Imagetext, or, Why Art Spiegelman Doesn't Draw Comics

By Joseph Witek

In 1992 the second installment of Art Spiegelman's account of his parents' experiences in the Holocaust, *Maus II*, won a special Pulitzer Prize. This unprecedented literary honor is a telling index of just how far comics have come since the days of the anti-comics crusade of the 1950s, when frightened American parents exorcised the specter of adolescent anarchy by burning piles of comic books. But to the ears of people who, like me, are professionally concerned with the comics medium, the chorus of critical praise for Spiegelman's work was marred by a few off notes. Most notable was the *New York Times Book Review*, which began its November 3, 1991 issue with the rather perplexing line, "Art Spiegelman doesn't draw comics."[1] Then the *Village Voice* wrote, in a review of a Museum of Modern Art exhibition of materials from the writing of *Maus II*, that "Spiegelman is an original, a hybrid artist who has genuinely created a new form. . . . But *Maus* is not exactly a comic book, either; comics are for kids."[2] These categorical assertions are no doubt news to Art Spiegelman himself, who, though he has labored for years to expand the definition of what a comic book is and what it means to "draw comics," has never suggested that he was doing anything else. While *Maus* is beyond doubt highly original, it likewise manifestly is written in a medium with a relatively long history (comics are older than radio and television, for example) and with a well-established set of narrative conventions of which *Maus* partakes.

The proposition that *Maus* is an utterly unprecedented work created in a form of Art Spiegelman's own invention is particularly puzzling because even the slightest acquaintance with Spiegelman's artistic career reveals his long and central role in the artistic movement from which not only *Maus* but also a wide array of contemporary comics derive their heritage: the underground comix. The "x" of the word "comix" distinguishes the irreverent and iconoclastic self-published black-and-white comic books often associated with the Sixties counterculture from their mainstream, four-color, corporately produced cousins.[3] The undergrounds were born in the late 1960s. When they died (or even if they ever did) is a matter of some debate, but clearly by the mid-1970s the initial impetus of the underground comix movement was over. Just as clearly, however, the undergrounds were and remain tremendously influential to any creator who takes the comics form seriously, and Art Spiegelman himself has done as much as anyone to keep the underground ethos alive, first by his co-editorship of the comix anthology magazine *Arcade* (with Bill Griffith of *Zippy the Pinhead* fame), and currently by his stewardship (with Françoise Mouly) of the avant-garde graphics anthology *Raw*, where *Maus* first appeared in serial form. Any attempt to understand the origins of *Maus* must at least acknowledge the existence of the underground comix, and to declare that Art Spiegelman "has genuinely created a new form" requires that the most important movement in the history of American comics be marginalized or even written out altogether.

That erasure is currently underway not only in the popular press but also among some comics critics and historians. Many full-length comics histories have been labors of love undertaken by
longtime comics fans, and their primarily nostalgic perspective clashes with the transgressive and unruly spirit of the undergrounds; writers with fond memories of the patriotic superheroes of the 1940s often are profoundly uneasy with the sex, drug, and violence-soaked underground comix. For example, both Maurice Horn’s massive World Encyclopedia of Comics and Ron Goulart’s more narrowly focused Encyclopedia of American Comics essentially omit the underground comix from detailed consideration. A glance at the “G”s in Goulart’s volume reveals a full column of text on the little-known character The Green Lama; not mentioned at all is one of the primary influences on the very popular autobiographical comics genre of today, comix artist Justin Green. Goulart’s full-scale histories of comic books, Over 50 Years of American Comic Books and the hubristically titled Ron Goulart’s Great History of Comic Books, likewise treat the minutia of early comics in loving detail, while the undergrounds merit barely a paragraph. Such misplaced emphasis in the comics histories is not simply a quirk of a single writer, either. Mike Benton’s glossy history The Comic Book in America considers the underground comix as one of many minor genres in American comics; the undergrounds thus are lumped in with romance comics, western comics, and comics spun off from movies and television. By bracketing off the undergrounds from an important role in comics history, the nostalgists finally agree with an implicit premise of the popular press’s attitude toward Maus: comic books are brightly colored adventure stories mass-produced for children; Spiegelman’s moving autobiographical account of life as the child of Holocaust survivors must then be something sui generis.

4 Academic scholars of comics have been at some pains to distance themselves from the fan writers, yet at least one strain of comics criticism follows the nostalgists’ suit by ignoring the underground comix. The recent volume Dark Knights: The New Comics in Context attempts to explain the purported sophistication of contemporary comics by tracing the development of the figure of the superhero. Greg McCue and Clive Bloom argue:

The history of the superhero is the history of the comic-book medium struggling to establish itself. Once all the necessary elements were in place the medium realized previously unknown possibilities. Even with other genres available to the medium, the superhero remains the most interesting because it has accumulated a wealth of codes and history which the most talented creative people can excavate and exploit.

Certainly the role of costumed superheroes in American comics history cannot be ignored. Yet for all the media attention they generated and the many imitators they inspired, the dark-toned superhero revisions Batman: The Dark Knight Returns and Watchmen are only one thread of the “New Comics” of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Another strain of contemporary comics criticism stresses the important work in the form being done by creators such as, among many others, Lynda Barry, Dave Sim, Peter Bagge, Julie Doucet, Chester Brown, Dan Clowes, and Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez, all of whom are deeply and often explicitly indebted to the underground comix.

5 The repudiation of the comics form articulated by the New York Times and the Village Voice, the single-minded emphasis on older (and safer) comics by the nostalgic historians, and the critical lionization of the superhero genre all amount to implicit theories of comics history. The New York press, confronted by a undeniably powerful work executed in a previously disdained medium, assumes that Spiegelman has by force of artistic will transcended mere comics into some uncharted formal realm. Conversely, writers who yearn for the early days of comics see the new superheroes, with their explicit violence and ambiguous motivations, as a devolution from a purer standard of heroism, patriotism, and wholesome fun for kids. And for the celebrators of today’s mainstream comics, any development in comics history that does not lead to the fulfillment of the superhero genre amounts to an unproductive false step. The
underground comix present each of these theories with an embarrassing obstacle. For the guardians of elite taste, to acknowledge the forebears of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* is to blur the crucial ideological distinction between high and low art. Far simpler to designate *Maus* as unique and self-engendered while still maintaining that “comics are for kids” than to find a way to discriminate among the huge and bewildering array of comics that exist in the world. For the nostalgia buffs, to grant to the underground comix a central role in American comics is to repudiate the very basis for admiring the early comics; the undergrounds were anything but innocent, charming, and patriotic. The underground comix likewise threaten the superhero devotees, not only because of the comix’ vicious scorn for Code-approved comics and their conventions, but because the example of the underground movement belies the implicit evolutionary theory underlying much current discourse about comics. This developmental model maintains that the comics medium has progressed from a primitive state to a sophisticated one while remaining fixated on the mythic figure of the superhero. Much ado has been made of late about ferment in the comics industry, as comics creators today try to reach new reading audiences, to take economic control of their own work, and to dictate the content of their work themselves. But the progressive model of comics history becomes rather suspect when we consider that the undergrounds did all these things decades ago.

