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**THE RISE OF THE AMERICAN COMIC INTO THE
ROLE OF SERIOUS ART**

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Tato stránka bude ve svázané práci Váš původní formulář *Zadáni bak. práce*

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V Plzni dne 19. června 2012

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Linda". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal dotted line.

Jiří Linda

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ABSTRACT

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The object of this undergraduate thesis is to map the development of sequential art, comics, in the form of respectable art form influencing contemporary other artistic areas. Modern comics were developed between the World Wars primarily in the United States of America and therefore became a typical part of American culture.

The thesis is divided into three major parts. The first part called Sequential Art as a Medium discusses in brief the history of sequential art, which dates back to ancient world. The chapter continues with two sections analyzing the comic medium from the theoretical point of view. The second part inquires the origin of the comic book industry, its cultural environment, and consequently the birth of modern comic book. Finally, there is also concisely introduced the development of comic book medium during 1950s and 1960s in the USA as well as the mutual relation of low culture and High art, which is important for full comprehension of the third major part. The last part introduces five prominent artists, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman and Will Eisner. The biographical data of each author is followed with analysis of their crucial works, through which they redefined the status of sequential art from a low culture element to a serious art form of considerable social significance.

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INTRODUCTION

Art is “the use of skill or imagination in the creation of aesthetic objects, environments, or experiences that can be shared with others” (“The Arts”, 2012). Therefore, the visual art is an indivisible part of human history, reflecting the evolution of human mind and the origins of civilizations together with their various cultural aspects. Since the era of Neanderthals, the pictures have been serving as the media transmitting an information across generations. Pictures in a sequence can convey for instance a story or some production process, and this is the reason why the primitive forms of sequential art could be found in different ancient cultures worldwide. The first sequenced pictures appeared in the visual art of the ancient Egypt in 13th century BC, but they were used in medieval Europe or pre-columbian Mayan Culture as well. The crucial moment for the spread of sequenced pictures was the invention of a mechanical printing press in the 15th century, when the sequenced pictures served as an enclosed tool in biblical texts, supporting their comprehensibility for the uneducated people.

Scott McCloud (1960), an American comic book creator, author of several non-fiction books discussing sequential art theory and sought-after comics expert, declared that the origin of modern sequential art can be traced in the satirical works of William Hogarth and Rodolphe Töpffer of the 18th and the early 19th century, nevertheless, the veritable inception of modern comic-strips started in the late 19th century America with the boom of newspaper coloured sections, to which dominated Richard Outcault’s *The Yellow Kid*, the first widely popular comic character.

Before the comic will be discussed as an artform, it is important to mention for its proper understanding how this medium works. The comic medium has its specific means of expression, which have their roots in satirical cartoons of early development. The informational transfer is realized through simplified pictures and language, combined in certain parity to make the idea more expressive and universally comprehensible. Its distinctive role in comics has also the composition of basic elements, such as panels or balloons, as well as its unique method to convey a movement, time or emotions, resulting from a universal knowledge of the audience. To the overall impression contributes also the colour conduct, suggesting through its tints various moods or connotations.

During the first three decades of the 20th century, comic strips became a popular form of cheap entertainment in the USA, which led in mid-1930s in the origin of the new entertainment industry, focusing not only on reeditions assembling older newspaper

comics, but primarily on the production of fresh comic stories, published as self-contained comic books. The expansion of comic books started in 1939, when the usual themes inspired by pulp fictions were overshadowed with superhero genre, launched after the first costumed crime-fighting superhero, *Superman*, appeared. *Superman* became a new hero of increasingly multicultural America of the late 1930s and, together with his followers, such as *Captain Marvel* (1940), established sort of new mythology, fitting in the modern, progressive world. As the politics in America after the Second World War changed, the themes of comics changed as well. Censorship associated with the anti-communist “crusade” conducted by Senator J. R. McCarthy in 1950s gradually forced out the artistic freedom and critical power from the comic medium. As a consequence, in 1960s, the wave of underground comix authors emerged, reacting on the government restrictions set up in the previous decade. From the underground comix sphere arose several most acclaimed authors, including R. Crumb, whose works prepared the audience for alternative comics authors, not excluding Art Spiegelman, the most important exponent of the alternative scene¹. The contribution to the comic medium appreciation of both the forenamed sequential art authors is also the subject matter of the third chapter.

The comics found their way also in the sphere of High Art. The interpretations of comics drawings became pivotal works of renowned fine artists, who created in 1950s and 1960s a revolution in the academic art world - Pop-Art. Before Pop-Art finally gained its approval from academics, the High Art itself had to pass through varied development during the first half of the twentieth century. Modern art began to reflect its own culture, social changes, and moral values more than previous art movements. Accordingly, among modern art motifs began to appear low culture elements (the cultural domain of comics), such as Picasso’s prostitutes (fig. 19) or Futurists’ machines (fig. 20). The techniques of modern artists were also often inspired by industrial production (Futurists, Pop-Artists), scientific findings (Futurists, Surrealists) or later by popular culture, the “breeding-ground” of Pop-Art. The modern art prepossessed also the comic artists in many ways, nevertheless, the low rank of sequential art remained, in general, until the late 1970s.

Apparently, the most important revolutionary of modern art was Marcel Duchamp, whose work influenced a number of principal exponents of modernism, such as Salvador

¹ “**Alternative** comic books are usually created by a single cartoonist and present a very personal vision. Many are autobiographical in nature and put more emphasis on the author than on characters. These are self-published or small press works that resist or even satirize the clichés of mainstream genre fiction and valorize their roots in the [underground] comix tradition” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 66).

Dalí, who with his brilliant imaginative draftsmanship, collaborations with fashion designers or the involvement in film industry moved forward the art itself.

The postwar atmosphere influenced not only the world of comics, but also the world of High Art. Pop-Art rejected the snobbish self-complacency of academic standards and, by contrast, aspired to set up a “new aesthetic sensibility”, resulting from emerging consumer society of 1950s (McCarthy, 2000, p. 6). This is also the reason why comic, an indivisible part of American popular culture, was not unfrequently employed by Pop artists, namely Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, whose works are also analysed in the third chapter.

The comic book artist, who definitely elevated the medium of comic from the low genre level, was Will Eisner, the last “grand oldman”, to whom is also devoted the last chapter. Will Eisner, a legendary exponent of the American comics’ mainstream, helped to establish the comic book industry in 1930s and, with his experimental approach, extended the potential of comic book medium. As a reputable authority, Will Eisner also wrote up the first publication dealing with comics theory, with which he presented the comic book medium in unprecedented scholarly form.

1. SEQUENTIAL ART AS A MEDIUM

The Birth of Sequential Art

“Art history spans the entire history of humankind, from prehistoric times to the twenty-first century”: (*Art History Appreciation*, n.d.). Stories and art, the two substantial elements combined in “sequential art”, are both equally ancient art forms that reach the roots of all cultures (Eisner, 2000). Therefore it is possible to say that in its most extensive definition the sequential art could be as old as historic mankind.

With the growing level of human mind people gained the ability to communicate via more or less various and developed speech. The first humans using a language to communicate were Neanderthals, who appeared between 300 000 and 120 000 years ago. During the evolution human acts and experiences were increasingly sophisticated and the speech was still more complex and richer in expressions. Although the speech was the main means of communication, art gradually gained its role in an originating social coexistence and abstract thinking of our ancestors. Josef Kleibl (1976), a Czech nonfiction author, declared that, besides the communicative function, “prehistoric art joined and established a primitive society” (transl., p. 49). As a consequence, the need to maintain somehow all the cultural knowledge and to preserve the unity was growing. The key to maintain an information for the future was to make it permanently visible.

Will Eisner (2000), a renowned graphic novelist, asserted in his *Comics and Sequential Art* that the “comprehension of an image requires a commonality of experience” (p. 13). It seems that according to this statement the principal presumption to reciprocal understanding of generations was to share the information or experience. Until then communication was only verbal; its potential was only at an instantaneous level. To transmit a message across time in this way was rather precarious and people began to transfer it on a constant surface, such as the rock surface: “Those works that are applied to an immovable rock surface are classified as parietal art”, which is also the case of the most well-known cave paintings in Altamira cave in northern Spain (*Prehistoric Art of the Stone Age*, n.d.). Subsequently the picture

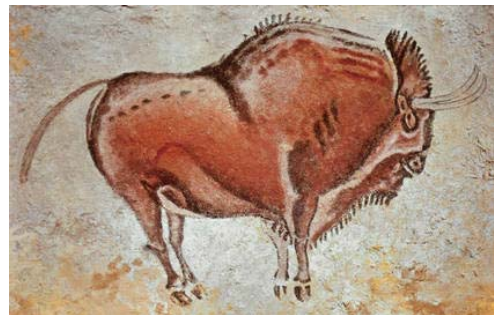


Figure 1. Altamira Cave Paintings. “In the small cave room are 25 painted animals, mostly bison, but also wild boars, horses, etc, of sizes between 1.40 m and 2.20 m” (*Altamira Cave Paintings*, n.d.).

appeared as a useful medium to maintain the information permanently.

The picture and later the sequence of pictures allowed to preserve the experience and to communicate to following generations with few misunderstandings. Unfortunately, during the thousands of years many of the visual realizations of some event were ruined or they are insolvable nowadays generally for a collapse of the whole civilization and the loss of some solvable material to compare with. This is the case of the famous and mighty empires such as the Mayan Culture in the area of present-day Mexico.

Scott McCloud, a comics theorist, in his book *Understanding Comic* surprisingly claims the history of the comic could be traced widely to the pre-columbian era. He bases this interesting statement on the existence of an epic story included in a picture manuscript discovered by Cortés in 1519. This 36-foot long brightly-colored sequence of pictures narrates a part of the life of a great military and political figure (McCloud, 1994, p. 10). Other examples illustrate the comic's existence even in an older age. The *Bayeux Tapestry* is medieval embroidery depicting the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. Dated about 1092, this seventy metres long and a half metre wide sequence of pictures, briefly accompanied also by words, represents through more than seventy scenes in left to right narrative order sort of first acceptable version of sequential art ("Bayeux Tapestry", 2012). It is commonly known that Egyptian civilization used to record any information through



Figure 2. The Bayeux Tapestry, 11th section, scene 1 - Arrival at Pevensey. This section illustrates how the Normans “reach the south coast of England on the 28th September and land at Pevensey. Soldiers ride off towards Hastings and gather food” (“*Beachhead - Scene 1*”, n.d.).

the medium of hieroglyphics. McCloud (1994) explains that “glyphs represent only sounds, not unlike our alphabet. Thus, their real descendent is the written word and not comics” (pp. 12-13). What is interesting about the ancient Egypt in the relation with the comic is its visual art. As well as the Mayan graphic art the Egyptian one corresponds with the definition sequential art accurately. The only remarkable difference is the course of the sequence. As it was practiced 2700 years later in Mexico, the Egyptians read their comics

zig-zag and from bottom to top (McCloud, 1994, p. 14). Nevertheless, according to McCloud's study, the very origin of the comic is impossible to define exactly.

The invention of a printing press in 1452 was not only a crucial moment in the world history of written word but it also influenced the spread of printed pictures: "Although movable type, as well as paper, first appeared in China, it was in Europe that printing first became mechanized" ("Printing Press", 2012). Initially, the printing press allowed popularizing a visual art prevailing with religious themes to support biblical texts and to simplify its content. Gradually, the utilization of printed pictures spread to more common areas of popular interest and it began to serve also as an entertainment of wealthy people.



Figure 3. A Rake's Progress, Scene 3. "The third scene depicts an all night entertainment. Tom Rakewell has ordered an orgy for himself and an acquaintance at a private room. ... Very drunk, he has succumbed to the charms of a prostitute, who professionally caresses him with one hand and steals his pocket watch with the other" ("William Hogarth: A Rake's Progress: Plate 3", n.d.).

The literal definition of a modern comic as a form of visual art is rather complicated. Because of the expansion of art in the last century and especially in a postwar west culture the term, which determines this relatively new art form, could be understood

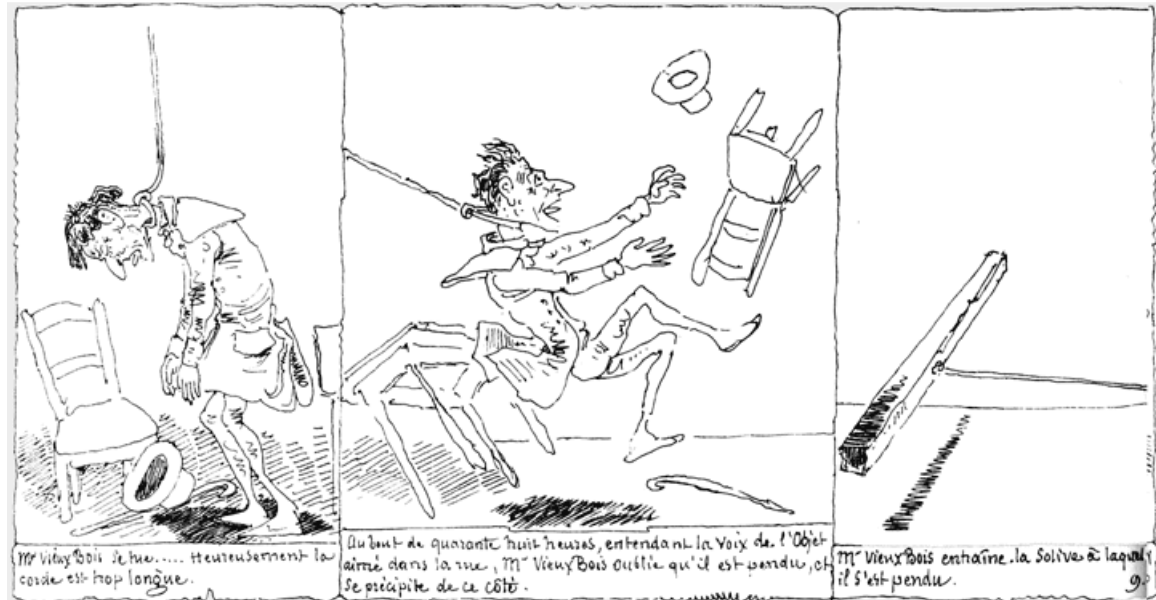
as pedantic but on the other hand necessary. It is possible to say that of the reasons for the ambiguous classification is the comic's vague history or no presence of high art's rules. The definition of the modern comic comes after a comparison with other artistic forms, such as moving pictures. Scott McCloud (1994) defines comics as a "juxtaposed pictorial and other [static] images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p. 9).

