or has something else in American culture happened that will make graphic novels a stable form of mass entertainment?

A Multitasking Society

Whether new developments in technology and information dissemination will affect the long-term status of comics, the fact remains that American culture *has* changed. Even the ways in which we complete our everyday activities have changed rather dramatically. One of the trends affecting us in such a way is the way in which we constantly multitask, the way we try to do multiple things at once. This is especially true of our information-gathering behavior. A survey conducted in 2000 said the time that people used media and entertainment everyday was 4.7 hours in real time. However that figure was 7.6 hours when multitasking was factored in (Dominguez). In essence, if we were to do all of our media- and entertainment-based activities one-by-one, it would take more than seven-and-a-half hours to do the same activities that take less than five hours to do when we double up. Americans today manage this by giving the activities they are doing "continuous partial attention" as one Microsoft employee put it (qtd. in "Does America").

The prevalence of multitasking prompted the editors of *U.S. News and World Report* to ask, "Does America have ADD?" In other words, has our continuous moving from one task to another taken away our ability to concentrate on just one thing? The *U.S. News* editors also noted, "We are a supermobile, hyperconnected, media-saturated society… with so many tasks being juggled and so much information being processed." Children are especially affected. While they have watched television ever since its creation, now they, as well as adults, seem to rarely just watch TV. They are always surfing the Internet, doing homework, or talking on the phone (Mandese). Multitasking is about doing more in less time. Adults, too must deal with the increased speed and amount

of information coming at us constantly. Our days are always on, running at high speed, and packed with info. "The average American office worker," reports *U.S. News*, "sends or receives 201 messages a day…There's no doubt we are processing more information in less time than at any point in history." And now, that "diet of information" is "outpacing our ability to digest" it ("Does America").

One way in which people can increase the speed at which they absorb and process information is by using more pictures and less text. The old cliché about pictures being worth a thousand words is not just a saying. Humans often read text and then create a mental picture, especially when they really "get into" a book (Esrock 22). Why, when someone wants to convey a message, do you have to read the message and create your own mental image, when the message's creator could create the mental image for you by drawing it or providing a photograph? One reason graphical user interfaces and information sources with graphic representations are so important to computer users is because the pictorial information can "condense large amounts of information into a visual picture" (Hedley 115). Hedley writes, "Verbal thinking is restricted in both the amount and kind of information it can handle in a reasonable amount of time, more time than it takes a computer to produce the information" (119). In other words, computer delivery of information is too fast for humans, but a visual representation can speed up the rate at which a person processes that information. This is the great advantage of graphic novels for readers who want a whole story, but don't have enough time to read a novel. I am attracted to graphic novels because I love to read, but I rarely have time for it. A graphic novel can give me a full story in only an hour or two. Jill Thompson, an American comics writer and artist who created an American graphic novel done in the

manga style, says, "You can flip through [a manga] quickly, but you feel a lot of emotion without having to read words" (qtd. in Arnold). It's also easier to pick up a graphic novel after setting it down in the middle, because the reader doesn't have to do as much work regaining the flow of translating text into mental images. The images are already created.

Our multitasking-oriented society has not just affected the people; it has also affected the forms of the information and entertainment we consume. Almost any entertainment property worth anything has to have its "media tie-ins." Tie-ins, which are usually related to a popular movie, can be anything from novels to DVDs, graphic novels, and video games (Wolk; Raugust; Reid, "BEA's Graphic"). Media tie-ins are far from new; as early as the 1920's, publishers were creating comics for children that related to popular movies of the time (Sabin 28). However, the cross-marketing of entertainment properties in multiple formats has really taken off within the last couple of decades or so, especially since superheroes have made a resurgence in the movie industry (Sabin 132-3).

The fact is that entertainment properties marketed through multiple channels do very well, largely because, as John-Michel Maas puts it, "multiple formats help garner attention in a crowded market (23). Furthermore the cross-marketing of all of the formats for one property can lead to DVDs in a bookstore and books in a movie store. All these different "sales channels" help heighten the exposure of one format to a new audience (Maas 23). Media tie-ins are particularly important for non-manga graphic novels, where such tie-ins are, as Maas writes, are "the most reliable way to drive sales of graphic novels other than manga" (25). Media crossovers are especially lucrative for publishers like Dark Horse, which control all the different branches of particular merchandising

machines, and can "create a groundswell around a property, and then capitalize on its success in several mediums" (26).