The definitive history of the underground comix has yet to be written,⁷ but a conventional wisdom on them has arisen, a story that bears consideration. It goes something like this: After the institution of the Comics Code in 1954 and after adult-oriented publishers such as EC’s William Gaines and crime-comic magnate Lev Gleason quit the field, comics stagnated as a form until the superhero genre was revived in the early 1960s, first tentatively by DC Comics and later massively by Marvel Comics, sparked by the genius of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. Then a bit later (rather mysteriously) an array of scruffy cartoonists arose who adopted comics as their preferred mode for extolling the glories of pot smoking, free love, and the violent overthrow of the American government. These artists flourished for a short time on the fringes of the hippie counterculture, nourished by a national climate of unrest and social realignment, then, when the Sixties were over, disappeared as quickly as they had appeared, leaving behind a legacy of a few “great artists” (Robert Crumb is the best-known example) and some soon-passe psychedelic graphics. Meanwhile, the development of superhero comics proceeded in fits and starts through the sixties and seventies until the late 1980s, when they suddenly blossomed into the “New Comics.”

As with most received wisdom, there’s a bit of truth to all this. But in this reading the underground comix become a somewhat embarrassing aberration, an evolutionary dead-end entirely disconnected from the main stream of comics history as it marches to the apotheosis of the superhero. I would like to take the undergrounds from a different angle, one that sees them as not so separate from the traditional comics after all. I would argue that in many of the most significant ways, today’s new comics continue the practices of the underground comix tradition itself. This is not to say that no differences exist between the comics of today and the comix of twenty five years ago; rather it is to maintain that the underground comix are crucial examples for understanding the shape of comics today and their possibilities for the future.

Zap #4: The Familiar Made Strange

Underground comix originally were defined by what they were not: comic books approved by the Comics Code Authority. It follows, then, that they were not published by any of the traditional comic-book publishers, they were not distributed to newsstands by magazine distributors, and, in general, they did not make very much money. Comic books traditionally required high-volume sales to make a profit, and so large publishing firms aimed them at an
Audience of eight-to-twelve year olds; the comix' habitual label of "Adults Only" referred both to their often-shocking content and to their sometimes abstruse intellectual level. Garish four colors were a defining feature of mainstream comic books; except for their covers, the undergrounds were nearly all printed in black and white. Where the Code-approved comics observed a rigid set of content guidelines that articulated a bourgeois ideology, the underground comix appeared to obey a single maxim: anything goes. The Code prohibited sexual innuendos; the comix wallowed in sex of the most bizarre kind. The Code banned violence; the comix routinely presented death, dismemberment, and mayhem beyond the wildest fantasies of the gory EC comics. The Code forbade any mention of drug use; the comix celebrated marijuana and LSD in their stories, and many comix artists undertook their careers in the undergrounds after mind-expanding conversion experiences with peyote and LSD. For readers accustomed to the wholesome goings-on in the Code-approved comic books, the first sight of comix such as S. Clay Wilson's "Captain Pissgums and His Pervert Pirates" seemed like appalling glimpses into some alien and rather disturbingly unhygienic dimension.

But for all their manifest differences from the superhero comics, the undergrounds were very much connected to the history and conventions of previous comic books. Les Daniels, writing in 1971 during the heyday of the underground comix, presciently speculated on the historical significance of the undergrounds:

The untrammeled underground comics may represent the coming trend, or they may only be a temporary aberration. Regardless, there is a sense in which they can be considered part of a larger comic book tradition, a tradition in which realism gives way to exaggeration, and even exaggeration gives way to pure fantasy. [8]

Daniels was right both ways: one strand of contemporary comics criticism considers the comix as an unsavory deviation from the inexorable progress to the present-day triumph of the "grown-up" superhero, while the one I am articulating here looks at the undergrounds as the defining event in contemporary comics history. The truly significant break with all previous comics that the undergrounds made, and the one that continues to fuel the movement of contemporary comics, was that the underground comix artists regarded the comic-book form as primarily a medium for personal expression. For all the accomplished and distinctive styles of previous comic creators such as Winsor McCay, George Herriman, and Jack Kirby, all worked in the service of large media companies and all aimed at a mass circulation audience. None wrote primarily for themselves; in fact a long tradition among cartoonists is to shun "artistic" pretensions and to disavow any intent besides entertainment at all. The underground artists did of course sell their work and by now several creators have made a lot of money doing it, but in general the rewards of being an underground cartoonist were a relatively free rein in subject matter and access to a sympathetic and (initially) undemanding audience.

Finally, of course, the freedom of the underground comix was hardly absolute. From the point of view of the Comics Code, such bizarre and disturbing comix productions as Thrilling Murder Comics (printed in black, white, and blood-red), or Robert Crumb's semen-splattered sex comics, or the paranoiac otherworldly visions of Rory Hayes were not only beyond the limits of the Code but exceeded every boundary of acceptable human expression. Yet the comics form itself imposed on the underground comix artists a history and set of conventions that served both to liberate and to limit their personal expression. Most comics histories emphasize the undeniable creative independence of the underground artists; lesser noted are how indebted the undergrounds are to their predecessors. In addition, the economic autonomy of the comix creators was only relative as well; although the underground comix were nowhere near as formulaic and market-driven as were the Code-approved comics, they still necessarily were
caught up in their own systems of economic relations and of audience expectations.

I'd like to demonstrate the connections among and differences between the underground comix and the previous comics tradition by reading carefully through fairly large sections of some underground comix in order to communicate the flavor of the comix reading experience. One of the central characteristics of the undergrounds is their diversity of subject matter and stylistic approach; just a few years after the first underground comic book appeared around 1968, literally thousands of artists were publishing their work, with the variations in skill and sensibility such voluminous production suggests. The first of the present examples, the anthology Zap Comix #4 from 1969, is one of the more notorious of the underground comix, its contributors are among the most prolific and talented in the undergrounds, and the issue is readily available today, as such matters are reckoned in the world of comics publishing.

