
“TO EMERGE FROM ITS TRANSITIONAL
FUNK”: *THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF
KAVALIER & CLAY’S* INTERMEDIAL
DIALOGUE WITH COMICS AND GRAPHIC
NOVELS

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INTRODUCTION

Together with jazz, comic books are among the most frequent candidates for the title of 'original' Americana, of popular culture originating from the United States of America (Kelleter and Stein 2009; Behlman 2004). Comics have been a stable part of U.S. popular culture and a profitable product of the American culture industry for the better part of the 20th century.

Concerning comics historiography, it is interesting to note how several comics historians tend to write a narrative of continual development and innovation that focuses on the progression of the medium and its increasing aesthetic complexity. A good example for this kind of narrative is Stephen Weiner's short history of comics, fittingly titled *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel*. The teleological argument already present in the book's title is also stressed in the preface, when Weiner claims that he wants to show "how the comics industry grew up, took itself seriously, and made enough noise so that mainstream readers were finally forced to pay it serious attention" (Weiner 2003, xi). And indeed, his history of (mainly U.S.) comics reads like a one-way road to a contemporary confluence of artistic innovation, commercial success, and critical appreciation. From the Yellow Kid and its newspaper descendants of the early twentieth century to the superhero comic books of the mid-century to independent comics in the 1960s, it presents a historical development that almost necessarily leads to the form's current apex: the graphic novel. The medium of comics is presented in an evolutionary manner as a constantly developing medium that has finally become 'serious' and thus subject to favourable, or at least neutral, critical attention (see Weiner 2003; Roberts 2004).

Because of its progressive view of comics history, Weiner's account is curiously reminiscent of Clement Greenberg's take on art history and Theodor W. Adorno's version of music history respectively. As Andreas Huyssen has shown in his analysis of Greenberg and Adorno, both modernist critics believed in the linear "logic of aesthetic evolution", and both suppressed breaks and ruptures in favour of a progressive narrative (Huyssen 1986, 57). Huyssen (1986, 56) identifies a "single-minded trajectory" based on "a notion of the inevitability of the evolution of modern art" in their historical accounts and argues that they retrospectively constructed a movement towards an aesthetic *telos*. In a similar manner, Weiner's account structures its argument in such a way that the outcome, the graphic novel, becomes inevitable. Thus, just like Greenberg and Adorno, current comics historiographies like Weiner's tend to retrospectively construct a linear, teleological trajectory of progression and thereby elide potential leaps, breaks, or ruptures.

In my analysis I want to contrast this historical logic with a fictional narrative that superficially presents a trajectory of comics strikingly similar to the teleological graphic novel narrative: Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000). However, I want to suggest



that the novel depicts this trajectory simultaneously with a necessary correlative of progression: juxtaposition. Through a historical logic of both/and rather than either/or or before/after, *Kavalier & Clay* represents the history of comics as a phenomenon that is incommensurable with a modernist narrative of progression.

Kavalier & Clay, a historical novel whose main narrative roughly coincides with the 'Golden Age of Comic Books' (1939–1954), tells the story of two Jewish cousins, one U.S.-born, the other recently fled from Nazi-occupied Prague. Against the historical backdrop of the post-Depression U.S., World War II, and the Holocaust, Brooklynite Samuel "Sam Clay" Klayman and Czech Josef "Joe" Kavalier create the Escapist, a masked crime fighter/superhero in the vein of the era's Superman, Captain America, or The Spirit. Structurally, the novel is a mixture of coming-of-age story¹ and *roman à clef* that synthesises the biographies of the classic comic book artist/writer-duos, from Joe Shuster/Jerry Siegel to Jack Kirby/Joe Simon, as well as of individual comics artists/entrepreneurs like Will Eisner. The novel features a creative team where one half is more artistically minded and the other more pragmatically inclined; through this dialectical relationship, we witness the creation of their franchise at young age, the success of their co-created comic book, how they are exploited by greedy businessmen, and the eventual breakdown of their partnership.² However, while the narrative of the book ends in the year 1954, thus coinciding with the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* and the introduction of the Comics Magazine Association of America's Comics Code, I read *Kavalier & Clay* not only as a historical novel that is phrased in the historically accurate terms of the transitional Golden Age, but also as a discursive product of its contemporary cultural context. Anachronistically, it adds aspects 'ahead of their time' and thus complements its historical narrative with the terms and phenomena of the contemporary transitional era in visual fiction, which is characterised by the emergence of the graphic novel.³

¹ The fact that large parts of the novel's narrative are in the form of the *Bildungsroman* is also significant for its take on comics. Douglas Wolk opens his ambiguously titled study *Reading Comics. How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* with the observation that "[i]t's no longer news that comics have grown up. A form that was once solely the province of children's entertainment now fills bookshelves with mature brilliant works". Thus, according to this logic, after "its awkward childhood and difficult adolescence", comics have entered adulthood (Wolk 2007, 3).

² For a more thorough historical take on the period fictionalized by Chabon and the relationships between early comic book creators and entrepreneurs, see Jones 2004.

³ Chabon himself once acknowledged that he wrote *Kavalier & Clay* during "the current boom – one might even dare to call it a golden age – in the graphic novel" (Chabon 2003), and thus explicitly states the connection between historical narrative and cultural context.