In reference to McCloud's definition the origin of the comic, which was very similar to a contemporary point of view, was found by William Hogarth in the first half of the eighteenth century. Seven sets of sequential narratives Hogarth produced on "Modern Moral Subjects" were originally painted and therefore very expensive. The first one of these sets, *A Harlot's Progress* (1731), was done in the form of paintings or less luxurious prints: "The six paintings in this set do have a deliberate sequence and do tell a rudimentary story when they are juxtaposed" (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 20). This piece of work is considered by many authorities to be the first comic ever not only for its form, but also for another properties and circumstances of a modern comic. "'A Harlot's Progress' and its sequel 'A Rake's Progress' proved so popular, new copyright laws were created to protect this new form" (McCloud, 1994, p. 17). Another important feature is explained in *The Power of Comics* where was pointed out that "Hogarth's importance in the history of comics stems as much from his marketing ability and his marketability as it does from his artistic or storytelling ability" (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 21).

The evolution of comics and their refinement continued, the form was increasingly similar to the comics how we know them nowadays. According to McCloud (1994): "The father of the modern comic in many ways is Rodolphe Töpffer [a Swiss schoolmaster], whose light satiric picture stories, starting in the mid-1800s, employed cartooning and panel borders, and featured the first interdependent combination of words and pictures in Europe" (p. 17). Töpffer's work was innovative also in the approach of the author. He was neither an acclaimed writer nor well-known painter but his idea to mix these different media (words and pictures) together was unique. Although, this Töpffer's act of creativity considered himself as a part-time job and the content of his work was simplified and comical sketch intended to entertain a reader above all, he took its form as a serious matter. Töpffer himself courageously predicted that "the picture-story, which critics disregard and scholars scarcely notice, has greater influence at all times, perhaps even more than written literature" (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 25). His unorthodox vision of absurd fictional

picture stories began to attract the interest of other artists and they started to copy Töpffer's work, which made this art form increasingly visible to the public.

Figure 4. Rodolphe Töpffer, *Les Amours de M. Vieux Bois*, 1837. M. Vieux Bois's long and absurd journey toward matrimony ("*Rodolphe Töpffer*", 1999).



Mr. Vieux Bois kills himself. Fortunately, the cord is too long.

After forty-eight hours, hearing the voice of the Loved One in the street, Mr. Vieux Bois forgets that he has been hanged, and rushes in that direction.

Mr. Vieux Bois drags along the beam he has been hung from.

At the turn of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, comics began to serve not only for an entertainment but also as an instrument of newspaper business. The first commonly known and mass produced versions of a comic were cartoons or comic strips and they became self-contained humorous parts of Sunday newspapers, also called “the funny papers”. These “funnies”, which originated in 1890s in America, were of a very simple drawings’ composition and consisted of only few panels accompanied by gags. “Even later, when newspaper strips and their offspring in magazine format featured serious narrative content, the term *comic* stuck” (Wright, 2003, p. 2). The first most famous comic strip was *The Yellow Kid* by Richard Felton Outcault (1863-1928), which dealt with slum life introduced by adult acting shabby kids. One of the kids was called Mickey Dugan. Bald, with jug ears, two stuck out teeth, beady eyes, and yellow nightshirt, it got a nickname *The Yellow Kid* and became very popular among the readers: “Soon products featuring the image of *The Yellow Kid* were everywhere: on shirts and cigars, lunch pails and cigarette cards, stationery and dolls” (Weiner, 2003, p. 1). Its release in Joseph Pulitzer’s the *New York World* in 1894 “had demonstrated that comics could dramatically increase newspaper circulation” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 27). *The Yellow Kid*

standardized not only the cohesion of comic and commercialism, but also another characteristics typical for a modern comic, for instance the synthesis of text and picture, the usage of balloon including a speech or a regular publication. This was the initial step toward a modern comic book developed in 1930s in the United States of America.

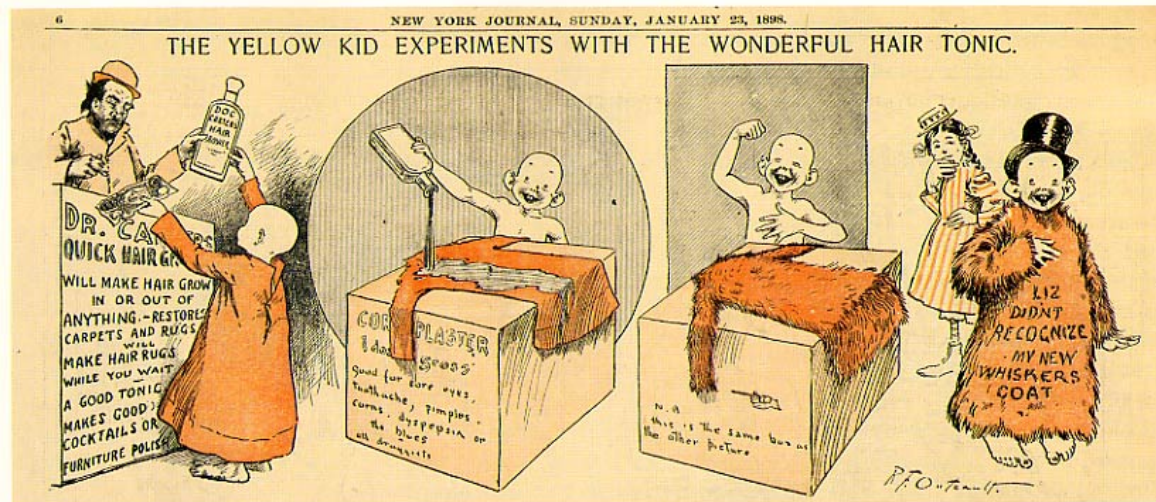


Figure 5. Outcault, R. F. The Yellow Kid Experiments with the Wonderful Hair Tonic, New York Journal, 23 Jan. 1898. “Although the Yellow Kid was usually dressed in yellow, he appeared in orange in this 1898 strip” (Wood, 2004).

The Difference Between a Cartoon and a Comic

A cartoon as well as a comic utilizes the symbolical information of an icon. Basically, an icon stands for some reality and it allows to express this reality towards a viewer immediately. This fact depends on the level of real or abstract interpretation of this reality. One such icon could be a picture in comics. The more the picture is abstract or simplified the more is the information general, understandable and/or also intensified, such as in the case of popular emoticons/smiley faces used during web discussions. The result of this “simplification or iconization” is a cartoon. Cartoons allow the reader to concentrate not on the form but on the idea itself. Another important feature is that on account of its elementary design the reader can easily identify with e.g. iconized figure in a cartoon or a comic. This is the key process that makes a cartoon or a comic powerful in its comprehensible communication and suggestive content worldwide. Finally, the difference between a comic strip/book and a cartoon is that the cartoon is in principle stylized attitude to visual creation (parodied or exaggerated frequently) and the comic strip/book is the medium, which often employs the cartoon as its “language” (McCloud).



Figure 6. The “Iconization”. Scott McCloud explains the simplifying function of an icon in a cartoon, which allows reader to be more focused on the very information or to be identified with such figure easier (McCloud, 1994, pp. 30, 31).

The Information Transfer of Comics

There are the two main sources of information in a comic - the language and the pictures. The popular origin of this art form subconsciously evokes to understand the comic language generally as a simple, but maybe an infantile or a stupid. Another reason could be also the boom of children comics during 1940s, such as Dell’s *Walt Disney Comics and Stories* that overshadowed more serious action comics, for instance Eisner’s *The Spirit* (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 36). This is one of the most influential stereotypes that have kept comics in the sphere of low and childish literature for a long time. Nevertheless, just the simplification makes comics so expressive and powerful in the ability to highlight the substantial matter, as it is increasingly employed in re-narrating of serious texts, for instance in Robert Crumb’s *The Book of Genesis* (2009) retelling *The Bible*.

It is possible to say that as well as the reality in a comic is iconized, the language has to be “iconized” in the same way. This problem is exactly commented by McCloud (1994) while he said that “when pictures are more abstracted from ‘reality’, they require greater levels of perception, more like words”, and he continued further, “when words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures” (p. 49). Therefore the relation between a language and pictures is in a certain artistic compromise or balance in order to keep the story fluent, coherent and understandable.

Decoding the information hidden in a comic depends also on actual knowledge of reader. Will Eisner (2000) explained that “comics communicate in a ‘language’ that relies

on a visual experience common to both creator and audience” (p. 7). Therefore the methods of creating comics and techniques to express a message are very similar all over the world.

The composition of a comic story depends on an author’s view how much of the scene a viewer can perceive for a dramatic interpretation of an action. There is also necessary to consider a picture or a panel proper to include or exclude the text. Randy



Figure 7. The most relevant view to visualize. Frank Miller uses synecdoche together with brief discourse to keep the tension and mystery of the scene (Miller, Janson, & Varley, 1996, p. 36).

Duncan, a professor of communication at Henderson State University, and Matthew J. Smith, an associate professor and chair of communication at Wittenberg University, observed that in comics the “meaning is created by a combination of the present and the absent” (2009, p. 133). In other words, the meaning in

comics is generally created via synecdoche and metonymy, which calculates with the viewer’s interaction. Scott McCloud claims the understanding the whole while observing a part happens between the panels. This process called “closure” is enacted in the space between individual panels and serves in the sequential art as “the agent of change, time, and motion” (McCloud, 1994, p. 66). Consequently, the “reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit” (Eisner, 2000, p. 8). These factors influence further the reader’s absorption of a story and express the stylistic view of an author.



Figure 8. Closure, Reader’s interaction. This sequence relies on reader’s knowledge of brain reeling while awakening from faint (Rothschild, 2000).



Figure 9. The panel suggestion. “The long panel reinforces the illusion of height. The positioning of several square panels emulates a falling motion” (Eisner. 2000. p. 46).

Pictorial accompaniment of words represents the comic appearance of reality itself but it is not sufficient to express the other characteristics of real world perceived by our senses. Comics include various methods to convey information and the most remarkable “engine” is the panel. The basic task of panels is to divide the plot into segments in a comprehensible chain. The shape and the dimension of the space between panels or panel itself evoke further complementary messages about the mood or sense of place for whole settings (McCloud, 1994, p. 103). The time is another indivisible feature of plot that is feasible to express by placing panels in deliberate order: “In relying on visual sequence, comics substitutes space for time” (McCloud, 2000, p. 3). The mutual position of juxtaposed panels can

predicate the flow of a story and in some cases can express another important aspect of a comic - the motion.

Modern comics developed several accepted methods to display a movement or dynamism of items in a real world. The simplest techniques are the position of the item itself or an inclusion of movement into the space (also called “the gutter”) between panels. Then the item is simply in another position than in the previous frame. Though, the most common technique is the application of “*speed lines* or puffs of ‘smoke’ drawn behind a character or object to indicate direction and rapidity of movement” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 136). This approach is typical for an American action comics, which greatest expansion came in the period of superheroic comics during the Second World War (McCloud, 1994, pp. 110-111).



Figure 10. Speed lines. Although speed lines were applied mainly in action comics, other illustrators used them as well. E. C. Segar’s *Popeye* is notorious for the “swinging” drawing style (“*Elzie Crisler Segar*”, 2010).

Comics benefit from their pictorial accompaniment in further important sphere of perception - in interpreting of sound. As suggested Duncan and Smith (2009), “voice, sound effects, and music represented in comic books lack the realism found in an auditory medium, but they can be great deal more expressive than they are in non-illustrated prose” (p. 144). The visual interpretation of sounds in comics is not so universally established as in the case of motion and it is still in slight progress. Nevertheless, the sound could be divided in two broad categories. The first category representates a spoken word and its derivation and the second indicates various noises. The spoken word is generally closed in “the balloon” which is only another type of panel. As well as in the case of the border panel “the balloon’s” shape itself can express the character of included discourse. Aspects of paralanguage (more or less quality human speech) can be also expressed visually by varying size and shape of letters (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 145). The method of simulating the train of thoughts is very subjective but usually it is realised by various scrawls or symbols included in wavy edged or scalloped panel borders (Eisner, 2000, p. 44). The second category includes noises evoking sound impressions inspired by an actual rush of real world. These onomatopoeic sound effects



Figure 11. The balloon function. Todd Klein, a respected comic book letterer, suggests through the bizzare balloon appearance a distinct voice of the character (Chittenden, 2010).



Figure 12. Emotions. Charles Schultz in his *Peanuts* frequently implies emotions nonverbally via postures and gestures (“*The Cartoon Raspberry Museum*”, n.d.).

utilizes, similarly as the discourse, miscellaneous lettering in order to denote the extent, direction or loudness of the noise.

The comic can through the visual character transfers an information also non-verbally and this serves to express especially emotions in many forms. In general, the drawing style of an author can assist while interpreting some emotional moment of the story. Duncan and Smith (2009) reported that

“an artist can communicate emotional tone by varying width, direction, curve, or even number of lines” (p. 146). Authors have their own methods how to foreshadow mental conditions of characters but these methods are always based on the universal knowledge of human face or body. Will Eisner was one of the first theorists who studied the human anatomy and its expressiveness in comics. He researched that:

The stylization of its shape, and the codifying of its emotionally produced gestures and expressive postures are accumulated and stored in the memory, forming a non-verbal vocabulary of gesture. Unlike the frame device in comics, the postures are not part of comic strip technology (Eisner, 2000, p. 100).