The brightly colored cover of Zap #4 features a large and bulbous central figure holding a cane and dancing while tipping a top hat; this monocled character inescapably recalls the advertising icon Mr. Peanut. One would be tempted to say simply that it is Mr. Peanut, except that the design has been altered in such a way that the overall impression is disorienting and somewhat disturbing. For one thing, the figure's rounded arms and legs seem to be lengthened and rubberized, a far cry from Mr. Peanut's pert and angular limbs. For another, the figure lacks Mr. Peanut's familiar bow tie and the surface detail of the peanut shell is merely suggested by three indentations; the visual effect is of a being made of chrome or some impossibly limber plastic. The cover's hard-edged colors (green against orange, blue and green against deep red) are striking and unpleasant in their contrasts. Flanking the figure, against a deep orange desert, stand groups of small green figures. The stylistic logic that has been applied to Mr. Peanut has progressed further with these figures; some effort is required to work out just what they are. On the left stand three entities. First comes what seems to be a cartoon tycoon mimicking the main figure as he doffs a top hat like the central figure's. Next is a squat and distorted version of Minnie Mouse; at least she wears Minnie's trademark boat-like oversized high heels, but the mouse ears have become bulbous and sport nipple-like bumps on top. Last in the group is a chesty version of the seductive female insects sometimes seen in animated cartoons of the 1930s. To the right are two more characters, one a curvy woman, nude but for stockings and high heels, beside her a grinning frog endowed with extravagantly rounded legs. In the background against the horizon line stand two pyramids with palm trees not unlike the scene on the back of a pack of Camel cigarettes; on the other side is a small Arabesque town with minarets against the masses of clouds which constitute the sky's lower half. Although the cover seems to be less a narrative scene than simply an enigmatic psychedelic design, it is worth describing in detail because it exemplifies one major gesture of the underground comix. The comix do not simply reject or attempt to transcend the tradition of the comix. Instead, the undergrounds embrace the entire iconographic vocabulary of American popular culture and recombine those elements in new and imaginative ways, in this case in the direction of abstraction and metamorphosis.

The cover's strategy becomes clearer when the comic is opened to reveal the wraparound back cover, a continuation and mirror image of the front. This time the central figure has altered so that the eyes have shifted to the tipped hat, and whatever anthropomorphic content the one on the front cover had is nearly lost on the back. The rounded head has mutated into two globes atop a rounded shaft: Mr. Peanut has become Mr. Penis. The smaller figures have become even more amorphous, mere blobs on legs, although one seems to have the webbed feet and beak of a Disney duck. The buildings too have become more abstract; now they are a futuristic towered city and something that may well be a stylized explosion rather than a structure at all. The back cover is signed "Moscoso," though, in keeping with the cover's
stylistic strategies, the name is nearly unreadable. What readers are to make of all this is by no means clear; the overall effect is of a random group of popular and commercial icons absorbed into a garish, jaunty, and not altogether pleasant dream. The cover of *Zap #4*, then, offers some of what regular comic covers do: bright colors, familiar characters, and an intriguing scene, except that each element has been transformed in such a way as to confound or at least to distance readers. The underground comix aimed at an audience of the initiated; and the cover of *Zap #4* suggests that the comic will offer a comics world where only readers comfortable with the familiar made strange need enter.

Things don't get much clearer with the inside cover. Where in mainstream comics readers expect the first of the many advertisements which form a relentless counterpoint to the narrative text instead is located another baffling graphic design, this one signed “Robert Williams.” A full description of the picture would easily double in length that of the cover; the design’s major elements include a heroic figure holding a flaming bowl or torch before his face, a combination horned demon/flying carriage, a cluster of skyscrapers atop a walking vulva, a second mobile vulva topped with a locomotive smokestack, an unidentifiable cartooned insect in chains, and explosions or splashes of liquid erupting from the material of the background. Where the front cover emphasized contrasts of color and clean, albeit peculiar, figures, the black and white inside cover combines elements of surrealism (the cut-outs in the ground and background especially recall Dalí’s dreams) with those of big-foot cartooning.

The issue’s concentration on graphics over narrative continues in the first story, or rather extended composition; the narrative line is obscure to say the least. It consists of six horizontal full-page panels, complicated in reading by the fact that each is reversible, so that two sets of interlocking activities are taking place simultaneously. The design makes the figure/ground relationships quite ambiguous, and it takes some effort to make out what is going on. The first page is signed “Moscoso” again, and the characters from the cover reappear, along with several others. The plot, such as it is, is a parody of domestic comedy. As many sitcoms begin with a major character entering a living room or other domestic space, Moscoso’s story consists of a series of characters entering a doorway at the side of the panel to confront other characters engaged in what is clearly sexual intercourse, although, given the bulbousness and stylization of the figures, could just as well be a form of conglomeration through liquification. Recognizable characters include Daisy Duck and Minnie Mouse, Jiggs and Maggie from George McManus’s *Bringing Up Father* comic strip (Maggie swats an *en flagrante* Jiggs with a rolling pin), and Mr. Peanut again, whose suave appearance apparently helps in his seduction of the nude woman from the cover. The whole “story” is more absurd than sexual, and playfulness with the design clearly takes precedence over narrative or even verbal concerns. The few word balloons that are included in Moscoso’s story play a similar role here to those in Winsor McCay’s similarly design-obsessed *Little Nemo in Slumberland*; they don’t matter much at all.

Up to this point *Zap #4* presents a series of dislocating visual experiences for its readers; Victor Moscoso and Robert Williams exemplify one half of a split in the underground comix, that between what Williams called “the graphic faction,” which also included fellow *Zap* contributor Rick Griffin, and “the literary end.” Many of the graphics artists came to comix from the rock-poster design scene centered in San Francisco, while a number of the underground cartoonists who focused on narratives began their careers in college-humor magazines, specialty outlets like the automotive humor magazine *CARToons*, and the several humor periodicals edited by former *Mad* writer/editor Harvey Kurtzman. This division in the undergrounds enacts in an exaggerated form a long-standing tension in comics between artists and writers. In the traditional assembly-line production methods of comics, separate
writers and artists collaborate in an effort to balance the words and pictures which comprise the comics medium; in the undergrounds, with little pressure on creators to deliver a "professional" product, these elements can separate out into their component parts. Even though the design-oriented comix artists work to create a reading experience that is analogous to, and presumably enhanced by, psychedelic drugs, their approach to the comics medium makes them the modern-day inheritors of the comics tradition of such spectacular and imaginative draftsmen as McCay, Lionel Feininger, and Cliff Sterrett. Readers familiar only with the pinched physical dimensions, relentless verbal gags, and minimalist art of current newspaper comics pages might well fail to recognize that the elaborate displays of line work and geometrical design in the undergrounds have a long and often flamboyant heritage in the comics strips.