The interplay of the different formats is growing more complex. Films are inspired by comic books and spin-off movie novelizations and video games (Maas 26). One of Dark Horse's landmark tie-in titles, Aliens vs. Predator, actually started life as two separate movie franchises that inspired comics of their own, then the Alien vs. Predator cross-over comic book series followed by video games, and will very soon spawn a cross-over movie. And just as fans of the previous incarnations will see the new movie, the movie's release will make more people aware of the property, sending some of them looking for the comics and video games (Maas 23, 26). What the tie-ins end up doing is informing consumers about other ways in which they can consume a favorite movie or a favorite book, hopefully convincing them to spend more money on the franchise. Since graphic novels are such a part of the media tie-in market, and media tie-ins sell well, it's easy to imagine that quite a bit of graphic novels' popularity is tied to those other media.

Even television news has started catering to our penchant for multi-modal media consumption. Most 24-hour news outlets, like CNN and MSNBC, now run ticker tape news bulletins on the bottom part of the screen, something that became widespread after September 11. These bulletins are rarely related to the news story being shown at the time. So viewers get at least two different pieces of news, one using the image- and audio-based information and one using text-based information. It only makes sense that people who are used to receiving their information over two different channels simultaneously and their entertainment in multiple media might even expect their reading

material to have multiple channels of transmission. Graphic novels fit the bill; they transmit information on the level of visual images as well as on the textual level.

Visual Literacy

It is the differences between the visual level of information and the textual level that I believe is having the most profound influence on the graphic novel boom. Our world has increasingly become one of images. Richard Howells, in his book *Visual Culture*, confirms this. He writes, "We live in a visual world. We are surrounded by increasingly sophisticated visual images" (1). Much of our information comes from the ubiquitous television, which is essentially a visual medium. Many of our memories of world events are shaped by the images we see of them on television (Howells 2). Most American's memories of September 11, 2001 surely include the same televised images of the World Trade Center towers falling. Even newspapers have become much more visual, incorporating more and more pictures as well as graphs, maps, and charts that condense textual information into bite-sized chunks, easy to absorb and digest. But probably the biggest culprit behind our culture's turn to visual information is the Internet. At its beginnings, the Internet was mainly text-based, but further developments in technology have allowed websites to employ more visual images (Howells 232). As the Internet has continued to evolve, it has become increasingly more integrated, allowing users to view "photography, drawing, (written) text, music and video" sometimes all at once, sometimes linked together, so that clicking on one link moves the user to another type of media (Howells 232). Although some Internet sites combine text and pictures in ways that seem like traditional newspapers, many use interactivity to go beyond the traditional

text-with-pictures format. People read Internet web sites differently than newspapers; they look at small chunks of information, such as "highlighted keywords, bulleted lists, frequent subheadings, and paragraphs containing exactly one idea" (Gleick 87). And we get the most amount of information in the smallest chunk when we look at pictures. For all of the images we encounter in our daily lives, is it any wonder that we have come to depend on visual media? Hochheimer asks, "What does literacy, in fact, mean in the Age of Information? Is merely understanding the printed word sufficient to be considered fully literate anymore?" In a world as dominated by television and other visual media as our own, we no longer just read text, we have to read pictures, as well. Strader says that "visual literacy involves the ability to sort out visual stimuli and make sense of them, often aided and abetted by the other senses. In the strictest sense it is not purely visual but multi-sensual…" (45).