Figure 13. The mood. The oppressive atmosphere of industrialized town in Ward's *God's Man* is extremely intense (Spiegelman, 2010).

There is no doubt that the human body is the most effective medium in the implication of emotions; on the other hand the surrounding of figures and the appearance of the picture itself allows to illustrate to some extent any mood. This approach was developed prevalently in the beginning of the twentieth century as a matter of Expressionism and Impressionism and the practices were subsequently received in different forms also by cartoonists, for instance in woodcut novel *Gods' Man* (1929) by Lynd Ward, one of America's most distinguished and accomplished graphic novelists. Scott McCloud (1994) studied the application of symbols from the comics' viewpoint and he claimed that even one line as the simplest unit of a comic carries an expressive potential and

characterizes the subject in some way. A curve or a set of wavy lines and their mutual combinations became a part of comic symbolical language understandable practically worldwide (pp. 124-128). Despite the fact that the modern comic is a young art form, “it already has an impressive array of recognizable symbols and its visual vocabulary has an unlimited potential for growth” (McCloud, 1994, p. 131).

As the symbolical lines or background can convey certain emotions, colours can highlight or complement their extent or instancy. Each colour indicates some mood and bears also some connotative meaning, as in the case of *Captain America* (1941), one of the



Figure 14. The wavy lines. Scott McCloud demonstrates in his *Understanding Comics* different meanings of wavy lines (McCloud, 1994, p. 128).

most popular superheroes in the USA, fighting against Fascist during the World War II. Besides the name, the patriotic symbolism was emphasized through his U.S. flag coloured costume, “urging the nation against foreign aggression” (Wright, 2003, p. 31). However, *Captain America*, cocreated by Jack Kirby (1917-1994), one of the most influential and distinctive comic book illustrators, has been something more than an instrument of the war propaganda: “*Captain America* has stood as a symbol of everything that America is based on ... he is the living embodiment of Truth, Justice and the American Way” (Metro, 2011).

Cartoonists utilize colour as a part of the visual language, which helps them to express the scene mood or to deliberately hide a message while narrating the story. It means that “anger, violence or any impact panel will have a hot color like red, yellow or orange. Cool colors like blue and purple are used when the mood is sad or depressed”, as it is applied in *The Batman’s* Gotham City, portrayed in gloomy colours in order to express the omnipresent sinfulness of that place (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 142). Colours could serve also as an instrument conducive to orientate or to promptly identify the character while reading the comics. This can be realised by the use of unified colour scheme of characters or setting through the whole book. Therefore there is no chance that most of the American superheroes’ costumes include red and/or blue colour, with which were American reader’s most familiar (e.g. *The Spirit*, *Superman*, *Captain America*, *Spiderman*, *Wonder Woman*).



Figure 15. *Captain America*. The original version of *Captain America* of 1940s (McAndrew, 2011).

Naturally, the use of colour in a comic industry was influenced by contemporary technologies and commerce and the first comic-strips published were black and white: “In



Figure 16. The cover to *Stormwatch* (vol. 3) #9 (May 2012), featuring the advanced colouring technology in depicting the flames and flashes (“*Stormwatch 2011*”, n.d.).

January 1894 a comic strip [*The Yellow Kid*] filled for the first time a full-colour page of Joseph Pulitzer’s newspaper the *New York World*” (“Comic Strip”, 2012). The first colour printing was very expensive and the costs were despite the profits not sufficient to include the coloured pages regularly. This was the impulse to invent a reasonable solution which had become progressively “the four coloured process [CMYK] ... the look of these colors, held by bold, simple outlines, and reproduced on cheap newsprint eventually became the look of comics in America” (McCloud, 1994, p. 187). The improvement of printing technology, paper and colour quality extended the creative possibilities into the present-day form.

Cartoonists have learned how to make use of the developing potentiality and their “coloring techniques have become more sophisticated and the color palette has become more varied, since skillful use of color can give a character dramatic impact in a given panel” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 142).

A coloured comic is more direct and schematic which makes the visual information understandable immediately. Scott McCloud (1994) alleges that “flat colors forms themselves take on more significance ... these colors objectify their subjects ... we become more aware of the physical form of objects than in black and white” (pp. 189, 192). However, in spite of the fact the coloured comics make a great deal of the contemporary comic production, the black and white comic has its own steady domain in serious themes. An example of this tendency is Art Spiegelman’s famous and honored *Maus* (1986), discussing the deep-going theme of holocaust during the World War II.

Spiegelman, an American graphic novelist and Pulitzer Prize winner, made a use of a black and white depiction to emphasize the extremely distressful situation of the characters. As to the rest, this approach is employed also in films that communicate high seriousness, typical for Hollywood postwar style of dramas - *film noir*, “which shared a strange and violent tone, tinged with unique kind of eroticism” (Silver & Ursini, 2006, p. 17). McCloud (1994) explained that while using black and white “the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly, meaning transcends form and the art approaches language” (p. 192).



Figure 17. *Film-noir*. This shot of Joseph H. Lewis's film *The Big Combo* (1955) immensely evokes the scenes of Frank Miller's comics *Sin City* (1991) (“*Star Wars Saga Marathon*”, 2012).

In arranging the scenes in comics both the colour comic versions also utilize many of the lighting techniques employed in film. These techniques are often inspired just by the *film noir* genre in order to evoke some oppressive atmosphere or simply to direct the viewer's attention to an important section within a frame (Duncan & Smith, 2009, pp. 142-143).

In conclusion, the unlimited and universal possibility to transfer information through its plasticity is only one of many qualities giving to comics a great narrative potential, the ability to be original or to follow world trends and to be more widely inspiring for other media.

2. THE COMIC AS A PART OF CULTURE

The Origin of a Modern Comic Book and Its Cultural Background

The society at the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth century experienced many breaking waves and cultural changes in considerable areas of life. The film industry as well as the radio broadcasting was still under development, however, it took more than three decades for comics to become parts of every-day life in America. As Stephen Weiner, a comics historian and critic, says in his *Rise of the Graphic Novel*, “Radios

became widely available by the 1920s, but they were not a visual medium. Comic strips were a welcome relief in homes that otherwise had only novels as printed entertainment” (2003, p. 1). In these times prevailed relatively an artistic freedom for the comic creators because they were not so limited by the successes of competition as in a later period. “During the years 1907–20 most of the major categories of American comics were established, including the first aviation, ethnic character, and career girl strips” (“Comic Strip”, 2012). The popularity of comics grew for their reasonable price and fresh undemanding topics, which were the same characteristics of another popular entertainment of those days - the pulp magazines. These two media were both forms of cheap literary amusement for the middle class and educated lower class and they competed for the interest of their audience. Comics and pulp magazines were through their similar aims to a certain extent linked and after the decline in the pulp fiction business many of pulp authors and publishers converted in the late 1930s into the more prosperous medium of comics. Nevertheless, a comic industry was to a certain degree bound to pulp magazines at least for the inspiration in stories about superheroes of extraordinary abilities (e.g. *Tarzan* and *Zorro*), which became smash hits during the late 1930s (Duncan & Smith, 2009, pp. 27, 28).

The defeating of comic’s biggest rival in its business category argued that the commercial potential of this booming medium should not be underestimated. After the experience with the success of newspaper comic strips (“funnies”), comics were used as promotional materials or giveaways across America often in different business areas. This meant the first mass production of comics in general, although the primary intention was not to entertain, but again to increase the companies’ gains on a market. This practice was realized firstly by The Eastern Color Printing Company in 1933 and was eventually followed by a number of the others. The first attempts to sell comics on newsstands were undertaken just with the souvenir copies and these comic pioneers were briskly sold out. Their popularity was still burgeoning, which led in 1934 to publishing of the first comic books called *Famous Funnies* that “were actually reprint collections of popular newspaper comic strips” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 26). This was the impulse to create and publish comic itself and to initiate the comic book industry, which meant the birth of the modern comic book.

The rise of a new literary genre signified a great opportunity on a market and the inception of keen publishing companies promptly tailed after. Bradford W. Wright, an associate professor with the University of Maryland University College, mentioned in his

Comic Book Nation, “the proliferation of such bizarre literature during the interwar years indicates that there existed lucrative, and mostly young, market with tastes well outside of the mainstream” (Wright, 2003, p. 2). In early 1936, the situation required to produce new and attractive stories that could be profitably sold to comic book publishers, therefore many “companies sprang up, employing teams of artists and writers to create the stories as quickly and cheaply as possible” (Weiner, 2003, p. 2).

The production of comics could be compared to an assembly line in a factory. As well as all the other spheres of man pain the comic industry was influenced by the Great Depression during the 1930s. This caused that many of more or less skilled and talented artists were unemployed and therefore grateful for any job close to their qualification. The Great Depression persuaded many respected artists to work as freelancers, but still they were ashamed to be incorporated in such business. As Wright (2003) reported about the situation in early 1938, “the comic book work for freelancers was neither prestigious nor profitable, and it was for the most part an anonymous affair ... in the artistic profession, comic books ranked just above pornography” (pp. 6-7). A low prestige, stressful working conditions and an uncertain employment led into crew changes and consequently to varying quality level of comic books.

Most of the stories were more or less inspired by notorious pulp fictions and that was probably the reason for its poor sales. Perhaps it was caused also by the suspicious publishers to release anything more shocking than military, adventurous or detective topics. All the same, some of such comics succeeded and found their audience, such as Charles Gould’s *Dick Tracy* that dealt with (in “post-Al Capone’s” times) commonly popular and topical theme of gangsterdom.

The detective genre was also the actual matter of the originating giant in the comic book industry, the Detective Comics, Inc. (commonly known as DC Comics), which became in 1937 “the most enduring publisher of American comic books” (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 31). Its key to success was an innovative approach to publishing as well as to creating the comic itself. DC Comics set up new standards and determined the direction of comic progress in America for the next decade. At this time “the humor was giving way to crime-fighting” (Wright, 2003, p. 5), which prepared conditions for the new era of superheroes.

Postindustrial American society raised new tensions. Whereas heroes of the previous centuries, like Daniel Boone, Natty Bumppo, and Wyatt Earp, could

conquer and tame the savage American frontier, twentieth century America demanded a superhero who could resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer-driven and anonymous mass society (Wright, 2003, p. 10).

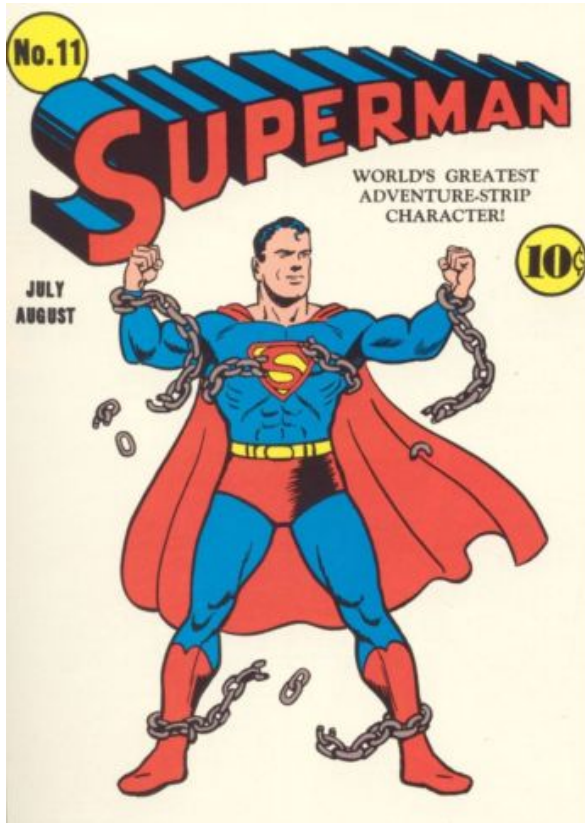


Figure 18. *Superman*. *Superman* shortly became the most popular character in the *Action Comics*, “so in 1939 DC launched *Superman*, the first comic book title devoted to a single character” (Wright, 2003, p. 9). The figure features one of the first issues of *Superman* (“*History of the Golden Age of Superman*”, 2012).

“During the first two decades of the twentieth century, there were as many as 1 million new immigrants per year, so that by the 1910 census, almost 15 percent of Americans had been born in another country” (Datesman, Crandall & Kearny, 2004, p. 4). As a result, the United States became a multicultural country being a goal for all people worldwide, who were searching for their “American dream”. A number of those immigrants were talented ambitious people, who succeeded and became during the interwar period very wealthy, famous, influential and also respected by public, such as Joseph Barbera (1911-2006), a world-acclaimed animator and director of Sicilian origin. Therefore, it was quite common when a foreigner became an adored “citizen-hero”, the beau-ideal for Americans. This could

be one of the reasons for immense popularity of *Superman*, a hero of supernatural abilities and grace coming from foreign planet called Krypton. On the other hand, *Superman*, embodied by Clark Kent, a common spectacled impecunious man, was in the time of the Great Depression easy to identify with. As *Superman*, he minded these ordinary people, whose struggles he also knew, and he grew into a “champion of the oppressed ... devoted to helping those in need” (Wright, 2003, p. 11).