The integration of the "graphic faction" with the "literary end" of which Williams speaks is epitomized in the next story, "Joe Blow," signed in the first panel by "R. Crumb." Crumb's drawing style has sometimes been called "Disneyesque," but it is more accurately described as a distillation of an array of cartooning styles from the beginnings of the comics strip form in America, from animation styles of the 1920s and '30s, and from advertising and other commercial illustrations. Crumb deploys his supremely nostalgic visual style to contrast with the oftentimes caustic satire of his stories. In "Joe Blow," the rounded objects and old-fashioned cartooning techniques conflict sharply with the story's deadpan depiction of the white suburban ethos of family togetherness manifested as cheerful and graphically presented incest.

"Joe Blow" contrasts as well with the experience of reading Zap #4 up to this point. Where the pictures by Williams and Moscoso challenge the eye to make even the most rudimentary and provisional sense of them, Crumb's drawings anchor the text in a simple and inviting cartoon world. Round insets in the first panel introduce us to the main characters in the story, a generic middle-class nuclear family: Joe, Lois, Joe Jr., and "Sis" Blow; the peculiar family name suggests both the averageness of the family and story's sexual theme.

The familiar domestic world soon gives way to a satiric conflation of sitcom homogeneity and pornography. The scene is a suburban living room, but the opening exchange between man and wife is anything but typical television fare: Lois asks Joe, "Hey Joe! Are you pretending to watch T.V. even though it's not on?" Joe explains, "It's a new game I am playing with myself... 'Cause I can think up better shows than the ones that are on! Ha ha!" This cracked gag is a harbinger of things to come as Joe next accidentally finds Sis masturbating in her bedroom. He excuses himself, goes to the bathroom, and takes "A simple pill called 'Compoz'... And I'm a new man!" The newly energized Joe calls Sis into the living room, where, in a parody of sitcom family discipline, he commands her to fellate him, after which he has sex with her. Junior arrives home excited after winning his baseball game, only to be nonplussed by the sight of his father penetrating his sister on the living room floor. He rushes to his mother in the kitchen, who calmly asks him, "Well, Junior, let me ask you this... do you ever jerk off?" Junior, still playing his wholesome assigned role, replies, "Aw gee...What a thing to ask a guy!!" His mother coaxes Junior's masturbatory fantasies from him, then reappears clad in a cut-out bra and garter belt. His grateful reaction: "Gee...You must be the greatest Mom a guy ever had!!!" The final page of the story returns to the platitude-filled denouement of the situation comedy form, but the lesson Joe has learned takes on a new resonance: "I never realized how much fun you could have with your children!" The comix audience would have well appreciated the ironic moral of the story, "Yes, youth holds the promise of the future!"

All this is indeed a far cry from the sanitized world of the Code-approved comics, but the
sexual content of "Joe Blow" can disguise how much it depends on its links to traditional comics. Simply showing cartoon characters having sex, as does Moscoso's story along with several others in Zap #4, enacts the fears of the anti-comic-book crusaders of the 1950s that, if left unchecked, comics would allow readers access to forbidden sexual images. "Joe Blow" sharpens the transgression by inserting that unbridled sexuality into the same wholesome never-neverland envisioned by the Comics Code and by much American commercial art. The opening and closing pages of "Joe Blow" could easily have come from one of the many "public service" strips that comics of the Fifties and Sixties included to prove their fidelity to the philosophy of the Comics Code.

Where Moscoso and Williams deconstruct the icons of American popular culture and reintegrate them into the vistas of psychedelic experience, and where Robert Crumb presents the most taboo subjects in an archaic visual style, S. Clay Wilson does all this and so much more as to make his work by any standard the most extreme of the routinely outrageous underground comix. His four contributions to Zap #4 demonstrate the range of his artistry, although the variety is hard to perceive at first since both his content and drawing style have been characterized accurately as being "as hideous as his considerable skill can make them;" reading an S. Clay Wilson page can be a considerable struggle.[11] Crumb's approach to the comix was much copied, but few cartoonists of any stripe aspired to Wilson's inimitable blend of scatological humor, sadomasochistic sex, dismemberment, torture, murder, bad puns, figure/ground trickery, anatomical exaggeration, and deadpan Grand Guignol violence. But in his way, S. Clay Wilson was perhaps the single most influential figure in the underground comix. Says Les Daniels,

Yet his work has had a direct and acknowledged influence on Crumb and all the other underground cartoonists, by making them aware of how much further they could go in challenging conventions of taste and judgement. Wilson's fantasies of depraved sex and violence made everything that preceded him, even in the underground, seem tame indeed.[12]

A mere recitation of the names of Wilson's characters suggests something of the flavor of his stories: The Black Prince, The Fat Demon, Star-Eyed Stella, the Barb-Tongued Clit Lickers, Leather Tits, and the recurring "hero" The Checkered Demon. The untitled two-page center spread features an almost indecipherable melange of demons, pirates, breasts, giant testicles, protruding eyeballs, castrations, and ejaculations. Still, even in Wilson's work the repellent content and style are cast in the form of what are, after all, familiar comics genres. The two-page story "A Ball in the Bung Hole," despite its sexual, misogynist, and sadomasochistic content, is a physical slapstick routine, while "Leather Tits" is a one-page blackout gag, and "Star-Eyed Stella" is a peculiar but recognizable pirate adventure story. Even the flamboyant center spread, which allies Wilson's work with the "graphics faction" of the underground comix, derives as much from the superhero action comics as from the psychedelic posters. The visually impressive but denatured fight scenes of artists like Jack Kirby are taken to their logical extreme in Wilson's macabre displays: the violence is no more "realistic," but it is infinitely more violent.