Of course, our dependence on the "reading" of images is not new. Helen Strader writes, "visual literacy was the first form of literacy, and it is a vital part of the ability to read. Recognition of shapes, sizes and colors is acknowledged to be indispensable in the development of reading ability; this is based on visual literacy" (46). Ancient humans, says Carolyn Hedley, "actively [created] a vision of the world." They and young children are much more dependent on visual images working together with verbal language (112-3). It's similar to the way children learn the names of the parts of a human face. Someone points to a nose and says, "nose." Eventually, the child grasps that the word said matches the image given to him. This visual process is very important to our process of learning language. Hedley explains that "infant and early childhood learning is concerned almost exclusively with visual thinking" (116). In fact, before modern times, but not too long

before the last century and a half, humans didn't need textual literacy; communication

among the common people was accomplished with pictures and symbols and "the oral

tradition of the storyteller and actor…" (Strader 45-6). Even the precursors of the comics

were designed for an audience dependent on visual literacy. The "broadsheets" produced

in England in the seventeenth century did have text for those who could read, but the

illustrations were the main way of transmitting the information to "an

audience…assumed to be illiterate" (Sabin 11). In modern times, though, people need to

read because so much information has been transmitted through the written word. It takes

an informed population to make democracy work (Strader 45-6).

These days, not only is visual information all around, it is increasing. Charles

Molesworth writes, "companies, news services and so-called media conglomerates...

produce and circulate almost unimaginably copious numbers of pictures for an ever-

increasing array of outlets." The increase in information is not easy to deal with. "Verbal

thinking is restricted in both the amount and kind of information it can handle in a

reasonable amount of time, more time than it takes a computer to produce the

information," wrote Hedley. The overload of information, says Molesworth, "is always

threatening to outstrip" even our own perception of the "real world" around us. He

continues, "our eyes are being made to feed our minds beyond satiety…we cannot simply

turn off this flood of images."

Since this visual information is all around us, and we can't just turn it off, we

have to adapt. Molesworth concludes, "…we live in a world of excess images…The

media…as well as the advertising and merchandising industries have produced a flood of

images that have changed the way many people see, and perhaps the way they can see."

And because all of these visual images are not just filler, but ways of transmitting information or ideas, the "way they can see" could certainly be applied to "the way they can *read*." Michele Gorman notes that the young people of today, who are growing up surrounded by technology, digital information, and visual images have become "comfortable with non-text visual media," a level of comfort that has led these teens to be "more at ease 'reading' the combination of words and pictures" (20). The trend will most likely continue with adults. Hedley suggests that with all of the new media and technology around us, "electronics is changing our thinking"; as information is presented more and more visually, combining text and images, "we will become more visual as we combine technologies" (120). One effect of the prevalence of visual media is that media consumers have become accustomed to the immediacy of visual images. Text provides the highest level of abstraction of an event or piece of information, removing much of its immediacy for the reader (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 46-7). As we become accustomed to the immediacy of visual media, the emotional impact of text may not be enough. Goldsmith writes, "Graphics-driven literature…[is] more visceral than the unadorned printed word: a pictorial representation of violence or sexual behavior is more immediate than a verbal description" (1510). One concern I have in providing graphic novels in a public library is making sure we guard ourselves against challenges. Although the content of a graphic novel may be similar to a typical adult or young adult novel, the visual images of sexual, violent, or controversial content make the graphic novel more explicit, simply because readers, especially young ones, don't have to decode and process text explanations. Seeing an event told in pictures gets a stronger reaction from the viewer than reading it.

As our way of seeing changes, so should our definition of literacy. John Hochheimer questions the idea that it is only writing that people need to understand in order to be literate. The integration of "visual and graphic media" into people's lives and work, says Hedley, will only increase; people will use verbal and visual presentations together, prompting our understanding of literacy to be "defined by knowledge of its graphic, pictorial form as well as its verbal one" (123). But visual literacy is not necessarily easier than textual literacy. A person's ability to make sense of a picture or painting is dependent on coherently organizing the individual symbols and simple images cognitively so that the picture as a whole is understandable. These symbols and images, pieces of visual language, are important to understanding any kind of visual media. Strader writes, "Symbols abound in art. If the symbol is not understood, the painting will not be fully understood" (50). This "perception and ordering of images is central to reading ability…and…the core of what we mean by visual literacy" (49-50).