A reading of the novel as a meta-historical narrative that is as much about the history of comic books as it is about comics' current status will show how the novel develops complex notions of comics history and aesthetics that go beyond the popular narrative outlined above. Several critics have already addressed this issue, with different emphases. Lee Behlman argues that the novel "embraces the superhero comic book in its earliest incarnation, with its crude drawing style, monotone dialogue, and unlikely plots, as a rough but vivid and fertile form" (Behlman 2004, 63). He also notes the anachronistic aspect of the novel when he claims that the Escapist's origin story, told ekphrastically in prose form, "includes a level of physical detail and even psychological sophistication that would never appear in a comic book of that era" while still being "clearly a comic book story, with all the trappings of its fantasy world" (Behlman 2004, 65).

In Hillary Chute's reading of the novel, *Kavalier & Clay's* engagement with comics "theorizes a democratic popular culture that is yet aesthetically innovative" (Chute 2008, 281). In contrast to Behlman, however, she puts more emphasis on the aesthetic development of the cousins' career and traces it from the beginning to its (supposed) end. Even though Behlman and Chute touch on important aspects of the novel, I want to suggest that the novel's cultural politics are even more complex and call for an integration of the two options. *Kavalier & Clay* is as much about a celebration of the Golden Age comic book as it is about a depiction of the "trajectory" (Chute 2008, 282) of Joe's career and artistic development; in the end, it calls for an aesthetic that manages to integrate both poles. Since much of what happens in *Kavalier & Clay* is focalized through its artist figures, I want to suggest that a more thorough analysis of Sam's development as well as that of Rosa Saks, who starts out as Joe's romantic fling and eventually becomes the novel's third major artist figure, is necessary. Furthermore, the novel implicitly comments on a paradox of the graphic novel discourse: The development of the graphic novel is often read as the 'serious' expression of comics, more sophisticated and thus better than the standard comics fare, while propagators of the medium simultaneously try to vindicate the entire medium through recourse to this most refined representative. The novel, in addition to a celebration of aesthetic mastery, argues for the necessity to take into account aspects that contradict this logic by juxtaposing serial forms like the comic book with graphic novel-like narratives rather than portraying them as different stages of a progression.

FROM THE GREAT DIVIDE TO THE GREAT DEBATE

Similar to other parts of popular culture, the critical reception of and the cultural value attributed to comics has gradually changed since the 1960s. Comics historiography attributes this development largely to the impact of alternative and independent comics (see Weiner 2003, 9–16; Hatfield 2005), yet it seems necessary to refer to larger processes beyond the medium itself. The



general development of cultural de-stratification is often attributed to postmodernism, which refuted cultural hierarchies erected along the modernist lines of high art and low culture, a logic for which both Adorno and Greenberg can be seen as epitomes (Huysen 1986). However, the move beyond “the Great Divide [...] the kind of discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture” has not led to a culture of no distinctions (Huysen 1986, viii). In fact, I want to argue that out of the postmodern dissolution of a priori vertical hierarchies grew an increased awareness of other normative, aesthetic and economic distinctions, as well as the increased debate on cultural validation.

Within the field of comics, this can be exemplified by *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud’s comprehensive and highly influential “comic book about comics” (McCloud 1993, vii), which devotes its entire first chapter to the question of what comics are and what cultural position they are in. Entitled “Setting the Record Straight”, the chapter aims to overcome prejudices against the medium and define it quasi-scientifically along strictly value-neutral lines. Knowing very well that even his impressive 22-page run-through will have no definitive answer to the question of what exactly ‘comics’ are, McCloud closes the chapter with a panel in which his stand-in salutes “the Great Debate” that necessarily follows from his claims (McCloud 1993, 22). In very condensed form, this chapter shows how the end of the Great Divide has led to, among others, a culture of a Great Debate, in which culture is characterised by an ever-increasing self-consciousness among artists, critics, and audiences across the entire spectrum that goes hand in hand with constant (re-)negotiations concerning the cultural status of authors, texts, genres, and media.

In cases when this debate centres on comics, it does not have to be restricted to comics themselves, as texts from other media also participate in this Great Debate and collectively negotiate the status of comics. For instance, literary engagements with comics have become so frequent that Daniel Punday has identified the literary “subgenre [...] comic book novels” (Punday 2008, 292–293).⁴ Alongside Tom de Haven’s *Funny Papers* (1985) and Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) among others, he prominently includes *Kavalier & Clay*. And indeed, as a bestseller and eventual Pulitzer Prize-winner, *Kavalier & Clay* is certainly among the most prominent recent literary engagements with comic books. The impact goes so far that Weiner (2003, 55) even called it “the biggest boost the comics field received from the literary world” and Kelleter and Stein described it as the “trigger of the comics studies-wave of the early 21st century” (Kelleter and Stein 2009, 88; my translation).

⁴ He defines them as “novels about writers who create comic books or newspaper comic strips and novels that use comic-book and comic-strip characters as part of their story” (Punday 2008, 293; cf. Kelleter and Stein 2009, 88).