Much more in Zap #4 deserves comment, but for the purposes of my argument the most important is Gilbert Shelton's superhero parody. In "Wonder Wart-Hog Breaks Up the Muthalode Smut Ring and Also 'Balls' Lois Lamebrain," Shelton burlesques both the sexual dynamic of the Superman series and the lurid reputation of the underground comix. Like Clark Kent, Shelton's protagonist, mild-mannered reporter Philbert Desanex, hides a superpowered identity, in this case the ultraviolent right-wing crusader Wonder Wart-Hog ("The Hog of Steel"); Desanex likewise is attracted to a co-worker who scorns him but yearns for his
powerful alter ego. The reporter goes undercover in a schoolyard to break up a "pornography" ring, where "Robert Scum, King of the Underground Cartoonists" attempts to seduce him in his schoolgirl disguise. Wonder Wart-Hog proceeds to stomp the cartoonist to death while proclaiming his fidelity to American standards of decency. He says, "I'll teach you to corrupt innocent American kids, you God damn fucking son of a bitch! You prick! You cocksucker!!" The "innocent American kids" cheer him on: "Yea, Wonder! Kill him! Smash him to death! Rip him to shreds!" Sexually aroused by gory photos of his exploit, Wart-Hog, now in his Desanex identity, corners his beloved Lois Lamebrain in a stockroom, reveals his identity, and rips off her clothes when she faints from excitement. She regains consciousness in time to laugh at the hero's tiny penis, upon which Wonder Wart-Hog ravishes her with his super-powered pig's snout, then sneezes her body out of the stockroom window. The story ends as do so many Superman tales, with the hero returned to civilian garb and commenting ironically on his alter ego's exploits with a sidewise wink to the audience.

The sexual content and exaggerated violence of Shelton's story cannot hide its roots both in the superhero comics themselves and in the comic that supplies the crucial link between the Code-approved comics and the undergrounds: Mad magazine.[13] Mad's trademark reductio ad absurdum of American popular culture has become an institution to generations of mildly rebellious adolescents, but its present familiarity can obscure the revolutionary impact its heady brew of puns, sight gags, self-referentiality, and parodic iconoclasm had on comics readers of 1954. Mad creator Harvey Kurtzman later acted as professional mentor to a number of underground comix artists, including Gilbert Shelton, who in "Wonder Wart-Hog Breaks Up the Muthalode" simply extends to include sex and ultraviolence the parodic technique Kurtzman used in classic spoofs like "Superduperman." Superman's heroic interventions become Wonder Wart-Hog's fascist totalitarianism, and the repressed sexuality of the Lois Lane/Clark Kent/Superman triangle comes uncorked with a hyperbolic vengeance. The authoritarian vigilantism implicit in the superhero ethos has been explored in such much-heralded contemporary comics as Frank Miller's Batman: The Dark Knight Returns and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's Watchmen; the willingness to deal overtly with the political and social implications of the superhero genre has been cited as an index of how sophisticated current comics have become.[14] But the portentous "darkness" of today's comics problematizes the superhero genre no more fully than do the often-brutal comics parodies such as Shelton's Wart-Hog or his demolition of war comics, "Smiling Sgt. Death." Like the Mad parodies, those in the underground comix depend on their audience's intimate knowledge of the object of parody, and for all their wide-ranging subject matter, the comix dealt deeply and often with the history and conventions of the comics form.

Rather than being a self-contained aberration from the comics medium, as it is often seen today, the underground comix movement on closer inspection seems more like a generation of cartoonists and commercial illustrators sidetracked by hallucinogens and political upheaval from careers in mainstream comics and humor magazines. Where the E.C. comics, and especially the Mad parodies, were an unforgettable influence on the undergrunds, the comix themselves were the examples and inspirations for a whole spectrum of contemporary comics creators. A mere listing of the underground practices and gestures that have become conventional in the comics medium would be as lengthy as it is complex, but the essential point here is that the underground comix were as firmly grounded in the tradition of previous comics as today's are indebted to the undergrunds. A glance first through Zap #4 and then through any issue of the Spiegelman/Mouly-edited Raw anthology would disclose that not only does Art Spiegelman indeed "draw comics," but that comics not "for kids" have been around for a very long time.
"A Sympathetic Understanding of the Problems of Love is Not a License for Morbid Distortion":[15] Wimmen's Comix #4

The influence of the underground comix on today's comics scene is nowhere more obvious than in the active presence of women comics creators. For most of the history of the comics, women were excluded from significant roles in the industry, and relatively few of its products were aimed at female audiences. The most notable exception was the female superhero Wonder Woman, a character developed by a psychologist specifically to redress the lack of comic-book role models for female readers, and whose adventures were distinguished by the leitmotifs of bondage and barely repressed sadomasochism. In contrast to the superheroics of the powerful Amazon, the humor comics presented the exceptionally intelligent exploits of the droll proto-feminist Little Lulu. And although comics historians generally have ignored them, the romance and teen comics of the post-World War II period also were extremely popular among young women; some of these comics were written and drawn by women working anonymously. Not until the underground comix did women work widely and openly in comics form, and it was in response to the perceived sexism in the early underground movement that women began to use comics to speak their minds.

Not surprisingly, women's gains in the comix field mirrored those in society at large; just as 1970s feminists organized partly in response to the male chauvinism underlying the revolutionary rhetoric of 1960s radicals, underground comix by and for women developed out of women artists' frustrations at the condescension and exclusionary attitudes of supposedly liberated men. The continuing anthology title Wimmen's Comix was founded by cartoonist Trina Robbins, who said of her early attempts to publish her work in the established undergrounds:

. . . maybe it was because the underground was so small, it was like a select club of a whole bunch of men who hung out with each other and drank together and stuff. For a while a lot of them lived in the lower east side and then San Francisco, and they all knew each other. And it was simply a club that I was not allowed into: it was like a boy's club. It was like Little Lulu's clubhouse--not Little Lulu, Tubby's clubhouse that says no girls allowed--and I was never told, never literally told, "I'm sorry we don't want to consider you because you're a female." I was simply ignored. [16]

Wimmen's Comix provided a much-needed outlet for women's work in the underground comix form, one where aspiring artists need not compete with the often combative male comix artists.