Comics, too, have to be read, and not just textually. Goldsmith writes, "Graphic novels require active, critical participation by the reader, who must not only be able to decode text but also follow its flow and grasp essentials of narrative, mood, character, or plot through images" (1510). The image panels themselves must be decoded, especially in Japanese comics, where several different panels might show the same moment in time (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 79). Gaouette explains the complexity of decoding such representations, saying, "This cinematic approach forces readers to pull together the moment from the varied perspectives the artist has given them." *Comics* also have a peculiar language, as Scott McCloud explains at length in *Understanding Comics*, with symbols and syntax of their own. Simple lines can be used to indicate motion, feelings,

even other senses such as touch and smell, and altered lines on the balloons encapsulating

dialogue can indicate tone of voice (127-35). These conventions may even partially

explain, to some extent, why comics were historically more easily accepted by younger

people. Marshal McLuhan, in his landmark book *Understanding Media*, notes that comic

books didn't have anything that "connected" with older readers and were "as difficult to

decipher as the *Book of Kells*," therefore adults, for the most part, ignored the medium in

its early days. "So," says McLuhan, "having noticed nothing about the *form*, they could

discern nothing of the *contents*, either" (168). Accustomed to reading text, many adults in

the early days of comic books were essentially unable to read them fully.

For a culture that has an understanding of literacy that includes the ability to read

images, the presence of graphic novels as a legitimate form of reading makes perfect

sense. Hochheimer recalls that earlier shifts in reading created markets for new kinds of

reading material. "Nearly universal literacy produced a market for mass-produced

fiction…The burgeoning number of readers also produced a market for mass journalism"

(Hochhemier). And so the advent of visual readers may certainly have opened the market

to graphics literature.

Conclusion

The history of comics is relatively short compared to other mass media, but very

bumpy. The most recent trend in comics is an astonishing surge in popularity, well

documented by sales figures and growing distribution. I have examined a number of

distinct forces and trends that have contributed to this current popularity. The question

now is, "Is this a temporary trend, or something more permanent?" Will this boom in

graphic novels follow the usual comic book trend of being popular for several years then dying abruptly due to censorship and waning interest? Some of the forces acting on graphic novel reading are certainly temporary. Many trends in popular culture run on a cycle, just as comics do. The current conservative swing of the U.S. government will shift eventually; politics is on an even shorter cycle than comics popularity. Our current fascination with fantasy, a genre that embodies many of the same themes as many comic-book stories, will run its course in a few years, as has happened before. Even our fascination with Japanese culture, a major factor in the rising popularity of graphic novels, will fade as its products either lose their "coolness" or are absorbed into our culture, becoming just another ingredient in the cultural melting pot of the U.S. These forces behind the graphic novel phenomenon are all temporary at most.

The influences on graphic novel popularity that are related to longer-term trends in American culture and society, however, argue that "this comic book thing" may be a more permanent fixture on the literary front. Although Japanese "cool" may be temporary, the increasing interest of Americans in global culture is likely not. As better access to worldwide information increases and more people of different cultures and nationalities move to new locales around the world, the varied perspectives found in graphic novels will remain an attraction for the medium. The Internet is not a fad, but a tool that has changed the way we gather information. Because someone with a budding interest in a topic can instantly seek out and connect with others who have similar interests and superior knowledge, the Internet will remain as a valuable channel for attracting new fans to the comics.

Our multitasking, multi-modal lives are also likely to remain fast-paced and will probably only get more cluttered with information. Graphic novels may become even more important as a method of transmitting printed information faster than text alone. We are now used to getting media from multiple channels, often at the same time, and the media tie-ins business has been growing since the early days of film and is not likely to die out. As a source of promotion and material for comics titles, this trend will probably continue to be a major influence on the comics. But it is the new importance of visual literacy, spurred by our dependence on non-textual media, that will likely mean the most for comics as a medium. With the abundance of visual images changing the ways we see and read, the medium that combines text and pictorial images could easily have a new importance to our culture and gain acceptance as a legitimate form of storytelling and information transmission. While the form may experience ups and downs in popularity, as do other types of mass media, comics may finally be here to stay.

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