The idea of a superhero was rejected by publishers for a long as any radical change in sort of running business. The figure of *Superman* existed several years before it was first published. Its creators, high school students Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, an offspring of

Jewish immigrants, spent a lot of time while convincing publishers to take their hero seriously and release him into the world of newspaper business as a comic strip section. The concept originated in 1933, but it was published by DC Comics in 1938 rather as an experimental part of the upcoming comic book called the *Action Comics*. Through its dubious lucrateness the concept of *Superman* was sold together with all rights only for \$130. At this time, nobody could have known that *Superman* would turn into a goldmine influencing next progress of American comic: “Other superheroes followed Superman. Just as with comic strips, most of the new creations were mediocre, but some stood out - Batman, Wonder Man, Captain America, Captain Marvel, and Plastic Man” (Weiner, 2003, p. 2). All these characters were fighting against crime in their own supernatural ways allied a police or in secrecy. With the coming of the World War II the topics of comic plots extended on a battlefield all around the world and there was no worry about the source of inspiration, but when the war ended and there was no more evil to fight with, some fresh subject matter was to come. However, Duncan and Smith commented this era of superheroes that:

Superman was both the triumph and the tragedy of the comic book medium. Within a few years, *Action Comics* and its spin-off title, *Superman*, were each selling over a million copies a month. Superman assured the financial succes of the new industry. Unfortunately, he also assured that that the comic book medium would be ... associated with adolescent power fantasies of muscular men in tights. The legion of “long underwear” imitators that followed Superman cemented this image in the popular imagination (2009, p. 32).

In the postwar era, the comic book industry underwent many substantial changes. As mentioned, the subject matter for superheroes fade out and so did their fame (at least until 1960s). In late 1940s, new comic genres, such as horror, romance or science-fiction, were introduced in order to bring in some fresh themes. This was the time when also one of the most influential comic publishers - EC Comics - emerged. EC's comics were the most favourite entertainment of teenagers in early 1950s for its straightforward stories, depicting the world in its real and often depraved form. The USA in the cold war environment or the atmpshere of McCarthyism, the exceedingly anti-communist and rather oppressive politics of 1950s practiced by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy (1908-1957), were extremely suspicious about any media, not excepting a comic. The comic book industry, and

especially EC Comics, had to confront a great censorship, resulting in establishing the Comics Code (1954), regulations governing acceptable comic book material, after which comics viewed the world in a moral-and-government-acceptable, couleur-de-rose way (Weiner, 2003, pp. 5-8). This situation evoked in 1960s “revolutionary” America a wave of resistance:

Spontaneously across America, creative and unconventional young people who had grown up reading the genre fantasies mass-produced by the traditional comic book publishers began to make their own comics . . . , [spread via] a distribution system of alternative bookstores, record stores, and head shops. The content and even the style of the artwork were a conscious rebellion against the Comics Code restrictions, editorial policies, and genre formulas of traditional comic books. These convention-defying, politically charged, and independently produced comics became known as **underground comix** (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 52).

Underground comix meant the origin of new generation of sequential art authors, who ultimately made the medium of comic serious through reflecting its culture and actual social problems as scarcely as any other medium. From this generation arose also the authors like Robert Crumb or Art Spiegelman, who brought sequential art to its eminence, who revealed its hidden, deep aspects, and who finally elevated it into the status of a reputable art form.

The Infiltration of Low Culture and Comics into the World of High Art

Due to its abstract complexion, the High Art at the beginning of the twentieth century was increasingly away from ordinary people’s comprehension and became a privilege of small number scholarly intellectuals. Nevertheless, in spite of its maintaining refinement, there is no doubt the High Art was to some extent affected with public metropolitan life together with its drawbacks. One of the first remarkable movements employing elements of vulgar low culture was Cubism, created in 1907 by the group of young artists in Paris, the trend-making center of the modern art.

The leader of this movement was Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), who won himself a name with the controversial painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1907). “This work”, writes Rookmaaker (1975), an art history professor at the Free University in Amsterdam,



Figure 19. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1907). The Young Ladies of Avignon - the disreputable street of Barcelona (Lynton, 1981, p. 92).

“defined the new epoch, the new world, which had not been realized in its fullness yet ... it does not concern with morality or another norms, but it deals with searching for something generally current” (p. 101-102). However, despite its surely sophisticated idea, the models for Picasso’s masterpiece were actually five prostitutes, women of the lowest social rank, who embodied through their cubistic shapes divergent values of the new society. The prostitutes also expressed the fact, that the female

body itself had been always inspiring artists, no matter of what social status the woman is.

Cubism itself went through several upgrades, from Analytical Cubism to more or less modified Synthetic Cubism, which was the first High Art style experimenting with materials of common use, such as newspaper, or contextualizing absurd, ironic and humorous motives of public life. As David Summers reported, “Cubist images are also comic at a level deeper than theme. Even in the most hermetic stages of the style much of cubist drawing is intrinsically amusing, the tilt of a cap, a smile, wavy hair, the cup of breast, a moustache reduced to jots of caricature” (Summers, 1981).

Futurism originated in Italy in 1908 as a movement of young artists fascinated by the quick technical progress including afterwards even the First World War machinery. Futurists “emphasized the dynamism, speed, energy, and power of the machine and the vitality, change, and restlessness of modern life” and spread the hate toward traditions in the art of the previous century (“Futurism”, 2012). Actually, their intention was to destroy all the older works of art and to set up new anti-academic aesthetic standard, resulting from the modernity of urban life. Their alternative for a sculpture was a roaring car, the symbol of speed and change. Futurists disdained works exhibited in art galleries evermore; their attitude towards art was rather consumer and they treated it like a newspaper - to read it and replace it with a newer product.

Futurists needed their own visual language to depict the furious and often utopia visions. They looked for the inspiration in Cubism and partly in Expressionism, which brought the use of cubic lines and bright colours, but the breakthrough found in a completely different medium, through which they elaborated the visual conception of motion in various forms. The source of this fundamental inspiration was common for both - Futurism and sequential art, and was found in an advancing and still slighted film industry.

The Futurists were fascinated by new visual technology, in particular chronophotography, a predecessor of animation and cinema that allowed the movement of an object to be shown across a sequence of frames. This technology was an important influence on their approach to showing movement in painting, encouraging an abstract art with rhythmic, pulsating qualities (“*Futurism*”, 2012).

Shortly afterwards, Futurists “explored the idea that motion could be depicted by a single image on *canvas* ... and began the systematic decomposition of moving images in a static medium” (McCloud, 1994, p. 108). Futurist works were actually sequenced pictures within one frame, as in the case of *Dynamism of a Car* (1912-1913) by Luigi Russolo (1883-1947), an Italian painter and composer, where were joined a symbol of Futurism, a low genre motif and sequenced pictures.



Figure 20. Luigi Russolo, *Dynamism of a Car* (1912-1913), (Gutteridge, 2011).

Both the visual arts, Futurism and sequential art, were developed in a completely different sphere of human interest and under incomparable conditions, but they both profited from the same source of inspiration - the moving pictures. Futurism vanished by the end of twenties, but its legacy of visual language survived in other art forms. This was also the case of sequential art that, besides the speed lines, extracted futuristic blurred and edgy lines to support the action, especially in order to depict some dynamic or otherwise dramatic



Figure 21. Masashi Kishimoto, *Naruto* (1999). This figure features an extract of typical Japanese manga, using the dynamic background similar to Futuristic visualization. There are also unique extra-panel verbal suggestions of sounds (Lee, 2010).

background within a panel. This technique was not so common in American comics until the mid-1980s, when they begin to be inspired by Japanese comics (manga), embracing this very different concept of motion as their own and employing it since the late 1960s (McCloud, 1994, p. 113).

Sequential art followed the futuristic means of expression also in conveying the sounds. All the modern art movements were influencing each other, particularly Cubism



Figure 22. The sound impression. John Byrne's interpretation of detonation sound in *Jack Kirby's 4th World* ("Jack Kirby's 4th World # 2 page 9", 2008).

and Futurism. For instance, Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), the most productive and talented Futurist, "borrowed [from Cubism] the geometric forms to evoke crashing, startling sounds to accompany the depicted movement" ("*Futurism*", 2012). Just this method, complemented with interjections and proper colour scheme, was more often used in comics for the sound impression.

Before the First World War began his career one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), a French avant-garde artist, became the man, whose work acted as a “bridge” across almost all the modern movements and connected the low culture and high art in unconcealed way. Duchamp, being originally a cartoonist, combined various themes and techniques that led to his very individual and provocative vulgar style, rife with sexual innuendoes and subversive cheeky sense of humor (“*Marcel Duchamp*”, 2012). His work made him an artist that cannot be classified as a member of any distinctive art movement. Duchamp also “completely changed the traditional concept of art with his ‘ready-made’ objects. This was the issue of exhibiting any finished objects, where the artistic idea itself should be represented by the choice of the object and not the process of creating the work” (Glenn, 2008, April). His first remarkable work was *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* (1912), which was sort of combination of Futurism and Cubism. It depicts “an invigorated figure ... in a state of perpetual motion - a very different effect from Picasso and Braque’s Analytic Cubism that held figures tightly in place” (Rosenthal, 2004). This painting, despite the sequential character, was not even a Futuristic work, because Duchamp’s intention was, through its ambivalent features and provocative title, to confuse the audience and make it searching for some immoral matter. This was maybe the reason why his debuting work was rejected even among avant-garde society. Nevertheless, despite the criticism, Duchamp continued in his shocking and vulgar style improving his sense of parody and absurdity, which was finally accepted after his immigration to the USA in 1915 (Rookmaaker, 1996, p. 113-114).



Figure 23. Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* (1912), (“*Nude Descending a Staircase*”, n.d.).

Two years later, Duchamp created his most famous work, *Fountain* (1917), “ready-made”, which became the symbol of his artistic philosophy. Klaus Honnef, an art critic and a professor of photography at Cologne University in Germany, researched that Duchamp’s “aesthetic goal was to replace an art designed to please the eye - he called it ‘retinal art’ - with an art of the intellect. Not the object as such was important to him but the train of thought it would touch off in the context of an unfamiliar environment” (Honnef, 2004,



Figure 24. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917). “The initial R stood for Richard, French slang for ‘moneybags’ whereas Mutt referred to JL Mott Ironworks, the New York-based company, which manufactured the porcelain urinal” (“*Marcel Duchamp*”, 2012), (Zimmerman, 2011).

art, for which he is sometimes called “the forefather of Pop-Art”. Due to his unique art attitude could be Duchamp also recognized as a predecessor of the new originating art movement - Dadaism.

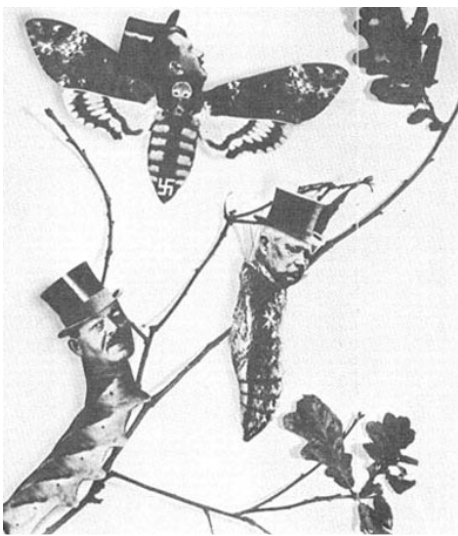


Figure 25. John Heartfield, *Metamorphose* (1934). Heartfield’s cartoon photomontage satirizes the change of German interwar politics - metamorphosis from President Friedrich Ebert (caterpillar) to Paul von Hindenburg (pupa) to Adolf Hitler (butterfly), (“*Metamorphose by John Heartfield*”, 2010).

p.8). This piece was actually an urinal, which Duchamp declared a work of art by placing it on pedestal in an art gallery and signing it R. Mutt. With the *Fountain*, expressing the dailiness and eliminating the social status differences, Duchamp depolarized the conception of High Art and “opened the gate” for more unstudied art, sequent to the human equality and spontaneousness. However, *Fountain* and a number of his other works were generally rejected and Duchamp almost left his artistic ambition for the benefit of his passion for chess. Nevertheless, through his bold production, employing mass-produced objects and ending in an absolute artistic freedom and prevision, Duchamp made a revolution in modern

Dadaism, alias Dada, was most powerful during the Great War years and as a matter of various artists’ interest became rapidly very influential worldwide. Dadaists spread their anti-military and later anti-capitalist thoughts through “politically satirical paintings and collages that featured wartime imagery, government figures, and political cartoon clippings recontextualized into biting commentaries” (“*Dada*”, 2012). The use of cartoons for the purpose of Dada could be also considered as the first infiltration of comic-based visual language in its genuine form in the area of High Art.

Surrealism, the successive movement to Dada, employed the low culture objects as well. Besides his “conventionally” finished paintings, as

for instance *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), one of the most significant surrealist performers, was evidently influenced by Duchamp's anti-academic approach. Inspired by his philosophy, he experimented with "unlikely



Figure 26. Salvador Dalí, *Lobster Telephone* (1936), (Riggs, 1998).

juxtapositions using imagery garnered from popular culture" (*"Surrealism"*, 2012). Dalí also continued in "Duchamp's revolution" by incorporating several mass-products of everyday use into High Art's context, as in the case of his *Lobster Telephone* (1936). He connected the world of High Art and the world of "ordinary people" also through his involvement in design and fashion when he applied his great

imagination in collaboration with renowned fashion designers Elsa Schiaparelli and Christian Dior (Glenn, 2008, May).

Surrealistic elements also found their way to different art media such as photography or film. The medium of film, in those times still considered to be the low stupid form of entertainment, was involved namely as a result of collaborations of Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel (1900-1983), a Spanish director and avant-garde filmmaker. Their most well-known surrealist film, *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), was in principle a short film analogy of Dalí's paintings, displaying "male identity as a fragile form of subsistence unfolding between two alternate forces, desire and fear: the desire for sexual realization and the opposed fear that sexual intercourse will conclude in disease and ultimately in death" (López, 2001). Despite the fact the film was "largely neglected by critics", continued López, professor and chair at University of Pennsylvania, "this narrative was highly influential ... to a long list of films that explore different aspects of the irrational, among them ... Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*" (López, 2001).