In contrast to Zap #4(1969), whose politics were detectable only in its implicit rejection of conventional morality, Wimmen's Comix #4 (1974) confronts a fairly coherent set of political issues surrounding the place of women in American culture. While the undergrounds as a whole became closely identified with the counterculture and its politics, the comix artists' satiric impulses led them to be as scathing about the hippies as they were about American culture at large. So too did the women's comix both articulate and critique the politics of the women's movement. Wimmen's Comix was the flagship title of a variety of underground comix by and for women, and its themes are the themes of the growing political awareness of American women. Wimmen's Comix #4 focuses on the experiences of middle-class white women, and explores both the pleasures of the female body and the despair and anger of life in the home and in the workplace. Comix by women depicted women's rage at male oppression, debated the politics of sexuality, supplied women with frank information on biology and reproduction, and featured the adventures of radical lesbians and unreconstructed shopping addicts; they ranged tonally from sanctimonious preaching to riotous bawdry, with an emphasis on the latter. Anyone with the notion that feminists have no sense of humor has never experienced the savage hilarity of women's underground comix.
Both the front and back covers of *Wimmen's Comix #4* employ a common strategy of the women's comix; they generate humor by inverting archetypal gendered situations. The front cover, signed "Shelby," portrays a tall-hatted long-haired princess with a satchel of frogs she has gathered; a crowned and nervous bullfrog in her outstretched hand begs, "Kiss Me!," to which she replies "Can't see turning a perfectly good frog into a prince!" In the background, a smoking factory labeled "Princess Brand Froggie Foods" locates the source of the royal amphibian's anxiety. The cover inserts industrial economics into the paradigmatic romantic scene, suggesting that Prince Charming is more useful as an hors d'oeuvre than as a husband. Sharon Kahn Rudahl's back cover continues the inversion of chivalric romance; there a determined young woman kills a huge dragon with a sword while a bound and shirtless pretty young man watches helpless and adoring from a nearby tree. In the background a shining white castle crowns a steep hill, indicating the heroine's final destination when her vacant-eyed prize is won. Together the covers embody the ambivalence that fairy-tale images such as Prince Charming and the savior knight evoke in the women cartoonists. Shelby's pragmatic princess casts a jaundiced eye on the ideal; Rudahl's heroic swordswoman co-opts romance by taking the traditional male role for herself. Both cartoonists place women in the positions of power; romantic ideals here are both sources of oppression and potential models for women's meaningful action in the world.

The political implications of comics drawing style are demonstrated in *Wimmen's Comix #4* by stories by three major comix artists, Trina Robbins, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, and Diane Noomin. The distinctive visual world of Trina Robbins derives directly from the comic-book style that has come to be known as "Good Girl Art." Among the popular comic-book genres of the late 1940s were the jungle comics and interplanetary adventures featuring statuesque and semi-nude female heroines, and Robbins's comics recreate in detail the clear, fluid, slightly stylized, unshadowed style of the "Good Girl" comics. The usual analysis of the appeal of these "pin-up" comics is that they pandered to the sexuality of soldiers overseas and adolescent males at home. That may well be true, but Robbins demonstrates how female readers can appropriate images for their own purposes. In an interview Robbins critiques one male writer's interpretation of the female heroines of comics publishers such as Fiction House. She says,

He starts out by talking about how when he was a kid, how he loved Captain America and all those super-heroes because he could identify with them and wanted to be strong and fantastic like Captain America. Then he goes on to talk about the heroines, the jungle heroines I love so much and he says that he can't imagine--he's sure they were only for the boys on the front to read as pin-ups--because he can't imagine how girls could have read this stuff and gotten anything from it except inferiority complexes. And it doesn't occur to this idiot that women are exactly like men and they have role models and they might read this and say, "I want to be strong and powerful and handsome like these women." I mean, he wanted to be strong and powerful like Captain America, and it didn't give him an inferiority complex! [17]

But if the look of Robbins's work comes from old comics, her subject matter in *Wimmen's Comix #4* is that pioneered by the underground comix: what it is like to live day to day in American society. Even so, her sharp commentary on fashion fads, "The Dread Platform Shoe Addiction of 1974," uses a quasi-science-fiction frame story. Set a decade in the future, the story posits 1984 not as an Orwellian totalitarian dystopia but as the tranquil aftermath of successful revolutionary struggle. The autobiographical protagonist's now-teenaged daughter entreats her, "Mom, tell me about the bad old pre-liberation days. . . Is it true you were born a slave? Tell me how you fought for freedom!" Her aging but stylish mother replies, "Well, Casey, as you know, women were enslaved in a number of different ways! One of these was fashion..." She proceeds to tell of her lust for the then-new platform shoes, and her struggles
to walk in them. Frustrated by the awkwardness of the enormous shoes, she struggles down the street; conservatively dressed women in sensible flat shoes whisper “drunk!” behind her back. Eventually she is caught in the middle of the street by a yellow light, and as she tries to hurry to the sidewalk she trips over the curb; the matrons “tsk!” in the background as Trina falls in the street. She then shows her daughter the shoes transformed into a planter; Casey ends the story by asking if she can borrow the shoes for a “nostalgia party Saturday night.” By characterizing fashion as a form of enslavement, Robbins demonstrates her political awareness. At the same time her visual style displays Robbins's fondness for even absurd and impractical clothing styles: Robbins's comics often include bonus paper dolls with lovingly rendered extra outfits. Robbins's distinctively old-fashioned drawing style finally embodies her determination to critique social attitudes toward women while refusing to reject on ideological grounds the things that she finds beautiful.

Like Trina Robbins, Aline Kominsky was one of the earliest women working in the underground comix. But where Robbins fuses a traditional comic-book style with an underground political sensibility, Kominsky exploits the undergrounds' rejection of “professional” technical standards; while many underground comix artists emulated the styles of traditional comics, others, like Kominsky, eschew the slick surfaces of commercial illustration to draw as if the unconscious is pouring out directly onto the page. Kominsky's drawings are primitive yet highly wrought, compulsive while apparently spontaneous, with erratically drawn figures, cramped panel compositions, and crude lettering in the text. Yet unlike most underground comix artists, Kominsky is academically trained in fine art; her raw style is chosen to match the intensity of the emotions she depicts.

Even more directly than Robbins, Kominsky confronts the intersection of beauty and female identity in her story “Goldie Gets By.” Where Robbins was criticized by some feminists for drawing only thin, beautiful, dynamic figures that seem to reinforce sexist stereotypes, Kominsky's work has been censured both for its unprepossessing surface and for the autobiographical persona's self-absorption and self-loathing. The cartoonist says, “Right from the beginning I got a lot of flak from everyone for being so primitive and self-deprecating. Women like Trina were influenced by traditional comics. They had images of women being glamorous and heroic. I didn't have that background."

