

Comics & Graphic novels

Concepts and history based on the
Encyclopedia Britannica entry on “graphic
novel”

<http://www.britannica.com/art/graphic-novel>

What is a graphic novel?

In American & British usage:

A type of TEXT combining WORDS & IMAGES

- essentially a comic –

The term most commonly refers to a
a complete story
presented as a book
rather than a periodical.

The term 'graphic novel' is contentious.

The field of comic studies emerges in the 1970s, and it seeks to define what comics and graphic novels are.

It looks for a critical terminology appropriate to the new field.

What is understood by 'comics'?

For many, the word 'comics' denotes
a periodical for children,
published on a weekly or monthly basis,
sold at newsstands or specialty stores,
often with pages devoted to advertising, and
when intended for young readers,
competitions & puzzles.

How is a 'graphic novel' different?

A graphic novel is usually taken to mean
a long comic narrative
for a mature audience,
published in hardback or paperback,
and sold in bookstores,
with serious literary themes
and sophisticated artwork.

However,

comics are found in all shapes and formats,
appeal to many different groups & ages,
and encompass a huge variety of
genres & styles

Moreover,

graphic novels are often
repackaged collections of
serially published comics.

Bookshops & libraries make no real distinction,
so the term graphic novel often serves
no serious descriptive purpose.

'Graphic novel' can be understood as a marketing term intended to resituate comics for an audience uncomfortable with, or embarrassed by, the association that surround them – a reader of comics is juvenile & subliterate.

It must be noted that
texts that are originally intended for
publication in book form
sometimes take advantage of the possibilities
for longer narrative, different formats,
& superior paper quality.

This can be seen as an argument for
preserving the distinction
between comics & graphic novels.

Note that distinctions between ‘comics’ & ‘graphic novels’ don’t exist in French & Japanese contexts.

In France, comics - or *bande dessinée*, literally “drawn strips” - have long been collected in high-quality albums, with themes & styles appropriate to a mature audience.

In Japan a huge proportion of the population reads comics, or *manga*, in a dizzying variety of genres & themes.

‘Graphic novel’ must be understood in terms of the cultural attitudes that shaped it.

From comic strips to comic books

In the late 19th century, US newspapers had a 'funny pages' section, with comic strips.

The comic book format was born in the 1930s, when comic strips were published as separate entities.

The humor genre started to give way to action, crime, and fantasy books.

These combined to create the superhero genre, which came to dominate the American market.

The association of comics with humorous & juvenile entertainment persisted, so the term 'comics' stuck.

It is used as a singular noun to refer to the medium.

The appearance of underground comics brought a new term – *comix* – denoting X-rated & taboo content.

Underground comix were also distinguished from the mainstream by its distribution and its material quality. Key comic artist: R. Crumb.

The academic study of comics

Academic interest in comics began in the 1970s.

The work of Winsor McCay & George Herrimann, comic strip creators from the early 20th century, was celebrated.

Comics began to be seen as part of a lineage of word-image texts that evolved from cave paintings, Egyptian hieroglyphs & Mayan carvings, medieval illuminated manuscripts, the Bayeux Tapestry, satirical serial illustrations by Hogarth & engravings by William Blake, among many others.

Comics should be seen in a larger historical context:

On the one hand, an ancient medium that combines words & images – two of the primal building blocks for communication;

On the other, a modern medium that continues to develop & evolve.

Comics have been described as ‘sequential art’:
“juxtaposed pictorial & other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response”

- Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*

The first graphic novels

Many consider Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978) to be one of the most important early examples of the graphic novel in the U.S.

Other key titles:

Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986)

Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986-87)

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-86)

All three had originally appeared as serial publications in comic or magazine form.

The graphic novel grows up

The turn of the 21st century proved to be a golden period for comics & graphic novels.

The production of comics in book form & the subsequent exploitation of the freedoms associated with the book market saw the emergence of a wealth of material, such as *Persepolis* (2000), by Marjane Satrapi; and *From Hell* (1991-98) & *Lost Girls* (1991-2006) by Alan Moore.

The appearance of Web comics

Web comics present a potential challenge to graphic novels: Will the new technology change the format?

Web publishing allows more creative freedom, and presents options to comic artists:

Will they still be drawn to longer narratives in book form?

Or, will Web comics, tending towards shorter narratives, encourage a return to serialization, this time through the medium of the Internet rather than the comics page?

From graphic novel to the screen: reading & viewing suggestions

L'arabe du futur – Riad Satouf, 2015

The Dark Knight Returns – Frank Miller, 1986

Frankenstein Underground – Mike Mignola, 2015

Hellboy – Mike Mignola, 1993 - present

A History of Violence – John Wagner, 1997

Maus – Art Spiegelman, 1980- 1991

Persepolis – Marjane Satrapi, 2000-2003

Road to Perdition – Max Allan Collins, 1998

Sin City – Frank Miller, 1991-1992

300 – Frank Miller, 1998

V vor Vendetta – Alan Moore, 1982-1985

The Walking Dead – Robert Kirkman, 2003 - present

Watchmen – Alan Moore, 1986-1987

The BFI 2008 series: Comic-Book Movies

How many have you seen?

Superman the Movie (1978) Richard Donner

Batman: Mask of the Phantasm (1993) – animated, Eric Radomski

Modesty Blaise (1966) Joseph Losey

Flash Gordon (1980) Mike Hodges

Popeye (1980) Robert Altman

Akira (1980) Katsujiro Otomo - animé

The Rocketeer (1991) Joe Johnston

Dick Tracy (1990) Warren Beatty

Danger: Diabolik (1968) Mario Bava

V for Vendetta (2005) James McTeigue

300 (2006) Zack Snyder

The Dark Knight: The IMAX Experience (2008) C. Nolan

X-Men trilogy: X-Men (2000), *X-Men United* (2002)

X-Men: Last Stand (2006)

Ghost World (2001) Terry Zwigogg

BFI series - continued

Art School Confidential (2006) Terry Zwigoff

Road to Perdition (2002) Sam Mendes

American Splendor (2003) Shari Springer Berman, Robert Pulcini

Hellboy (2004) Guillermo del Toro

Hellboy: The Golden Army (2008) Guillermo del Toro

Sin City (2005) Frank Miller, Richard Rodriguez

A History of Violence (2005) David Cronenberg

Persepolis (2007) Marjane Satrapi

Iron Man (2008) Jon Favreau

The Incredible Hulk (2008) Louis Leterrier

Wanted (2008) Timur Bekmambetov

Spider-Man trilogy: *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004),
Spider-Man 3 (2007), Sam Raimi

Superman II (1980) Richard Lester