To understand why a novel can have such an impact on an entire medium, it might be fruitful to consider the following quote from Danny Fingeroth's study of Jewish superheroes: "The superheroes have permeated our popular culture and everyday culture, and – in works such as Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* – our highbrow culture as well" (Fingeroth 2007, 26–27). Even though both authors work with and within the fields of popular and genre fiction, Chabon and Lethem are both safely established within the literary field, as even a cursory look at their publishing houses or the sites of reviews of their books indicate. Given their cultural status, these texts are thus already able to promote comics by doing hardly more than affirmatively engaging with the medium (cf. Ditschke 2009, 269). Fingeroth's statement shows how engagements with comics by established literary authors are taken as endorsements by cultural authorities in that they perform a critical and evaluative assessment of a popular medium which has the potential to elevate the latter into the realm of 'serious' culture. This phenomenon is not only present in discourses on literature devoted to comics, though; we can also find it in a central discourse *within* the field of comics. Here, I am referring to the argument that comics have finally become a credible, 'serious', in short, literary form (with a capital 'L') that deserves the impressive title 'sequential art' (Eisner 2008) and that there has developed a new form of comics that marks a crucial incision in comics history: the graphic novel.

THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

"[W]hen they coined the term 'graphic novel' nobody mentioned that the novel in question was Ulysses." Tom Shone

The term "graphic novel" can be traced back to 1964 (Gravett 2005, 8), but it was no sooner than the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978) that the term gained wide currency. However, already the first major representative failed to adhere to the most basic premise implicated by the term. *A Contract with God* was published in book form, but it consists of largely independent stories rather than a single book-length narrative. Irrespective of this, Weiner defines graphic novels as books that have "a beginning, middle, and end between two covers" and try "to have the same effect as serious prose novels – in other words, the characters grow, change, and reach a point of resolution [...] In addition, the artwork propelling the story has to be expressive and telling" (Weiner 2001, vii–ix). Against this narrow and highly normative attempt to fix the meaning of the term, one can put Hatfield's cautionary remark that "a graphic novel can be almost anything: a novel, a collection of interrelated or thematically similar stories, a memoir, a travelogue or journal, a history, a series of vignettes or lyrical observations, an episode from a longer work – you name it" (Hatfield 2005, 5). This thought is confirmed when we consider that



apart from Eisner's 'original' graphic novel being a collection of short stories, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* was a limited series of DC comic books before it was collected in graphic novel form, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was published in *Raw* magazine before it was collected in book form, Joe Sacco's *Palestine* is a work of journalism, and while Craig Thompson's *Blankets* is one of comparatively few graphic novels that was actually published without having been previously serialised, it is not fictional. All of this contributes to the impression that a definition of what exactly a graphic novel is (and what it is not) will most probably fail because of the vagueness inherent in the term.

Not only because of this, the term "has become distorted with prejudices and preconceptions, riddled with confusion among the media and public, and a topic of dispute among 'graphic novelists' themselves" (Gravett 2005, 8). After all, the exact meaning of the term may not be the central aspect to be considered when analysing the phenomenon, as the term has come to stand more for a new way of appreciating comics than a new form of comics.⁵ Paul Gravett (2005, 8) puts it succinctly when he calls the term a "misnomer", but one that needs to be considered, since it "has caught on and entered the language and dictionaries, for all its inaccuracies". Even though one may argue with Wolk that graphic novel is hardly more than "the fancy way" to talk about comics used by those "trying to be deferential or trying to imply that they are serious" (Wolk 2007, 61-63; cf. Roberts 2004, 214), it is undeniable that this "fancy way" is a powerful means to very specific ends.

By setting a normative framework to the discourse, 'graphic novel' signifies a serious and artistic conceptualisation of the medium of comics that endows the form with cultural capital. Read against this context, Eisner's tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement that he used the term to promote *A Contract with God* in "a futile effort to entice the patronage of a mainstream publisher" comes as no surprise (Eisner 2006, x). Eisner revived his career and introduced a term that has come to stand synonymously for comics' artistic and commercial maturation and success since the 1970s – despite, or maybe exactly because of, its terminological inaccuracies.⁶

⁵ Gravett cites Eddie Campbell, who once claimed that "graphic novel signifies a movement rather than a form", and that it is a movement that has the goal "to take the form of the comic book, which has become an embarrassment, and raise it to a more ambitious level", thus "forging a whole new art which will not be a slave to the arbitrary rules of an old one" (Gravett 2005, 9).

⁶ In the context of this article, I am not able to resolve the question whether the relationship between the graphic novel and comics' rise to respectability is of causal or correlative nature. However, it becomes clear from critical and journalistic sources that "[t]he growing dominance of long-form works of comic art – graphic novels – is frequently heralded as an indication of the aesthetic and literary development of the comic art medium in the United States" (Couch 2000; cf. Gravett 2005, 9; Ditschke 2009).



In essence, the contemporary fascination with the graphic novel can be read as a continuation of the “evaluative discourse” that has been a permanent part of comics discourse since its inception (Stein, Ditschke and Kroucheva 2009, 9). Epitomised by the congressional hearings following *Seduction of the Innocent*, this discourse has continued, but under inverted conditions: rather than evaluating the badness of comics, now the goodness of comics is at the centre of public and critical discourses (Stein, Ditschke and Kroucheva 2009, 9). What Stephan Ditschke has shown with respect to German ‘Feuilletons’ and publishing houses, namely the “literalisation of comics” (Ditschke 2009, 267; my translation), can also be shown in the U.S. context.⁷ And even beyond the journalistic context, it is safe to say that the medium of comics has entered the realm of respectable culture and has become the subject of systematic scholarly concern (Weiner 2003, 56).