“Goldie Gets By” is like nothing in traditional comics either in appearance or subject matter. The art is crude even by the standards of schoolroom drawing and the narrative is surreally disjointed, yet the story is touching and evocative of a real human presence behind the roughly drawn protagonist.

The dense page layout of “Goldie Gets By” combined with its panels crammed with the human figures create a claustrophobic and obscure fictional world; in the narrative the protagonist, Goldie, encounters a series of friends and acquaintances with only rudimentary transitions between scenes and little sense on the reader's part of who these people are or where they come from. The unifying feature of the story is Goldie herself, with her mercurial moods and self-lacerating introspection. She first meets her friend Tonetta, now a member of the Hare Krishnas. Goldie tells Tonetta, “Ya look like a pinhead!” Her newly enlightened friend replies, “Who cares what I look like, I'm higher than you.” The exchange introduces the story's equivocations around the theme of physical appearance. Goldie next returns to her apartment to find her roommate, Angel, packing up to join the guru "Supermuniya," whose attractions Angel explains as, "Perfict love, and plus he can make me look beautiful." Goldie retorts, "Jeesis, ya look fine to me Angel!" But, like Tonetta, Angel ignores Goldie's evaluation, and leaves her alone and bitter. During each of these exchanges, the faces of the characters are
constantly shifting in size and shape as they swell with anger or glaze over in religious bliss. It's not clear whether these metamorphoses stem from a logic of symbolism or from the artist's inability to draw a face consistently, or even if the difference matters at all.

Goldie's form becomes even larger and rounder when in lonely desperation she visits her ex-husband, who complains "You just not the girl I married... You were thin and pure when you lived with me!" Her retort indicates the lengths she has gone to match his ideal: "Sure I was real thin, you Nazi asshole, I was eating speed and washing the floor 4 times a day." All pretense to realistic rendering falls away as Goldie explodes in anger, jumps on her ex-husband and forces him to beg to keep from being strangled. In this sequence Goldie's body enlarges until she is many times larger than the man, and small unidentified figures appear who urge her on, giggle at her ex-husband's plight, and scorn him as a "schmuck." Flushed with victory, Goldie takes stock of herself in a series of panels that deal with the same "enslavement" by standards of beauty as did Trina Robbins's story, but this time the presentation is as raw and self-lacerating as Robbins's is cool and stylized. After glorying in her physical power ("I'm so glad I'm strong and healthy!"), she begins to criticize her body. Drawn in a highly irrational, almost cubist, posture to enable her to see behind her, she muses, "My ass is a little large." In the next panel she shows what that ass is good for: transformed nearly entirely into a giant pair of buttocks, she squeezes her ex-husband up against the panel border. The next panel might well serve as an emblem for much of Kominsky's work, as she gazes into a mirror and says "Everyone thinks I'm cute." But just as her evaluation of Angel's appearance helped not at all, the opinion of "everyone" means nothing as her internal critic passes final judgement: "Ugly." Distraught and crying, pledging herself to a silent catatonia, and as egotistical ever ("And I'm never admitting that I'm wrong about anything"), Goldie is saved by a bearded friend, who offers her marijuana and turns on the television, which replaces the authority figures embraced by Tonetta and Angel: "Let's see what the master has to say." The story ends with Goldie and her friend contentedly watching a screen as blank as their own figures. Goldie's friend first attacks her appearance, "Hey, Goldie you look shitty," but his criticism is an accurate diagnosis, not a power play as with her ex-husband.

The story's title, "Goldie Gets By," points us to an essentially upbeat ending, but the effect of the story is disorienting and inconclusive; the fury of Goldie's anger and self-hatred overpowers the equivocal serenity of the final panel. Readers looking for "positive images of women" can find Kominsky's work horrific, yet stories like "Goldie Gets By" embody the intense, almost hallucinatory examination of individual experience that was entirely missing from the comics form before the advent of the underground comix. Kominsky has hewn to her distinctive style despite the flak she takes from readers who are comfortable only with conventional-looking comics; taking full advantage of the stylistic license granted in the underground ethos, she helped to free a later generation of women artists, such as Lynda Barry and Dori Seda, from the tyranny of traditional ways of drawing comics.

Mediating between the glossy sophistication of Trina Robbins and the tortured primitivism of Aline Kominsky is the cartoony style of Kominsky's sometime collaborator Diane Noomin, whose "DiDi Glitz: She Chose Crime" leads off Wimmen's Comix #4. If Kominsky's style is not as slick as that of the kid who drew cartoons in the back of most people's junior high class, Diane Noomin's is. Her figures are more stable, her backgrounds rendered more consistently, and her page layouts designed more conventionally than Kominsky's, while the characters still are more awkward and two-dimensional than in commercial comics and the panels display the obsessively worked crosshatching of the amateur artist. The flatness of the characters' design matches the limited horizons of their lives. Noomin creates a densely textured suburban middle-class world stuck forever in the early 1960s, a feminized world filled to bursting with
acrylic wigs, Tupperware parties, flocked wallpaper, gossiping hairdressers, jello molds, and cat’s-eye sunglasses. Her perennial protagonist is the bubble-wigged and mascaraed Long Island Jewish housewife DiDi Glitz, of whom Noomin says, “DiDi is both an exorcism of and a wallowing in my Canarsie ‘roots.’” The double perspective is essential to Noomin’s work; Didi’s immersion in a universe of middle-class commodities both supports and undermines her struggle for true love, economic independence, and sexual fulfillment.

In "She Chose Crime," Noomin overlays the contemporary politics of reproduction on the conventions of romance comics and crime comics. When DiDi discovers she is pregnant, her joy is cut short when her boorish boyfriend Eddie reveals that he is already married. Her desperation grows along with her belly as she dreams of escape to a tropical paradise in Rio. With her pleas for a loan rebuffed first by her mother and then by a sneering bank officer, DiDi decides to rob the bank to pay for her cruise. Disguising herself as an overweight brunette, DiDi holds up the bank with a toy pistol, then nips around the corner to Macy’s department store, where she outfits herself for her cruise with her ill-gotten gains. Aboard the cruise liner DiDi befriends the captain, has her baby and recovers in time to teach the infant to swim, has a passionate affair with a handsome lover, and wins at shuffleboard. She ends up at the Hotel Rio celebrating her new life with baby Crystal, hoisting "A toast to crime, love, and liquor!!!" Where the Comics Code requires that crime never pays, and where the romance comics insist that female happiness is found only in a middle-class marriage, Noomin ends with a burlesqued version of a feminist utopia; by taking decisive action, DiDi is able to escape entrapping structures of family (her nagging mother), society (when the supercilious bank teller asserts that she needs a husband to get a loan, she retorts, “I don't got to show you no stinking husband!”), and morality (she is an outlaw as a bank robber and an outcast as a single mother). In "She Chose Crime," crime and romance comics supply the narrative structure, 1962 J.C. Penney catalogs furnish the decor, and feminism filtered through the underground comix provides the distinctive sensibility.