The absolute revolution in a High Art sphere was called Pop-Art. "Pop" found its theory in depicting the banality of cheap dailiness and trivialism, through which it was in contrast with its rival - Abstract Expressionism, maintaining "a resolute distinction between itself and consumer culture" and glorifying the snobbish refinement along with the pride of High Art academic standards (McCarthy, 2000, p. 8).

Abstract Expressionism was in a deliberate contradiction with the social popular circumstances. The fact that this art movement, generally ignoring its times, was

considered as the High Art elite, became the impulse for the new generation of artists, such as Americans Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg or James Rosenquist, who were trying to capture their society truly in its impertinent vulgar way. As Rookmaaker alleged in his *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1975), Pop artists began to copy ordinary stuff, such as gaudy trashy posters, indeed, but they emphasized their symbology via different well-considered combinations and made in this way the art more actual and understandable (p. 158). One of such works representing the crucial themes in the postwar America is Eduardo Paolozzi's collage *I Was a Rich Man's Plaything* (1947), depicting the moral depression and a woman as a mere sexual object. David McCarthy, an associate professor of art history at Rhodes College in Memphis, commented the collage that it is even "suffused with sexual innuendoes, from the phallic outlines of handgun, bomber and bottle, to the vulgar and obvious triangulation of female genitalia, cherry pie and 'real gold'" (McCarthy, 2000, p. 49).



Figure 27. Eduardo Paolozzi, *I Was a Rich Man's Plaything* (1947), ("Sir Eduardo Paolozzi: *I was a Rich Man's Plaything* 1947", 2004).

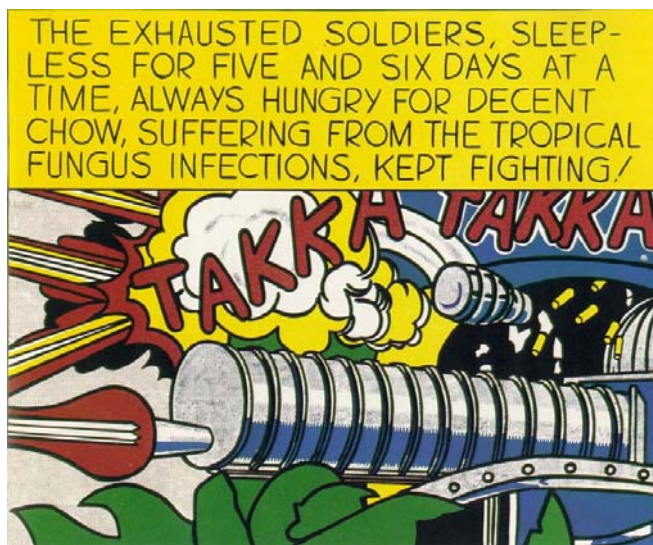


Figure 28. Roy Lichtenstein, *Takka Takka* (1962), 173 x 143 cm. The anonymity of the characters involved and the multiple enlarging of the original bright coloured comic panel impart to the painting a deep message of war brutality (Honnef, 2004, p. 50), ("Roy Lichtenstein", n.d.).

Pop artists were usually of the opinion that the contemporary lifestyle and the popular culture itself was the art, which was formed by advertising and professional designers - commercial artists - responding to the changes in the generally popular mainstream and to the inclination of consumers (Honnef, 2004, p. 20). Klaus Honnef also pointed that a number of Pop artists, for instance Roy Lichtenstein or Andy Warhol,

were former commercial designers and thus very familiar with the low culture. Nevertheless, they abandoned the “kitsch” in its original purpose and began to utilize its aesthetic and visual potential in their artworks, contextualized with serious themes as in the case of Lichtenstein’s comic-based *Takka Takka* (1962), dealing with the carnage of the Korean War.

The techniques of most Pop artists were sort of handicrafts. They were frequently an equivalent of mass-production in industry at the art level, such as in the case of Warhol’s use of screen printing or the use of airbrush by Peter Phillips, one of the most significant British Pop artists. Pop artists also tried to employ all possible materials and instruments, which came from the popular culture itself, and which had the ability to express it not only visually, but also materially. The look of Pop-Art was also attractive for some comic artists. As Weiner researched, “Steve Ditko, who created Spider-Man along with Stan Lee, ... drew moody illustrations with vibrant designs that recalled the canvases of Pop artists” (Weiner, 2003, pp. 10-11).

It is possible to say that Pop with its unaccustomed appearance continued in the tradition of Synthetic Cubism, Dadaism or Marcel Duchamp’s “individualism”. Nevertheless, the intention of Pop artist was entirely different. While Duchamp’s purpose was to provocatively transform the traditional conception of High Art itself and Dadaists “targeted the art of the bourgeoisie, especially the kind based on education and good taste ... , even the most pointed works of the Pop artists reflect a complete absence of political

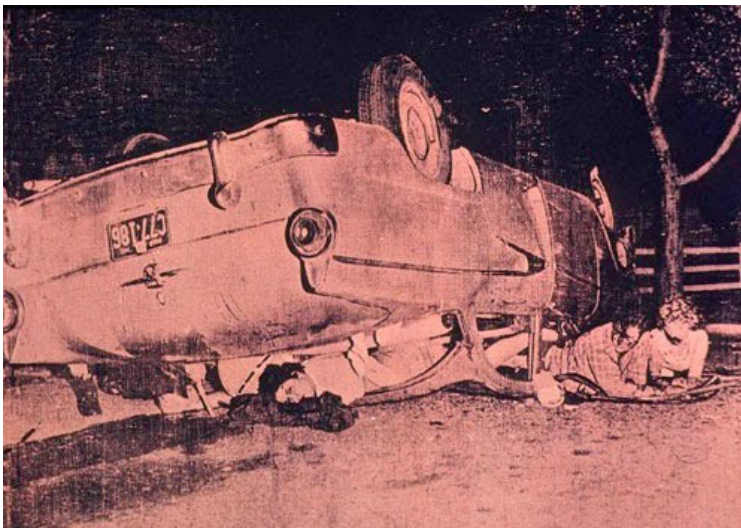


Figure 29. Andy Warhol, *Red Car Crash* (1963), “based on a United Press International photo of a car accident” (Chan, 2011).

intent [and] criticism of the injustices of capitalist society is found only rarely” (Honnef, 2004, p. 15). Pop artists just reflected their cultural environment with all its pros-and-cons. Some works celebrated consumerism and the passing character of the postmodern society, on the other hand, many works showed the idleness of

metropolitan living, cynicism or sensationalism, which is expressed for instance in Andy Warhol’s *Red Car Crash* (1963) from *The Death and Disaster Series*, created in 1962 and

1963. Therefore, “in contrast to the ‘hot’ expressivism of the gestural abstraction that preceded [the works], Pop art is generally ‘coolly’ ambivalent” with no purpose to criticise or to belaud its subject matter (“*Pop Art*”, 2012).

Although Pop-Art was established in the mid-1950s by the London Independent Group, composed of younger avant-garde British artists, intellectuals and critics, its potential was fully developed during 1960s in the USA (especially in Manhattan, New York), “where, almost simultaneously and with no knowledge of British developments, young artists began to charge the language of art with the visual jargon of the streets” (Honnef, 2004, p. 6).

Besides the fact the U.S. artists were working separately from one another, there were some other differences in the Pop development on both sides of the Atlantic. While Britain was still contending with the economical consequences of the Second World War, the United States were prospering in the 1950s and 1960s like never before. This was the reason why Pop through its fresh look became the art defining foremost America and its commercial mood. Also the works were to some extent different. “American Pop Art includes hard edges and represents real

life while British Pop juxtaposes images of American culture as a way to mock or parody through contrast”, which can be recognizable for instance from Richard Hamilton’s collage *Just What Is It that Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?* of 1956, where is ironically used a framed comic book title-page of *Young Romance* (by Jack Kirby) in the role of an artwork on the wall (“*Introduction to the Artistic Style of Pop*”, n.d.).

Nevertheless, despite certain diversity, there is one essential thing, which connects both the groups. It is the fact that Pop artists finally destroyed the borders between the High Art and low culture. They shared common sources of inspiration stemming in a commercial culture, such as hedonism, advertising, erotic, photographs, film clichés, pop-music, ready-made products and last but not least comics, through which they created a profound art movement and undeniably joined for the first time a public life and the world of serious art. Just the last listed item, the comics, was the important or even fundamental



Figure 30. Mel Ramos, *Captain Midnight* (1962). One of the Pop artists who often used comics heroes for their paintings was Mel Ramos, a significant exponent of American Pop (“*Mel Ramos: Girls, Candies & Comics*”, 2011).

theme of the most acclaimed American Pop artists, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, who redefined the conception of such underestimated medium by employing it in the serious context of High Art.

3. PEOPLE WHO REDEFINED THE CONCEPTION OF COMICS

Roy Lichtenstein

Roy Fox Lichtenstein was an American painter, one of the Pop-Art movement leaders during the 1960s, who became well-known for his typical comic-based style of painting. Roy Lichtenstein was born on October 27, 1923, in New York City, where he spent most of his professional career and, on September 30, 1997, also died of pneumonia. Despite the fact he came from non-artistic middle-class family, he was interested in art



Figure 31. Roy Lichtenstein, *Look Mickey* (1961), 122 x 175 cm. Lichtenstein in his first works did not depict the Benday Dots, which he began to apply constantly since early 1962 (National Gallery of Art, 2012).

since his childhood. He did not attend any art lessons until the final year of secondary school, when he joined the summer art classes organized by the NY Arts Students League. In 1940, Lichtenstein continued in his art education at Ohio State University, which he had to interrupt in 1943 due to the 3-year period of army service during the World War II in Europe. After the

war, he returned to Ohio, where he finished his Master's degree in Fine Arts in 1949. During the 1950s, Lichtenstein changed a number of occupations, for instance an art instructor, advertiser or window-dresser. He also continued in his artistic work and organised several exhibitions. Nevertheless, inspired by Cubism, Surrealism and even Abstract Expressionism, his early work was far away from his later famous distinguished "comic-strip" style, which he initiated in 1961 as a sort of experiment, while searching for some modern, fresh and more actual look of his works "to create a type of art with instant meaning" ("*Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997)*", n.d.).

Despite the apparently direct relationship between his art and the cartoon sources, Lichtenstein described his process of selecting and transforming images as one of “seeing, composing, and unifying”. His drawings reflect how deftly and freely he could adjust the balance of forms, color, line, and detail (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2004).

His first painting derived from comics was *Look Mickey* of 1961, “which shows a scene adapted from the 1960 children’s book *Donald Duck Lost and Found*” (National Gallery of Art, 2012). Subsequently, this painting was exhibited in Leo Castelli’s Gallery in New York, which became during the 1960s “the temple” of Pop-Art. At this time, the gallery was also the center of other avant-garde artists and important people; Lichtenstein’s *Look Mickey* promptly got known and became one of the cornerstones of the whole Pop-Art movement. With this painting, Lichtenstein found his own visual language, unique in its, at a glance imperceptible, sophisticated expressiveness. Since this time Lichtenstein began to take “images from gum wrappers, cartoons and comic strips (drawn originally by artists like Tony Abruzzo, Jerry Grandinetti, Russ Heath and Irv Novick), recomposed them and then blew up the images to a large scale, reproducing the heavy black outlines, primary colours and benday dots of cheap printing processes” (“Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997)”, n.d.). The Benday Dots, named after an American printer and journalist Benjamin Day, were actually a result of enlarging the original half-toned or/and coloured comic strip image, after that they were perceived as a group of distinctive and organized dots. Through the enlarging, a slight line simplifying and the dots emphasis, aroused associations different from the original. This practice revealed for instance the artificiality of comic figures, often glamourized women ideals, which makes sometimes even a caricature of the primal cartoon and reverses in this way the original connotation (Hunt, 2000).



Figure 32. Gil Elvgren, *Illustration for Napa Auto Parts* (1970's). This figure features slightly more modest form of a vargas girl, also called pin-up (girl) for being often pinned in cars etc. for men's pleasure. This image is by Gil Elvgren, one of the most eminent pin-up artists in the history of American glamour illustration (Pator, 2012).

Just the woman ideal phenomenon was often a common theme for many Pop artists. The image of a perfect woman has its origin in “vargas girl” pictures, pictures of attractive girls and Hollywood stars, popularized in 1930s especially by Alberto Vargas, one of the most respected artists of glamour illustration. These pictures, depicting contemporary sex symbols, were used prevalingly as an instrument of advertising to attract the consumer’s attention. The standardized faultless female figure was also employed while illustrating a woman in comics. Advertising together with comics made from this imagery a cliché, a universally accepted model of men desire without any deeper meaning.

In the beginning of the sexual revolution in 1960s America, this theme was also a matter of Roy Lichtenstein’s interest. He searched for such models to bring them into a



Figure 33. Roy Lichtenstein, *M-Maybe* (1965), 152 x 152 cm. The Benday Dots play their role after an enlargement, otherwise they invoke their original function - half-toning (Honnef, 2004, p. 53).

different context by their extracting from the comic medium. Lichtenstein’s intention was, through this isolation of an image and its other modifications, to evoke an originally hidden mood or, on the contrary, to intensify the idea of the original frame, depicting almost always sort of crucial moment of the plot (see also fig. 28). Roy Lichtenstein ascribed his interest in a comic book medium to its frequent contrast of telling the emotional content through its impassible visual language, just as in the case of *M-Maybe* (1965), depicting one of those perfect

women in a specific turning-point. The blond beauty experiences a moment of doubts and sadness and the reader, looking at the original comic image, sympathizes with her feelings (Honnef, 2004, p. 52). Nevertheless, in Lichtenstein’s enlarged version, the girl looks scarcely as a real person and so do her feelings. The viewer loses his interest in her trouble or her refined face and begins to perceive her unrealistic appearance; the Benday Dots are now perceived as an imperfection, which reminds the viewer how he was cheated by the blend of well-organised dots and lines of the previous image.