However, if one looks at university syllabi, newspaper coverage, and bookstore displays, it also becomes obvious that the medium is going through a differentiation process that closely mirrors the differentiation of the literary field in the 19th and early 20th century. Broadly speaking, courses on *Maus* rather than on Superman or Captain America are offered; arts & leisure sections cover the new Chris Ware rather than the new Batman story arc; and rather than putting comic books on the shelf, bookstores display graphic novels like *Watchmen* or *Blankets* (cf. Hess 2012, 26). If we look at the process of cultural construction that was behind the invention of ‘literature’ as opposed to other, less ‘serious’ modes of writing and compare this to the current differentiation of the comics field, we witness striking similarities (Fluck 1997; Eagleton 1996, 1–14). Ditschke has identified a significant aspect of this development when he argues with Bourdieu that recent “comics criticism constructs an autonomous field of comic art production (serious culture) that is opposed to the heteronomous field of comics mainstream (entertainment culture)” (Ditschke 2009, 272; my translation). For Bourdieu, cultural producers are basically divided by the degree of autonomy/heteronomy visible in or projected into their works. While heteronomy, the cultural producer’s dependence on patrons, employers, or the audience is dismissed as commercialism; a high degree of autonomy from external factors is taken as evidence of a high degree of artfulness (Bourdieu 1996, 218). If we apply this to the graphic novel narrative, we see that comics are increasingly appreciated for a few comics’ supposed adherence to a decidedly traditional and exclusionary notion of art and culture as a normative category.

⁷ For instance, a cursory search on the *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* websites yields dozens of articles on ‘graphic novels’, while hardly anything is written on serial comic books.



If we return to Weiner, it is significant how differently the respective circumstances of production and reception are put: While Golden Age superhero comic books were produced “as quickly and cheaply as possible” (Weiner 2003, 2), the graphic novel is described as “a cartoon literary art form” (Weiner 2003, 58) that is produced by individual, identifiable authors/artists. As a consequence, comic books “were the lowest rung of the cultural ladder” (Weiner 2003, 3) in the 1930s and 1940s, while the graphic novel is seen as the catalyst, if not outright origin of the development that finally brought the medium away from the newsstand, out of the comic book specialty shop, and into the book store, where it is bought and sold next to serious literature (cf. Couch 2000). Weiner implicitly portrays comic books as a heteronomous form of comics that is produced under Fordist conditions by dependent artists – thus artistically inferior. In contrast, graphic novels are, according to Weiner, produced under more autonomous conditions, making them more direct imprints of the respective artist’s creative mind and therefore more artistic. And through this conceptualisation of comic books and the graphic novel, the critical appreciation of the two forms diverges.

THE TRAJECTORY OF *KAVALIER & CLAY*

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay engages with these contemporary developments through its historical negotiation of comics. As a historical novel, it discusses and represents Golden Age comics in their own discursive context while also phrasing its aesthetic arguments in the discursive context of the novel published in 2000. It depicts a narrative of aesthetic development that conspicuously transcends the novel’s chronology of fifteen years to rather encapsulate the development of the form during the last 70 years.

In chronological terms, the novel begins by outlining the common positions on the superhero comic book genre as it was widely received in the 1930s United States. When Sam wants to convince Joe to start a comic book, Sam’s plea for the form is not based on an objection to his mother’s claim that comics are “trash”, but simply on the assertion that “[t]here’s good money in comic books” (Chabon 2001, 73). Given the artistic state of the comic book in those days, this cynical and purely commercial view of comics seems to be legitimate:

In 1939 the American comic book, like the beavers and cockroaches of prehistory, was larger and, in its cumbersome way, more splendid than its modern descendant [...] Inside the covers – whence today there wafts an inevitable flea-market smell of rot and nostalgia – the comic book of 1939 was, artistically and morphologically, in a far more primitive state. (Chabon 2001, 74)



In these quotes, Chabon's novel explicitly affirms Weiner's assessment of the cultural position of comic books in the 1930s as well as his account's evolutionary logic. However, already here, a certain contradiction to a purely progressive assessment becomes obvious. Given the "primitive state" of the comic book and the mainly economic interest of its practitioners, it is made clear that initially comic books were not read as an aesthetic progression, but rather as a fall from grace if compared to the older genre of comic strips and "the mannered splendor of Burne Hogarth, Alex Raymond, Hal Foster" or "the finely tuned humor and adultish irony of *Lil'Abner*, *Krazy Kat*, *Abbie 'n' Slat's*" (Chabon 2001, 75).

This shortcoming, however, is overcome when the narrator describes a creative watershed in the development of comic books; namely, the appearance of *Action Comics #1* and the birth of Superman, "a magical alloy of several previous characters and archetypes from Samson to Doc Savage" (Chabon 2001, 77). Superman may lack originality like his comic book predecessors, the figure is a "version", but it is still different from those comics that suffer "a bad case of the carbon copies", those uninspired knock-offs that preceded Superman (Chabon 2001, 77). Because of successful artistry, the character brings the form to a new level by making use of its potential in ways the newspaper strip never could:

The artist, Joe Shuster, while technically just barely apt, seemed to understand from the first that the big rectangular page of the comic book offered possibilities for pacing and composition that were mostly unavailable in the newspapers; he joined three panels vertically into one [...] and he chose his angles and arranged his figures with a certain cinematic flair. [...] Though he had been conceived originally as a newspaper hero, Superman was born in the pages of a comic book, where he thrived, and after this miraculous parturition, the form finally began to emerge from its transitional funk, and to articulate a purpose for itself in the marketplace of ten-cent dreams: to express the lust for power and the gaudy sartorial taste of a race of powerless people with no leave to dress themselves. Comic books were Kid Stuff, pure and true, and they arrived at precisely the moment when the kids of America began, after ten years of terrible hardship, to find their pockets burdened with the occasional superfluous dime. (Chabon 2001, 77-78)

This passage shows, at the same time as it points out the formal innovation brought about by Shuster through his individual exploitation of the medium's potential, that all formal aspects and every artistic progression cannot be taken on their own terms alone. They are always inextricably linked to economic factors and the need to appeal to a very certain demographic, in this case working-class children and adolescents. On its own, none of the three factors – post-Depression affluence, commercial appeal, or formal innovation – would have brought any significant change



to the medium; together, they change it completely. Here, we find the first instance where the novel claims that comic books in particular and comics in general have to be considered a heteronomous art form that has to be evaluated in the concrete context of its production and reception and not only against the yardstick of certain transcendental cultural norms.

After these initial narratorial comments, most of the novel's history of comic books is written through the development of Joe Kavalier's and Sam Clay's partnership, focusing on the creation of the *Escapist* and the comic book franchise attached to it. From the beginning of the cousins' collaboration with Sheldon Anapol and Jack Ashkenazy – two stereotypical representations of the greedy businessmen who exploited the early comic book artists – to the publication of the first issue of *Amazing Midget Radio Comics* (as their franchise is called), the novel paints the early career of Kavalier and Clay in lavish and loving detail. In his analysis of *Kavalier & Clay*, Hess accurately describes the novel's "enthusiastic celebration of mainstream, mass-market superhero comic books" (Hess 2012, 26). Together with the *Escapist*, the cousins create characters with such evocative names like Luna Moth or Mr. Machine Gun and soon establish a successful comic book series. Read along the lines presented so far, the novel closely correlates to Roberts' characterisation as "[a] loving tribute to the burgeoning comic book industry of the 1930s" that forced "the sometimes-elitist academic world [...] to again take note and consider its canon" (Roberts 2004, 214).

However, as I have already indicated with reference to the novel's take on Superman, appreciating comics for their popular appeal and the campy celebration of comics exactly for their ostensible aesthetic deficits is only one part of the novel's engagement with the form. While it shares certain aspects with Jules Feiffer's classic study *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, in which Feiffer affirmatively claimed that "[c]omic books, first of all are junk [...] there to entertain on the basest, most compromised of levels" (Feiffer 2003, 72–73), the novel cannot be reduced to that. Chabon wrote more than an "enthusiastic endorsement of this by now rather 'square' art form" and does more than celebrate "the pulpy energy, excitement, and crude imaginative power of superhero comics without a trace of condescension" as Behlman (2004, 64–65) put it. Beginning at the latest with the appearance of the first issue of the *Escapist* comic book, the novel synthesises the entertainment and pleasure of comic books with a discussion concerning the artistic potential of the genre and its medium. Large parts of this debate are centred on Joe, known "today [...] as one of the greatest innovators in the use of layout, of narrative strategies, in the history of comic book art" (Chabon 2001, 361). And indeed, if Joe's development is read in isolation, the novel portrays a development of the medium from simplicity to complexity that evokes the graphic novel narrative I have outlined above.



Significantly, this development accelerates after the main characters have attended the premiere of *Citizen Kane*, itself a landmark in the formal development of film and the cultural appreciation of the medium. The movie has a tremendous and immediate impact on the comic book the cousins have created: “But in July 1941, *Radio #19* hit the stands, and the nine million unsuspecting twelve-year olds of America who wanted to grow up to become comic book men nearly fell over dead in amazement. The reason was *Citizen Kane*” (Chabon 2001, 361). Joe, who had always wondered about the – for him and his European, academy-educated understanding – inverted relationship of comics and art, in which cheap production and crude layout seemed to be prerequisites for, rather than obstacles to, success, finally finds a text akin to his ambitions. He “was impressed – demolished – by it” and is instantly changed by the reception of Orson Welles’ directorial debut:

All of the dissatisfactions he had felt in his practice of the art form he had stumbled across within a week of his arrival in America, the cheap conventions, the low expectations among publishers, readers, parents, and educators, the spatial constraints that he had been struggling against in the pages of *Luna Moth*, seemed capable of being completely overcome, exceeded, and escaped. The Amazing Cavalieri [his stage name as a magician] was going to break free, forever, of the nine little boxes. (Chabon 2001, 361)

The impact of the film on Joe’s understanding of the comic book is worth quoting at length:

Joe struggled to express, to formulate, the revolution in his ambitions for the ragged-edged and stapled little art form to which their inclinations and luck had brought them. [...] *Citizen Kane* represented, more than any other movie Joe had ever seen, the total blending of narration and image that was – didn’t Sammy see it? – the fundamental principle of comic book storytelling and the irreducible nut of their partnership. Without the witty, potent dialogue and the puzzling shape of the story, the movie would have been merely an American version of the kind of brooding, shadow-filled Ufa-style expressionist stuff that Joe had grown up watching in Prague. Without the brooding shadows and bold adventurings of the camera, without the theatrical lighting and queasy angles, it would have been merely a clever movie about a rich bastard. It was more, much more, than any movie really needed to be. In this one crucial aspect – its inextricable braiding of image and narrative – *Citizen Kane* was like a comic book. (Chabon 2001, 362)