Wimmen’s Comix #4 finds the women’s movement as represented in comix form at a short-lived moment of unity; since 1974 a perhaps-inevitable fragmentation has taken place. If women’s underground comix artists were never as professionally competitive with one another as were the male-dominated Zap group, they still were subject to serious ideological tensions among themselves. With mostly their gender in common, the women comix contributors had widely varying conceptions of what their art should do. For example, Kominsky experienced political pressure to be more positive about women from the collective which produced Wimmen’s Comix. In an interview with cartoonist Peter Bagge, she explained the origins of the 1976 title she shared with Noomin, Twisted Sisters:

[Diane and I] decided to do it together as a project. We were pals. We liked and still like each other's work. We felt our work was complementary. Neither of us liked what was going into Wimmen's Comix that much, at that point. We really didn't like the Trina influence. I don't know what you want to call that, this idealized feminism. Bagge: You mostly wanted to be more satirical and self-deprecating? Kominsky-Crumb: Not wanted to. I just had no choice. This is the way I was and am. This is my world view. I don't romanticize life, and I don't think that romanticizing women makes other women feel better. It makes most people feel worse. [21]

Since 1974 comics by and for women have multiplied, with varying commercial success, and though Wimmen’s Comix still appears, no longer do women require a single special title in order to publish work in the comics form. With few exceptions, these titles are the descendants of the underground comix; for every woman now working for Marvel and DC, many more express themselves in a format and with artistic assumptions derived from the place where female rage, menstruation humor, lesbian struggle, open sexual playfulness, and overt political
For all the formal and thematic innovations of the underground comix, though, their uncompromising insistence on representing the artist's personal world view that Kominsky-Crumb articulates here is the single most important legacy of the comix to the field of comic art. Not all contemporary comics creators agree. For some the allure of the famous comics characters is so seductive as to convince them that they can express a personal vision in the time-honored conventions of traditional comics, that the mythic power of such figures as Superman, Batman, or Spider-Man can counteract the artistic restrictions the superheroes inevitably carry with them. Such dreams are unlikely to be realized very often. The sprawling multimedia corporations of which the major comics publishers now are parts have a significant monetary interest in the meal-ticket concept of the superhero; the merchandising revenues generated by successful commodities like the Batman movies are too valuable to be jeopardized by comic-book artists "expressing themselves" without restraint. While the major comic-book companies may perhaps for publicity purposes project images of themselves as hotbeds of innovation and creative license, their dependence on mass-marketable products militates strongly against any explosion of individual self-expression in mainstream comics. Creators today still publish comics with relatively few content restrictions; they simply don’t expect to be praised for it by collectors of old comics and superhero fans, nor do they expect to make very much money doing it.

The longstanding alliance of commerce and comics is apparently so fixed in the American cultural psyche that, like The Shadow of old, it has the power to cloud the minds of book reviewers, rendering them unable to conceive that the brilliance of Art Spiegelman's Maus stems not from the artist's transcendence of the comics medium but from a deep understanding of comics traditions and conventions and a fearless reimagining of the medium's possibilities. Any careful reader of Carl Barks's Donald Duck comics could testify that the funny animals genre can generate compelling stories, and no reader of the passionate and overtly political underground comix would doubt that the combined words and pictures of the comics medium can support themes of the most profound seriousness, even that of the Holocaust itself. The underground comix embraced the rich stylistic, thematic and formal heritage of the comics medium and rejected its habitual commercial motivation and juvenile orientation; in so doing the comix creators demonstrated that, if the marketplace cannot be overthrown, it can be forced, provisionally and haltingly, to open itself to new ideas and new ways of looking at the world. The underground comix and their present-day successors prove that, though the comics have a deserved reputation for childish humor and formulaic myth-mongering, they likewise can be the vehicles for satiric political critiques, for personal introspection, for screams of primal rage, for visions of beatific or nightmarish mindscapes, for stories taken from daily life and from world history, and for anything of human significance that can be rendered in words and pictures. To assume that because in the past comics have been trivial and jejune they must forever be so is to ignore the history of the medium and the present examples of some of its best practitioners. If the doctrine that "Art Spiegelman doesn't draw comics" should somehow take root, we shall be hard-pressed to identify what he does do, for if Maus is not a comic book and if Art Spiegelman doesn't draw comics, nothing is and no one ever has.

Notes


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ART SPIEGELMAN: There’s actually a paragraph or sentence about this, where I say the kind of magic I admire the most is the kind implied by Penn & Teller. They don’t actually do this, but what they do is, they sort of explain and debunk the trick, and then do it. And it still works as a magic trick. I’m not that interested in art that overtly manipulates people, and the things that go into doing Maus itself were meant to be both transparent to those who can see, mildly opaque to those who can’t, and yet somehow be allowed to work, but not to deceive. SPIEGELMAN: It’s true that the “drawing comics” part is just a given for me, even though people came up and said, “Why did you do it in a comic book?” “Well, how else?” It’s in my grammar; it’s in my language. Finally, Art Spiegelman turned to comic books, which began as reprints of comic strips and then solicited new ideas from anyone to fill up space, including two Jewish boys from Cleveland named Joe Siegel and Jerry Shuster, who created Superman in Action Comics #1. Spiegelman say he didn’t care much for superhero comics after his childhood poking fun at a Silver Age Superboy comic, but occasionally enjoyed “weird” superheroes like Stardust the Superwizard, whose comic was filled with lines of energy and had OCD. Story: Comics and Graphic Novels in the Classroom Why Comics? There are at least three reasons why comics and graphic novels are useful teaching tools: (1) there is a great deal of student interest in
this genre. Teachers who skillfully use comics and graphic novels in their curriculum present numerous opportunities for students to deconstruct these texts on multiple levels. Comics offer an opportunity for students to scrutinize how interdependent images and words can create a strong sequential narrative. Pairing visual images with words is an easy way to help students develop stronger visual literacy. & Chilcoat. One student who was trained as a medical illustrator had never explored drawing as a medium for telling stories. SAY. many students had a great concept.