In conclusion, Roy Lichtenstein was the most important High Art exponent, who, among all the Pop artists’ low culture subjects, employed the comics as the fundamental

source for his work. Despite a frequent criticism for plagiarism, he defended his work through that he redefined both, the Fine Art and the sequential art. He revealed another face of comic book medium, the sphere of secret associations hidden in our minds, resulting from our previous experience with an ordinary comic strip as well as he extended the sensibility of Fine Art.

Andy Warhol

Andy Warhol was the leader of Pop-Art movement and one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. He was born in Pittsburgh on August 6, 1928, as a child of working-class immigrants, Ondrej and Ulja Warhola, who came from today's northeast Slovakia. As a child, Warhol was frequently sick, isolated from his peers, which gradually led to strong attachment to his mother and his hypochondrical nature. However, just these periods of isolation Warhol spent while listening to the radio, reading comics and collecting pictures of movie stars cut out from popular magazines, which later formed his obsession with pop culture and celebrities (*"Andy Warhol"*, 2012). As the most talented

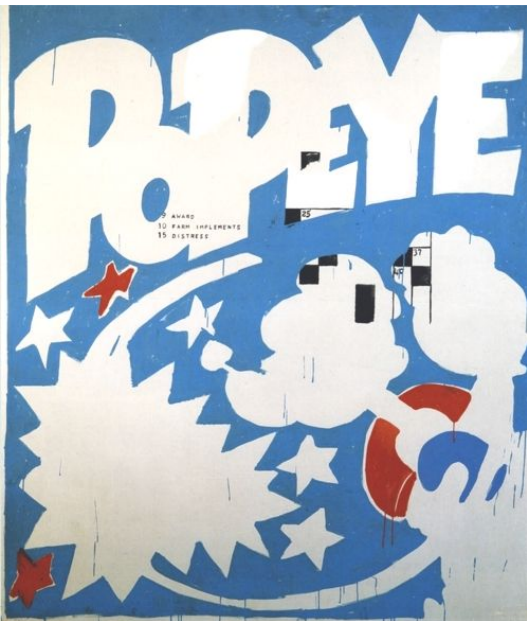


Figure 34. Andy Warhol, *Popeye* (1961), (*"Andy Warhol: self-negation as self-promotion"*, n.d.).

child of Warhol's family, Andy was sent after graduation on Schenley High School in 1945 to study on Carnegie Institute of Technology, where he formally evolved his draftsmanship. When he graduated in 1949, Warhol moved from Pittsburgh to New York to assert himself in commercial illustration. During the 1950s he became a successful advert designer, illustrator and window-dresser, well-known for his unique sensible eye-catching style. Warhol also worked for several renowned popular magazines, for instance *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, which enabled him a contact with a number of important people. At this time Warhol also

joined several exhibitions, where he presented his early works inspired by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, to fulfil his passion to become a member of the New York avant-garde, a respected exponent of Fine Art and a famous celebrity in particular.

The breaking point in Warhol's career came in 1960, when he began to experiment with screen printing, also called silkscreen or serigraphy, originally used for cheap prints in advertising. Screen printing is a "sophisticated stenciling technique for surface printing, in which a design is cut out of paper or another thin, strong material and then printed by rubbing, rolling, or spraying paint or ink through the cut out areas" ("Silkscreen", 2012). Just this method happened to be typical for Warhol's paintings, irradiating the freshness and breadth of 1960's America. Similarly to Lichtenstein, "Warhol used an opaque projector to enlarge the images onto a large canvas on the wall. Then, working freehand, he would trace the image with paint directly onto the canvas", in which he differed from Lichtenstein's practice, who first used a pencil tracing before the colouring ("*Andy Warhol*", 2012). With an unconcealed hate towards Abstract Expressionism, Warhol began to reflect on his paintings popular features, idols and common things of everyday use. By the means of screen printing, he was able to produce his works such as those products depicted, with a minimum of the artist's touch. This controversial artistic approach began to attract an attention of experts and galleries, which in 1962 contributed to the realization of the first official Pop-Art exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery called *The New Realists*, featuring Warhol's and another Pop artists' similarly finished works. Since this time, Pop-Art and especially Andy Warhol became increasingly popular figure and one of the 1960s icons in America.

The important thing in relation to the medium of comic is that Warhol's first remarked artworks were just his comic-based paintings of 1960 and early 1961, featuring the characters like Dick Tracy, Popeye or Superman, some of them presented also by Roy Lichtenstein and later by Mel Ramos. David McCarthy explained the interesting concord of several Pop artists in theme while depicting heroic male characters from the late 1930s as a sort of nostalgia. He alleged that, in the times of burgeoning feminism and emphasizing civil



Figure 35. Andy Warhol, *Dick Tracy* (1960), ("*Andy Warhol: self-negation as self-promotion*", n.d.).

rights, depicting of such heroes was “a backward glance to a simpler moment when, apparently, men were men and mastered they fate with their fists” (McCarthy, 2000, p. 63). Another reason could be their role - in a popular privity - as the counterparts to vargas girls. Exponents of both the groups were for their well shaped bodies understood to be the idols, the models of perfect people, who were the objects of admiration in the 1960s “sensual” America.

The fact that Warhol was the first Pop artist recontextualizing comic images in his art was a matter of polemics, whether Lichtenstein copied Warhol’s work or not. David Barsalou, an American visual artist and art critic, claimed that “the first time that Warhol’s large canvases of comic strip characters were exhibited publicly was in April 1961 as part of a window display at the Bonwit Teller department store” (Barsalou, 1999). Lichtenstein also denied former knowledge of Warhol’s paintings and claimed the first time he saw them was in Leo Castelli’s Gallery, when he had finished several of his own comic-based works. However, Andy was shocked with Lichtenstein’s works and consequently, except for few pieces of early 1980s, abandoned this idea and created differently motivated art.

Warhol’s paintings were due to his less mechanical, more direct technique more vivid than those of Lichtenstein’s. In comparison with Lichtenstein, Warhol modified the original strips far more as well as he employed his own aesthetic intervention, as in the

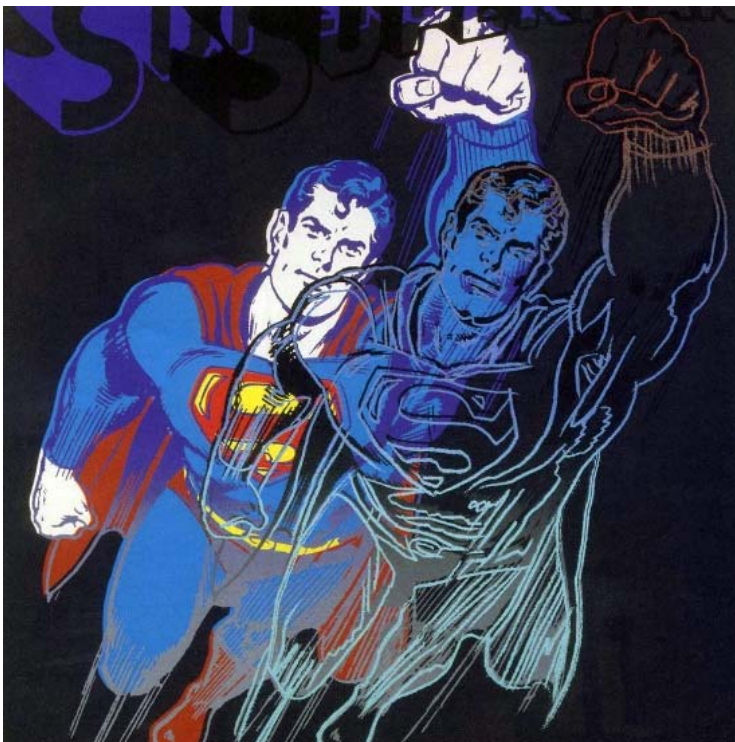


Figure 36. Andy Warhol, *Superman* (1981), (“*Andy Warhol: Superman, from Myths*”, 2012).

case of *Popeye* (1961), where he left only silhouette of this notorious character, considering further colour accompaniment as a superfluous addition. The black outlines of *Dick Tracy* (1960) were smoother, saged or even eliminated and accompanied by vulgar strokes of crayons, implying a shading and perhaps a tough nature of the character. Warhol as well as Lichtenstein interpreted the comic images together with the balloons,

nevertheless, Warhol omitted most of the letters, as if the words would have lost their meaning in the 1960s and survived only the memories of those “masculine” times of the 1930s. As mentioned, Warhol ceased to depict comic heroes in 1961. Nevertheless, he employed few characters once again in *Myths*, “Warhol’s 1981 portfolio of 10 screenprints, [where] he was referring not to remote civilizations, but to the beginnings of the cinema and the imaginary characters loved and recognized by millions all over the world” (The Speed Art Museum, 2010). Warhol included in *Myths* the characters of Superman and Mickey Mouse, finished now by the means of screen printing and in colours with diamond dust. The look of these two works is more sublime than those of early 1960s, treating the characters like true esteem-worthy Hollywood stars.

Andy Warhol got famous primarily due to screenprints of actual popular themes, celebrities and products, created in the 1960s. In 1965, he almost abandoned visual art for the benefit of his activities in the cinematographic industry and collaborations with the rockband *Velvet Underground*. Warhol’s career was also largely influenced with an attempt on his life in 1968, after which he reduced his public life. Despite this fact, Warhol grew in the 1970s and 1980s into a media star of an international format, having great influence among the whole popular culture in America. Andy Warhol unexpectedly died of pneumonia after complications connected with gallbladder surgery on February 22, 1987 in New York City. The fact, that he employed also the medium of comic in his works, extended a number of authorities considering it now in a different, more serious way.

Robert Crumb

Robert Crumb was in the late 1960s one of the leading figures of the burgeoning underground comic movement. His unique style of satire and drawings made him an icon of the underground rebellion itself. Crumb was born on August 30, 1943 in Philadelphia as one of five children. His mother, a faithful Catholic, suffered from neurotic problems and together with Robert’s despotic father, former Marine, mindful of the duties of a “proper” American, created an unhappy married couple, whose rather strange upbringing largely scared for life all the offspring. Crumb’s children were far from their father’s nature; being their whole childhood outsiders among their peers, they found their luck in creating comics all their leisure time.

After he left home in 1962, R. Crumb changed several employments, such as a greeting card artist or commercial illustrator, but he also continued in his own comics creation, improving his grotesque style, typical for big-footed low-gravity-centred figures,



Figure 37. *ZAP COMIX* #2. Angelfold McSpade embodies both R. Crumb's styles of depicting African Americans and women in general (Crumb, R., Wilson S. C., Griffin, R., & Moscoso, V, 1968, p. 9).

in a manner influenced by Disney's cartoons and primarily Segar's *Popeye* of 1930s and 1940s. His life, and especially his artistic career, were fundamentally changed when he started taking L.S.D. in 1965. As R. Crumb himself alleged: "That [L.S.D.] changed my head around. It made me stop taking cartooning so seriously and showed me a whole other side of myself" (Wood, n.d.). L.S.D. revealed a hidden potential of Crumb's abilities. Since this time, Crumb's bizarre drawings increasingly gained their specific lampooning expressiveness via his sort of distressed technique. At the beginning of Crumb's underground activity, his cartoons and their themes were greatly influenced by EC Comics daring production of the early 1950s as well as later on derived satirical magazines *Mad* and *Help!* (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 53). "Encouraged" by L.S.D., he revealed through his drawings his unusual conservative personality, the obsession with rather different sexuality, but primarily his unaffected critical view on American culture. Duncan and Smith observed that "all of the characters for which he became famous - Mr. Natural, the Vulture Demoness, Eggs Ackley, Angelfood McSpade - were conceived during this period" in between 1965 and late 1967 (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 55).

Across his entire work, R. Crumb created his own ideal of a perfect woman, which was quite an opposite to those mainstream types of girls promoted in the media. Being openly sexually perverted, "he explored his own sexual fantasies through his comics and shared his preferred style of female figure - thick-legged Amazonian women with ample bumps and curves" (*Robert Crumb Biography*, 2012). The figure of such woman became a cult of Crumb's comix, which expressed the existence of real women around us and

through his suggestions rejecting the popular facade he took such women in a different popular consideration.