Sam’s response is indicative: “I’d like to think we could do something like that. But come on. This is just, I mean, we’re talking about *comic books*” (Chabon 2001, 363; emphasis in the original). And even after Joe’s avant-gardist bohemian girlfriend Rosa objects by pointing out that “[n]o medium is inherently better than any other” a dictum in which to believe “was almost a requirement for



residence in her father's house", Sam insists that "that's not right. Comic books actually *are* inferior" (Chabon 2001, 363; emphasis in the original). Still, Joe's plan is pursued, and soon after, "Kane Street" is produced, "the first of the so-called modernist or prismatic Escapist stories" and the comic book market – years ahead of its time – is opened to adults (Chabon 2001, 363). And indeed, with subject matter that significantly transcends the genre constraints, "Kane Street" is portrayed as a significant progression.⁸ By depicting "the ordinary people" around the superheroes and with Joe's "daring use of perspective and shading, the radical placement of word balloons and captions and, above all, the integration of narrative and picture by means of artfully disarranged, dislocated panels that stretched, shrank, opened into circles, spread across two full pages, marched diagonally toward one corner of a page, unreeled themselves like the frames of a film", the Escapist comic book of 1941 has qualities that are supposed to have come only recently, with the graphic novel (Chabon 2001, 368–369).

Furthermore, this quality is measured according to a standard that can be found in a text that is openly acknowledged by Chabon in his "Author's note" and also ironically alluded to in the novel (Chabon 2001, 545), but fits the historical context of the narration rather than the novel's plot: Robert C. Harvey's *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*. In this study, Harvey speaks of the "unique aspect of comics' blending of word and picture for narrative purposes" and that "one litmus test of good comics art is to ascertain to what extent the sense of the words depends upon the pictures and vice versa" (Harvey 1996, 3–4). Together with the narrator's obvious historiographic insertions, it is this blatant concordance between the two texts that demonstrates how the narrator tells and evaluates the novel's historical narrative from a point of view steeped in current approaches to the medium.

"Kane Street" is followed by a short period of radical innovation taking place within the constraints of early comic book publishing. This period, however, is prematurely terminated on December 6, 1942 by the death of Joe's little brother Thomas and Joe's subsequent enrolment in the army after the attack on Pearl Harbor. And it will be only after a stint in Antarctica and a period of Romanticist seclusion that Joe will eventually reappear in 1954 with *The Golem*,⁹ a 2,256-page comic book that surpasses everything the form has previously come up with and "would, he hoped at the time, transform people's views and understanding of the art form that in 1949 he

⁸ However, the fact that this aesthetic progression coincides with and complements their publisher's economically motivated demand for less controversial subject matter once more displays the integrated nature of both.

⁹ An actually existing version of this mythical Jewish hero was instrumental in Joe's escape from Prague and the Golem served from the beginning as a role model for Joe's understanding of superheroes.



alone saw as a means of self-expression as potent as a Cole Porter tune in the hands of a Lester Young, or a cheap melodrama about an unhappy rich man in the hands of an Orson Welles” (Chabon 2001, 577).

Concerning *The Golem*, Chute argues that “Joe Kavalier embarks on what Chabon presents as America’s first ‘graphic novel’” and that “*Kavalier & Clay* is about comics moving out from a degraded mass form (the pulps) to what Joe insists on: comics as serious art form. The book argues for an art form whose politics resides in its aesthetic choices and stances but is yet inclusive of popular conventions and genres” (Chute 2008, 285). Focusing on this development from the beginning of the partnership to Joe’s *The Golem*, Chute (2008, 282) argues that the novel “presents a trajectory, showing us how its creative cartoonist protagonists embrace and adopt various comic book methodologies”. Read in isolation from the rest of the book, this chronological take on the Escapist comic is indeed a straightforward retelling of the comics-to-graphic novels account of popular comics history as exemplified by Weiner’s book.

This view of the novel, however, is only possible by ignoring large parts of the final section and neglecting the artists Sam and Rosa, thus eliding the crucial dialectical dynamic at the heart of the novel. Even more, as Hess points out, Chute’s approach to *Kavalier & Clay*’s comics historiography “largely ignores the seven decade legacy of superhero comics” (Hess 2012, 26). Accordingly, Chute claims that *Kavalier & Clay* locates comics’ development in Joe’s career and moves from “the novelty companies and pulps [...] to the realm of modernist aesthetics [...] and finally propagates a form that draws on elements of both: a solemn, experimental, and – crucially – book-length comics oeuvre that yet wears its roots in generic convention with pride: the graphic narrative” (Chute 2008, 286). However, it seems dubitable that *The Golem* can be read as such an inclusionary text, let alone “a form that bridges the high and the popular” (Chute 2008, 286). Already the fact that this “comic book novel”, as Sam calls it, remains unpublished makes it decidedly *unpopular* (Chabon 2001, 543). Thus, even though Chute convincingly argues that *Kavalier & Clay* “theorizes a democratic popular culture that is yet aesthetically innovative”, *The Golem* can hardly be taken as the point where this cultural politics manifests itself (Chute 2008, 281). Rather, within the novel, this “monstrous comic book” signifies an extreme end in the dichotomy between individual artistic expression and commercial potential (Chabon 2001, 578). Accordingly, we learn about Joe that “the more convincingly he demonstrated the power of the comic book as a vehicle of personal expression – the less willingness he felt to show it to other people” (Chabon 2001, 579). It follows that if *The Golem* is understood as *Kavalier & Clay*’s version of the graphic novel, the form is depicted as an artistically advanced but potentially antisocial genre that cannot represent comics on its own, but needs to be conceptualised together with other forms of graphic expression like the comic book. Accordingly, the last section of the novel



puts as much emphasis on Joe's graphic novel as it does on the work of Joe, Sam and Rosa in the field of serial comic books and thus juxtaposes the two genres.

KAVALIER & CLAY: JOE, SAM & ROSA

The development of the cousins' comic book is but one aspect of the novel's comics discussion, and only through a thorough consideration of *Kavalier & Clay*'s character constellation can we make sense of it without reading it solely along the lines of a teleological narrative. Basically, *Kavalier & Clay* consists of a unique constellation of its two most prominent characters, the "solidly lower-middle class" American Jew Sam, and the displaced upper-middle class European Jew Joe (Chabon 2001, 6). With Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay, the novel offers two typical models of approaching comics in particular and art in general; two models that at times converge and at times diverge (cf. Chute 2008, 283; Behlman 2004, 66–67). Joe, on the one hand, is the formally educated European artist who continually aspires to bring innovation to comic books and eventually produces *The Golem*. Sam, on the other hand, is the shrewd American plagiarist that may dream of writing the Great American Novel, but never succeeds in doing so (Chabon 2001, 7; 543). Individually, neither would achieve anything; it is only through the collaboration of the two that anything comes to pass. The novel shows that only a collaboration of different approaches to art, entertainment, and culture makes it possible to come to terms with comics. For instance, coming back to *The Golem*, without Sam, Joe does not produce a comic book, at least not one according to the criteria established before with reference to Harvey – *The Golem* has no words, it consists only of images.¹⁰ Furthermore, Joe resorts to highly idiosyncratic 19th century conceptions of Romantic art (cf. Eagleton 1996, 16–18) and produces *The Golem* in total seclusion and obscurity, eventually declining to publish it. Therefore, a more than fleeting analysis of Sam seems to be necessary.

From the beginning, Joe's counterweight Sam is made out as the almost exact opposite of an original Romantic genius; he is a talented copier, a postmodern artist *avant-la-lettre*: "His grasp of perspective was tenuous, his knowledge of human anatomy dubious, his line often sketchy – but he was an enterprising thief" (Chabon 2001, 7). It is of course significant that later, this "thief" will have played an instrumental role in comics as patron to young artists, as we learn in "A

¹⁰ *The Golem* is reminiscent of Lynd Ward's series of wordless woodcut novels or Frans Masereel's *The City*. However, even though these books are often hailed as proto-graphic novels, the aesthetic, cultural and economic contexts of their production and reception is distinctly different from that of the early comics industry and much more similar to current figurations of literary authors and creators of graphic novels (cf. McCloud 1993, 19).



Postscript”, a short piece that was published after the novel and narrates Sam and Rosa’s visit to “IronCon” in 1988 (Chabon 2004, 38).

In essence, what Sam lacks in creativity, he makes up for in social behaviour and economic acumen, thus complementing his cousin and the idiosyncratic approach to art Joe stands for. Together, they form a neat complementary cycle that is, however, yet to be completed. Even though I do not claim that she is as central to the novel as the two cousins, I still want to suggest that the function of Rosa Luxemburg Saks has been insufficiently analysed. Rosa, the daughter of a patron of the avant-garde, starts out as Joe’s love interest, but she ends up as an artist in her own right, similar to, though not commensurable with, Sam and Joe. So far, Hillary Chute is the only critic who has mentioned her in a more than passing fashion, pointing out that already her names connote wildly divergent cultural phenomena. Communism (“Rosa Luxemburg”) and consumerism (“Saks”) are separated only by a space character and thus make her an artist “who represents the intertwining of the political and the commercial” (Chute 2008, 289). Subsequently, Chute concentrates her analysis on how the avant-gardist artist Rosa employs popular modes of expression ‘from above’, thus echoing Huyssen’s (1986) conceptualisation of the historical avant-garde and U.S. postmodernism.

I want to argue that the novel goes a step further, again by pointing out Rosa’s name. While Chute concentrates on the significance of her birth name, I want to emphasise the names she will assume through her relationships with Joe and Sam. After Joe disappears in 1942 and Sam finds out that Rosa is pregnant with Joe’s child, he marries her, and she becomes Rosa Clay. Shortly after, she starts working for Sam and assumes the *nom de plume* Rose Saxon, thus anglicising her Jewish name just like Sam Americanised his. The novel ends with the reunification of Rosa and Joe and the disappearance of Sam. When he leaves, he makes a significant gesture by leaving behind a card that signifies both the relation between all three characters as well as the new relationship between Rosa and Joe by writing, “knotted by the stout cord of an ampersand, the words KAVALIER & CLAY” (Chabon 2001, 636). Thus, in the end, the stable signifiers of the book’s title have become ambiguous, for the names do not only belong to Joe and Sam, but also, in equal parts, to Rosa. Together with her avant-gardist upbringing, this makes Rosa the perfect link between the two different approaches to art represented by the cousins.