The first eminent success in Crumb's career was publishing of Zap Comix in 1968, where he figured as the lone artist for the first two issues. "Crumb's Zap Comix is

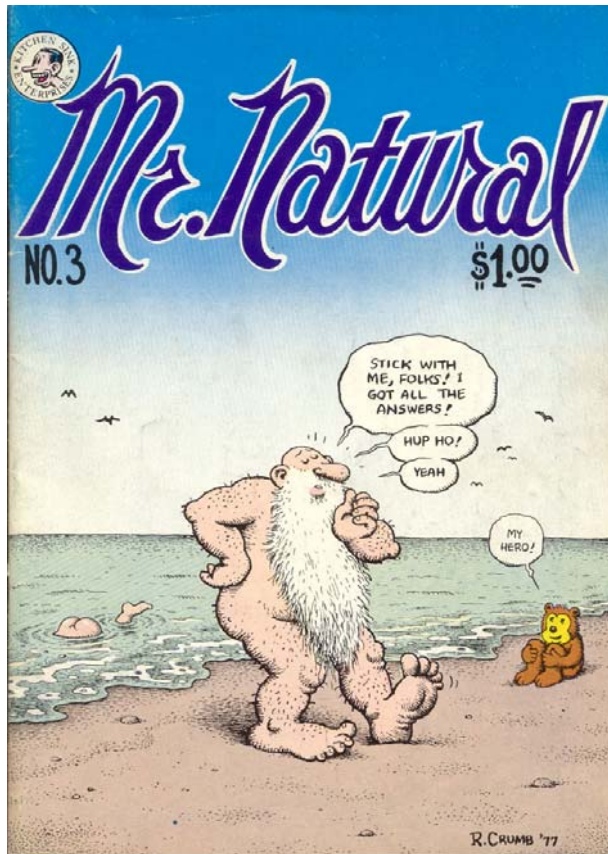


Figure 38. The cover to *Mr. Natural* #3 (1976-1977) by R. Crumb. Mr. Natural, one of the most notorious Crumb's characters, appeared for the first time in the underground newspaper *Yarrowstalks* in 1967. Mr. Natural is a mystic guru, who is able to answer any question, however, his answers are usually malicious, cynical or deviant. The character offered great potential for new themes, thus in 1970 the first self-contained comic book was published ("*Vintage Underground comix #5*", n.d.).

generally considered the one that started the whole underground comix movement. The series has been published continuously ever since that first issue in 1968. The last one, #15 (sixteenth in the series), was first published in 2005" (*Underground Comix: Zap Comix*, 2011). Zap, as a contribution to anti-authoritarian counterculture, was very popular among Hippies, nevertheless, as well as Crumb criticised the ostensible morality of American orderly citizens, he also prevalingly rejected the anarchism of Hippies. In Zap stories Crumb criticised American society in objective way, he touched politics, sexual taboos, social norms and last but not least racism. He drew African Americans as they were perceived by the society in late 1960s, almost like an anthropoid-like people, such as in the case of his famous figure *Angelfood McSpade*, being often scathingly depicted as "the object of white men's sexual desire", but nothing else (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 57). Crumb was frequently criticised for vulgarity, violence, cynicism or obscene motives in his comix, but the fact is that he just highlighted a human behavior destitute of all moral values in this paradoxical way. This approach was typical especially in his *Mr. Natural*, a character of weird abilities, entirely embodying all the vices of human race in a very impertinent way.

By the end of the 1980s, with suburban sprawl increasing, R. Crumb became disgusted with America and decided to leave for south-France, where he continued in his

Chapter 1

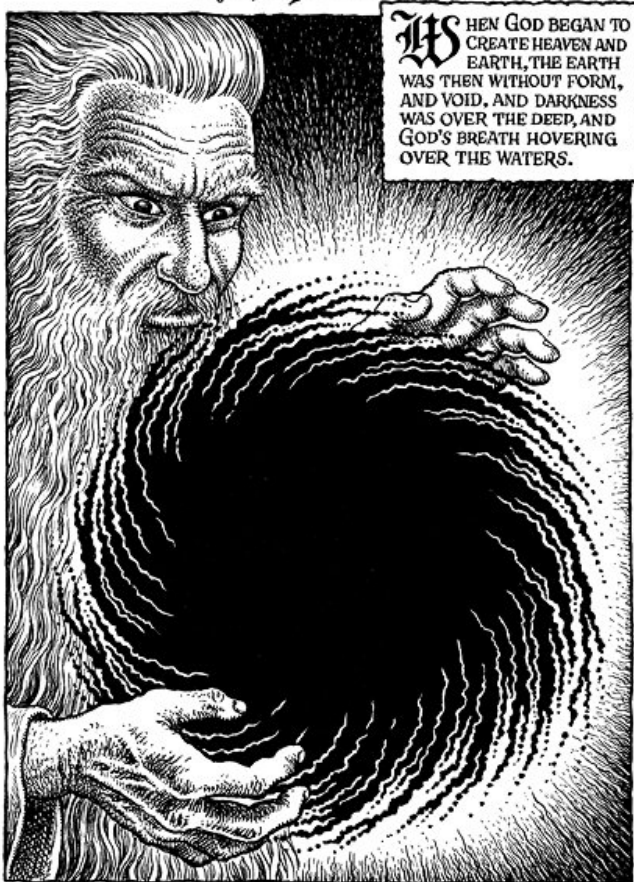


Figure 39. R. Crumb's comics were also several times exhibited in museums or art galleries. The figure features Crumb's image of God from *The Book of Genesis*, which was a part of the internationally acclaimed exhibition called *The Bible Illuminated: R. Crumb's Book of Genesis*, presented in San Jose Museum of Art in 2011 (San Jose Museum of Art, 2011).

work on current projects. In France also originated probably the top of R. Crumb's draftsmanship, *The Book of Genesis* finished in 2009. This Crumb's latest piece of work is actually a retold Bible word by word completely in a comic book format: "From Adam and Eve, to Noah's Ark, to Sodom and Gomorrah, Crumb pictures these familiar narratives in his instantly recognizable style and reinterprets Genesis for contemporary times" (San Jose Museum of Art, 2011). Nevertheless, in spite of Crumb's maintaining precious drawings, there is something different in comparison with the older, sort of depraved works from 1960s - 1980s. "The work [*The Book of Genesis*], begun in 2004, was originally intended as a parody of the first book of the Bible. However, as Crumb delved deeper into the source material,

he decided to adhere to the literal text to create a unique graphic interpretation of the stories of Genesis" ("R. Crumb", 2012). Consequently, Crumb's *Genesis* is a rare work among his production, in which he employed his distinguished style, but still fitting for the purpose of such serious matter of the Bible. He masterly caught the moment where he should not depict the violent and "dirty" scenes as usual to avoid making the contents ridiculous or obscure. *The Book of Genesis* is not maybe the famous extravagantly explicit R. Crumb, but just for the fact he is able to develop his style in the purpose of completely different theme demonstrates the control over his artistic talent and above all, the potential of sequential art itself.

Art Spiegelman



Figure 40. Art Spiegelman, *Ace Hole, Midget Detective* (1974). *Ace Hole, Midget Detective* “is a witty visual-verbal spoof of the hardboiled-detective genre, deploying visual allusions to Picasso as well as to classic comic strips (with a telling dig at the Comics Code)” (Harvey, 2010), (Berlatsky, 2011).

Arthur Spiegelman, the most important exponent of the alternative comics scene, is the artist, who with his experimental approach to comic storytelling and cartooning itself unquestionably joined the worlds of High Art and comic industry. Spiegelman was born on February 15, 1948 in Stockholm, Sweden, as a child of Jewish Holocaust survivors. When he was three years old, he immigrated with his parents to the United States in New York City. Spiegelman was interested in comics since his early childhood; being a fan of “the clever artwork and subversive humour of *Mad* magazine”, he acquired a different approach to comics than most of his contemporaries (“Art Spiegelman”, 2012). Despite his parents’

disagreement, Spiegelman soon decided to become a professional comic book artist. Consequently, after leaving Manhattan’s High School of Art and Design, at the age of sixteen, he began to work professionally as a cartoonist and a commercial designer. In 1965, Spiegelman continued to study art at the State University of New York at Binghamton, nevertheless, after his mother’s suicide in 1968, he abandoned the college with no degree. He was further still in touch with actual trends on the alternative comics scene. Largely inspired by R. Crumb’s work:

Spiegelman became [during 1970s] a regular contributor to various underground publications, including *Real Pulp*, *Young Lust* and *Bizarre Sex*. Under a variety of pseudonyms like Joe Cutrate, Skeeter Grant and Al Flooglebuckle he drew creations such as ‘Ace Hole, Midget Detective’, ‘Nervous Rex’, ‘Douglas Comics’ and ‘Cracking Jokes’ (“*Art Spiegelman*”, 2010).

During this period also originated the first sketches of his most relevant work *Maus* as well as some other significant works, such as *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, where Spiegelman narrates his own strongly emotional experience with his mother's suicide through techniques inspired by Lynd Ward's and German Expressionists' woodcuts. The crucial moment in his career came in 1980, when he launched the magazine *Raw* with his future wife Françoise Mouly. *Raw* gave an opportunity to works by many still unrevealed underground and alternative comix talents, such as Dan Clowes or Charles Burns. "Recognized as the leading avant-garde comix journal of its era, *Raw* featured strips [also] by European artists as well as previewed Spiegelman's own work", not excepting serialized *Maus* as a periodic short comic strip appendix ("Art Spiegelman", 2012). Spiegelman's and Mouly's bold experimentation with *Raw*'s design was, according to Duncan and Smith, one of the principal steps towards bridging over the considerable gap between comics and High Art (2009, p. 67).



Figure 41. Art Spiegelman, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* (1972). Spiegelman is well-known for his variable style of visualization. In *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, dealing with his mother's suicide, Spiegelman employed hard-edged expressionist distorted lines, supporting the oppressive theme of distress and blame (Spiegelman, 1987, p. 102).

Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* was published in 1986 after six years of working on its book shape (the second volume *Maus II: From Mauschwitz to the Catskills* was subsequently published in 1991). This autobiographical comic book was something unaccustomed among all existing comics; there was no work to compare with, so much the more not with Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, a mainstream fitting work published the same year. As a consequence, despite its evident quality, publishers initially rejected to publish such a precarious and not proved

work as *Maus* was. However, *Maus* soon appeared to be improvidently underestimated material and, to the publishers' and even Spiegelman's surprise, turned into a bestseller.

Jules Feiffer, one of the American comic book veterans, concisely characterized *Maus* when he said it was a "remarkable work, awesome in its conception and execution ... at one and the same time a novel, a documentary, a memoir, and a comic book" (Weiner, 2001, p. 36). Just Spiegelman's approach itself while creating *Maus* was sort of writing a "normal" novel, but through straight black and white pictures accompanied with freehand lettering, which suggested to the reader more cohesive narrative-like experience. Spiegelman used a common fountain pen for both, lettering and depicting the images in order to feel more like he was writing than drawing (Bolhafner, 1991). The plot of *Maus* actually consists of several layers - the struggles of Spiegelman's parents (Vladek and Anja) during the World War II in concentration camps narrated retrospectively in flashbacks by Vladek, author's relationship with his parsimonious, exasperating and sick father, and contemporary partnerships of both Vladek and Art stigmatized by Anja's suicide. The plot is in general divided into two temporal levels - the war time and the current life (about the year 1980) in Queens, New York - in order to make the reader understand the impact of war horrors and Anja's death on Vladek's personality and behavior. The interludes of Vladek's life in Queens help to thoroughly complement the whole complex story and, more rarely, act as pauses relieving the distressed mood via few humorous situations.

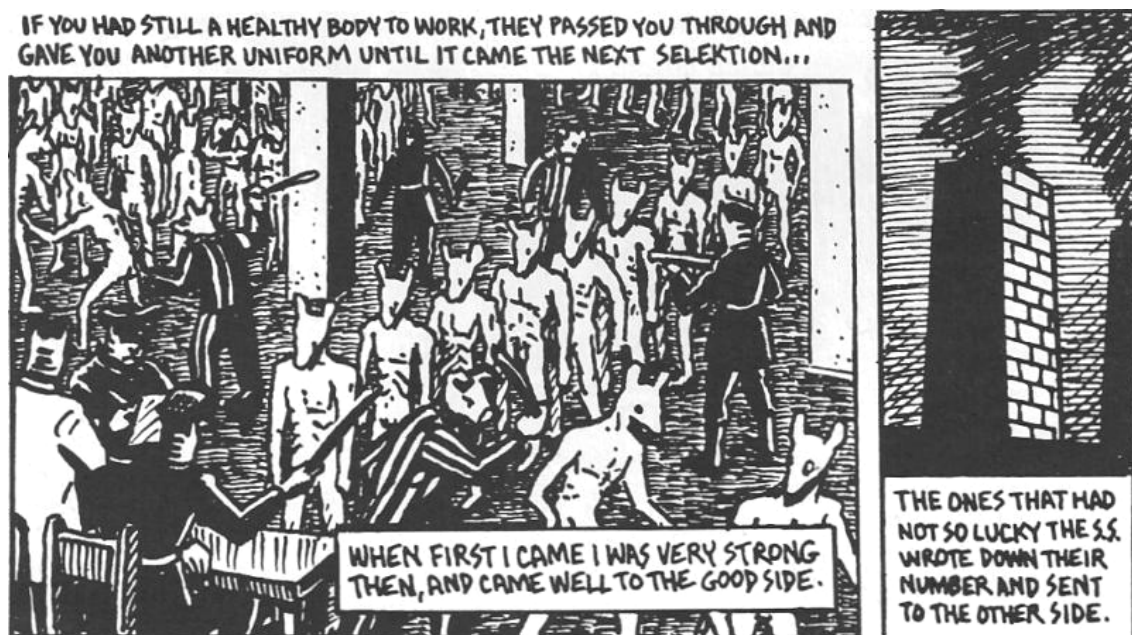


Figure 42. Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (1973-1991). This figure depicts one of the appalling scenes from Auschwitz-Birkenau (Oswiecim, Poland), the deadliest concentration camp of WWII (more than 1,100,000 people lost their lives here). The German behind the desk is Dr. Mengele, one of the most feared fanatics in Adolf Hitler's services (Spiegelman, 1992, p. 58).

Another substantial feature of Spiegelman's narrative style in *Maus* is the use of animal metaphors, clearly and immediately conveying the social status or roles of characters of various nationalities within the story. More specifically, while Spiegelman depicted for instance Jews as mice, Poles as pigs, Germans as cats, and Americans as dogs, he suggested, similarly as George Orwell in his *Animal Farm*, certain connotative meaning supporting the whole idea of the tale. Due to such cogent visualization, *Maus* earned yet more depth in its message. Another meaning of the anonymous animal "faces" was that they not only generalized the social rank of the listed nations, they judge the humanity itself, especially in the case of Nazis, presenting human behavior not far from the animal instincts. However, despite his purely artistic intention, Spiegelman was criticised just for using such unflattering animals while depicting Jews and Poles. Nevertheless, Spiegelman explained his practice that he only borrowed this designation from the Nazi Germans, who called Jews - *vermin* (German for mouse or rat) and the Poles - *schwein* (German for pig) (Bolhafner, 1991). Other animal metaphors were further derived in respect to mutual relation of the animals or according to specific features typical for individual nations.

Art Spiegelman has proved that a comic book can tell a serious story and, moreover, that the picture story could be even more suggestive than in the case of some "common" novels. Shortly after its publishing, *Maus* obtained a great attention of critics and became very sought-after piece of work among readers of different age groups and reader preferences. *Maus II: From Mauthausen to the Catskills* was also honoured with several awards, for instance Will Eisner Comic Industry Award in 1999 or Pulitzer Prize Special Award in 1992, as "the first and only comic book to earn one of publishing's most prestigious prizes" (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 71).

Will Eisner

Will Eisner was one of the most talented pioneers of the comic book medium, whose work influenced generations of cartoonists and other artists. At the time of the comic book industry origin, despite comics were considered to be the low form of entertainment, Eisner was probably the only comic book professional artist, who dauntlessly believed in the artistic and profound potential of this medium, which he constantly developed his entire life. Will Eisner was born to Jewish immigrants on March 6, 1917 in Brooklyn, New York. As a child of lower-middle-class family, he spent his

childhood in the Jewish ghettos in Brooklyn and the Bronx, working as a newspaper delivery boy. “He got to see all the comics every day, from all the newspapers that were then being published in New York . . . , [which] was during that time that some of the field’s alltime greats were doing some of their best work” (Heintjes, 1992). Greatly influenced with all the comic strips he could read every day (and later on also with pulps and movies), Eisner entered DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, where he experimented with various artistic media and formed his artistic preferences and skills. After graduating in mid-1930s, Eisner chose a comic as the medium of his professional interest and, as a consequence, in late 1930s, he co-founded with an editor Jerry Iger the Eisner-Iger Shop, a prosperous comic book studio producing comics for a number of publishers. Eisner-Iger Shop also employed several future “big shots” of the comic book industry, such as Bob Kane, the creator of *Batman*, or Jack Kirby, one of the leading figures of American comics in postwar era.

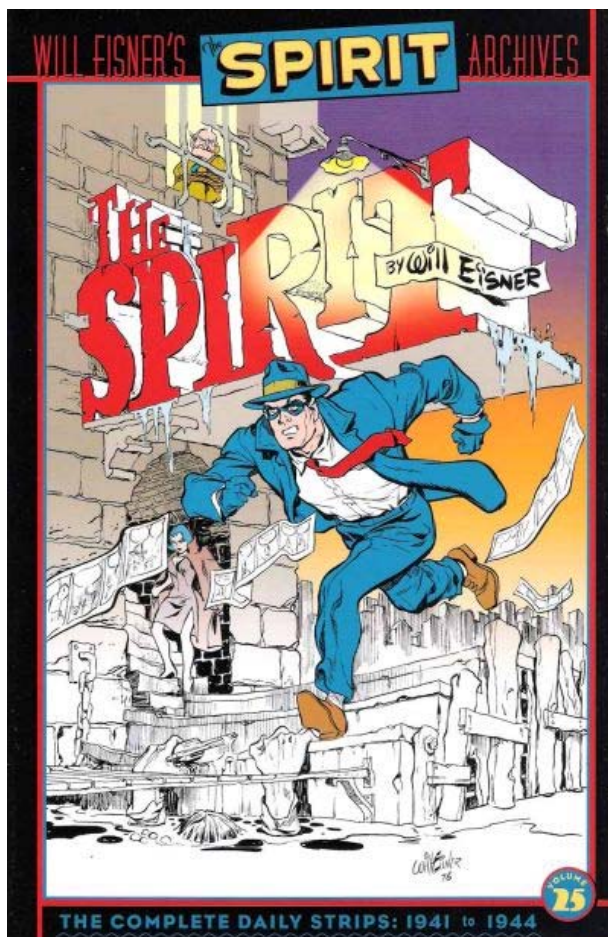


Figure 43. The cover to Will Eisner’s *The Spirit* #25: *The Complete Dailies: 1941-1944*. Spirit’s superhero attributes were minimalized to a domino mask and a pair of leather gloves (“*The Spirit Archives*”, n.d.).

Despite its success, in 1939 Eisner “dissolved his partnership with Iger when he was offered an opportunity . . . to create a [comic] supplement to be inserted into newspapers across the nation” - *The Weekly Comic Book*, including *The Spirit* (1940), Eisner’s first famous work (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 35). *The Spirit* was a mysterious masked [working-class] hero who is believed dead, at once parodying and capitalizing on the immensely popular superhero genre sparked by Siegel and Schuster’s *Superman* (Arnott, 2009). Despite *The Spirit* was different from the mainstream taste (except few early issues, he actually lacked special gadgets, superpowers or any other supernatural abilities), his more realistic stories gained many fans, especially among more adult readers, to

whom the contents were prevailingly devoted. *The Spirit* was also unique for its visual

style, in which Eisner applied his innovative and experimental approach to the comic book medium itself. It “stood out for the use of so-called ‘splash-pages’ - one picture filling the page like a movie poster with the lettering fully integrated into the image - and his unmatched capacity for rendering atmospheres: mist, nighttime skies, fuming sewers, and the like” (“*Will Eisner*”, 2009). *The Spirit* became for its cultivated, well-organized appearance and gripping stories an excellent comic book of its days, in which Eisner mingled the elements of crime pulps, comic books and short comic strips. Even when Eisner stopped its production in 1952 for the benefit of other projects, *The Spirit* remained in the hearts of its fans as the work venerating the medium of a comic itself. As Duncan and Smith alleged, “For many of Eisner’s contemporaries and generations of artists who followed him, *The Spirit* was the *textbook* from which they learned how to create comic books” (2009, p. 36).

The revived fame of *The Spirit* in 1970s, caused also by Jules Feiffer’s essay *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (1965) including a chapter devoted to Eisner’s work, gave rise to Will Eisner’s comeback to “mainstream” comics (Weiner, 2003, p. 18). In 1978, after twenty-five years of working in the American Visual Corp, Eisner’s own company producing “visually arresting and highly effective educational comic books for schools, government, and the armed forces”, he introduced a breakthrough work of the comic medium, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, the first adult-reader-intended comic book in a book-length format (“Will Eisner”, 2012). *A Contract with God* was actually devoted to those fans of 1940s *The Spirit*, who were now in the mid-1970s in their thirties, lacking an adequate comic book, in which they would be interested. This first “graphic novel”, as Eisner himself designated the new



Figure 44. Will Eisner, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978). The figure features a scene from the first story - *A Contract with God*, depicting the main character, Frimme Hersh, in the moment he was informed his daughter is dead (Eisner, 2006, p. 23).



Figure 45. Will Eisner Comic Industry Award. The figure features the 2005 Eisner Award in the category of Best Digital Comic, which gained Brian Fies for his webcomic *Mom's Cancer* (2004) (Fies, 2011).

comic art form, was a collection of four thematically linked short stories inspired by his early life in ghetto tenements. In general, these four stories formed a portrait of working-class Jewish life in Brooklyn during the Great Depression in 1930s. Depicted through large drawings focused primarily on facial expression and the overall mood of the story, *A Contract with God* tells the deal of an old Jew with undermined faith, the struggles of an unemployed street singer, an imprudence of an astute young girl, and an incident of a juvenile, who changed after he had lost his virginity to an older woman (Weiner, 2003, pp. 17, 20). With this work, Eisner grantedly put seriousness into the comic book medium, extended its suggestive power, and encouraged other artists to realize their own ideas discussing serious issues of our society.

Will Eisner was also the first comic book professional, who researched the comic medium from the theoretical point of view at large. His *Comics and Sequential Art* of 1985 dealt, as the first publication ever, with the creative procedure of making comics, the informational transfer within/between panels or the analysis of particular elements of various comic drawings.

In Will Eisner's honor were in 1988 established the Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards, coveted comics prizes ("the comic book Oscars"), which Eisner himself presided over at Comic-Con, the most renowned international comic book and popular arts convention held yearly in San Diego ("*Will Eisner*", 2009). Will Eisner demised at the age of 87 on January 3, 2005 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, leaving behind a great artistic legacy, inspiring generations of comic artists worldwide.

CONCLUSION

The suggestible power of sequential art consists in the use of icons, cartoonized versions of our reality, being most frequently their typical means of communication. Just through these universally understandable symbols relying on our often intuitive interaction, comics are able to promptly and clearly convey any information.

After the Second World War, with the formation of consumer society, sequential art (or its derivatives) was employed as a tool of mass-produced advertisements, the “motive power” of commercialism, just for the ability of generally immediate comprehensibility. Comics, glamour illustration and poster art - all these media together were the engine of advertising and, as a result, indivisible parts of postwar American culture. Comic, generally considered as a form of low entertainment at that time, was not only a part of the originating Pop phenomenon; some comics also not unfrequently intervened in social environment in intellectual way. EC Comics was as the first publisher focused on educational comic books. Since 1941, the production of EC Comics introduced for instance snatches from *The Bible* or various crucial events of American history in a sequential art form. After ownership change in 1947, EC Comics changed also its comic production, which themes boldly reflected and, in principle, criticised demoralization of American society in the middle of twentieth century. EC Comics publishing was also the most frequently referred source of inspiration of a number of independent comic book authors, who later created the movement of underground comix and alternative comics “offshoot”, including R. Crumb, Art Spiegelman or Harvey Pekar (1939-2010), an American comics creator, influential exponent of the underground comic book scene and the founder of *American Splendor*, a series of biographical comic book stories published constantly since 1976 by himself. Pekar was also one of a few artists, who considered sequential art as a proper art form, equal to any acclaimed fine art form. Inspired by R. Crumb, Pekar decided to use the comic medium as the most suitable for his artistic intention, which resulted in *American Splendor* project, contributing to the maturation of the medium. Having some experience with comics, he commented his choice that “comics potential was hardly being scratched at that point [mid-1970s]... most comic books at the time were still being written for kids, and it was clear that you could do anything with comics that you could do with any other art form, but less of it was being done” (Ervin-Gore, n.d.).

The clearness of sequential art, which was proved especially with the advertising, resulted in its application in various areas. Its practical use began to be found for instance

in industry while using it for service manuals of products, in tourism as a way of simple international communication or in education. A great deal of contemporary textbooks of foreign languages, history, etc. employs, as in the case of medieval biblical texts, sequential art (prevalingly short, schematic well organized comic strip format) to make the subject matter more comprehensible and consequently the classwork more effective. There is also increasing number of renowned literary works retold in a comic book format, such as previously mentioned R. Crumb's *The Book of Genesis*, Will Eisner's *Moby Dick* (2001) retelling Herman Melville's classic novel of the same title or *The Last Knight* (2003), Eisner's adaptation of Miguel de Cervante's *Don Quixote*. In this manner, Eisner and similarly "specialized" authors presents important literature almost with no labour and encourages young readers to read the originals and to find their way to reading itself.

Comic art has always held popular appeal, but now it is spilling over increasingly into other forms of mass media and it is becoming intellectually and artistically respectable. Cartoons, caricatures, comic books, and graphic novels are garnering considerable attention, inspiring work of contemporary fiction and a crop of recent films as well as taking pride of place in major art museum exhibitions and in college classroom discussions (Roeder, 2008).

The golden era of comic books that, in general, ended in 1954 with the establishment of the Comics Code, was not the only period when comics acted as an important part of American culture. Since the origin of comic book industry, in every decade appeared important comic authors, who pushed the limits of the medium itself. Their significant works were based on more or less conventional, but still topical creative process. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the traditional way of making comics is rather overshadowed with digital animation, through which is the medium of comic developing new possibilities. Comics conquered Hollywood, and moreover, the film adaptations of comic book originals are one of the most popular, most profitable, and not unfrequently also the most highly regarded products of American cinematography of the recent period. In the fall of informationalism (the term used for the sequent era to postmodernism), the great splendour of cartoons is evident; nevertheless, the printed form is gradually substituted with web comics, utilizing new potentialities of digital graphic and global distribution. Sequential art still continues in the effort for undeniable artistic equality, but the fact that comics can be serious had been proved already.

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SUMMARY IN CZECH

Předmětem bakalářské práce je zmapování vývoje sekvenčního umění, čili komiksu, do pozice uznávané umělecké formy, jež se v poslední době stala inspirací i pro ostatní, všeobecně uznávané umělecké oblasti, např. film nebo výtvarné umění. Moderní komiks se začal vyvíjet v meziválečném období zejména na území Spojených států, a proto se stal také nedílnou součástí americké kultury.

Práce je rozdělena do tří větších celků. První část je věnována stručné historii sekvenčního umění, jež se datuje do období starověku. V následujících dvou odděleních je medium komiksu přiblíženo z hlediska teorie, přičemž se opírám o poznatky renomovaných komiksových odborníků. V druhé části je věnována pozornost vzniku nového zábavního průmyslu komiksu a jeho kulturnímu pozadí v meziválečné Americe. Dále je zde přiblížen vývoj amerického komiksu v průběhu padesátých a šedesátých let minulého století, kdy došlo k podstatným změnám na poli tohoto uměleckého žánru. Druhá část této kapitoly rozebírá vzájemný vztah akademického výtvarného umění a nízké kultury, jež byla také po dlouhá léta doménou světa komiksu. Třetí část navazuje na látku části předchozí. Je zde představeno pět významných osobností světa umění: Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman a Will Eisner. Každá z osobností je nejprve představena krátkým životopisem, načež následuje rozbor několika zásadních uměleckých prací, které pomohly předefinovat pojetí sekvenčního umění z pozice nízkého „uměleckého“ žánru do pozice seriózní umělecké formy značného společenského a kulturního významu.