In the novel’s most blatant deviation from the graphic novel narrative, this bridging is artistically represented in a genre that is usually portrayed as an aesthetic decline: romance comics. Rosa’s romance comic books can be seen as a mirror of a change in the industry during the 1950s; but on a more personal level they do not only present an option to earn a living, but also a means of



escape for Rosa that mirrors Joe's and Sam's escapist¹¹ fantasies: "The night he [Sam] offered her the chance to draw 'a comic book for dollies,' Rosa felt, Sammy had handed *her* a golden key, a skeleton key to her self, a way out of the tedium of her existence as a housewife and a mother, first in Midwood and now in Bloomtown,¹² soi-disant Capital of the American Dream" (Chabon 2001, 547; emphasis in the original). With personal liberation comes artistic exploitation of the medium, much in the vein of Joe:

Her pages, though neglected by all but a few collectors, retain an imprint of the creator's faith in her creation, the beautiful madness that is rare enough in any art form, but in the comics business, with its enforced collaborations and tireless seeking-out of the lowest common denominator, all but unheard of. (Chabon 2001, 551)

Rosa manages, just like Joe did, to create ambitious comic art in everything but independent circumstances (she is, after all, Sam's employee). As the narrator of "A Postscript" tells us:

Mrs. Rosa Kavalier, better known to aficionados of comic-book romance (sadly few) as Rose Saxon. In the fifties and well into the early sixties she had taken the conventions and verities of the romance genre and stretched them to the breaking point. At first her hallmark was a stylized realism but toward the end, before the bottom fell out of love comics and her career was cut short by arthritis, things took a baroque turn. (Chabon 2004, 36)

This description clearly echoes Shuster's work with Superman and Joe's work with the Escapist. And similar to the heteronomous conditions of Superman and the Escapist, it happens primarily under the guidance of Sam, who is both writer and contractor for her. That Chabon chose a critically reviled genre for this is indicative, as it makes clear how even the most disregarded cultural product may have the potential of actual artistic bliss, thus belying many long-standing preconceptions. Rosa becomes a representation of the heteronomous comic field, and at the same time represents the novel's problematisation of a purely male teleology of comics historiography and functions as a corrective for simplistic conceptualisations of comics history (cf. Frahm 2009, 183).

Thus, contrary to what the current literature on *Kavalier & Clay* implies, the novel's representation of comics art does not end with *The Golem*. Rather, it ends with Sam and Rosa working in romance comics and other typical 1950s genres and, maybe even more significantly, with Joe buying Empire Comics, the publishing house of the Escapist. In the end, the figure of the

¹¹ For an analysis of escapism in *Kavalier & Clay*, see Behlman 2004.

¹² Bloomtown is the novel's thinly veiled allusion to 1950s suburbia epitomized by Levittown.



entrepreneur and the artist are conjoined both within the character of Joe and of Sam. And although Joe is eventually defrauded of the *Escapist*, as the title was sold shortly before he purchased *Empire*, he publishes “adult-themed” titles in comic book form while Rosa continues to make a living drawing 1950s romance comics.

BEYOND KAVALIER & CLAY

Joe and Sam, together with Rosa, represent different *intertwined* possibilities of what it means to be an artist in the culture industry. In their different approaches to being an artist they epitomise, individually and collectively, what Chabon lauded elsewhere as “pop artisans” (Chabon 2008b, 98). For Chabon, a pop artisan “teeters on a fine fulcrum between the stern, sell-the-product morality of the workhorse and the artist’s urge to discover a pattern in, or derive a meaning from, the random facts of the world” (Chabon 2008b, 98). He argues that among the “balancing acts” that “have always been the greatest feats of American popular art” is work that stands “at that difficult fulcrum [...] between the unashamedly commercial and the purely aesthetic” (Chabon 2008a, 105). That art and economy are inextricably linked in popular culture is also argued for by Chabon in his elegy on Will Eisner, in which he compares Eisner and Welles in terms of revolutionising one’s chosen medium. Chabon identifies one major difference between the two, though:

Will Eisner had something – was something – that Orson Welles never quite managed, or permitted himself, or possessed a head hard enough to be: Will Eisner was a businessman. He was a Welles and a Selznick, a Brian Wilson and an Ahmet Ertegun. [...] Will Eisner was a great artist and a skilled businessman; inextricably both. I loved that about him. (Chabon 2008b, 142–143)

Chabon himself seems to epitomise this characterisation of Eisner, as he not only wrote a critically and commercially successful novel, but also managed to participate in the creation of extra-textual sequels. To date, there have appeared several short prose pieces written by Chabon that were published in journals and exhibition catalogues; even more, there are also two actual comics that spawned from the book. Although both of them were later collected in trade paperback and hardcover form, respectively, these comic book sequels to the novel clearly represent a further contradiction to the graphic novel narrative.

Collaboration is the keyword for this aspect. From 2004 to 2006, Dark Horse Comics published *The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist*, a quarterly comic book that purports to collect formerly



lost Escapist-stories from the 1940s to the present.¹³ Apart from “The Passing of the Key”, which is a comics adaptation of the Escapist origin story told in *Kavalier & Clay*, only very few of the stories were actually written by Chabon (Chabon et al. 2004–2006). Using pseudonyms like the anagrammatic Malachi B. Cohen, Chabon’s main contributions, apart from being the “presenter”, are a number of essay-like insertions which add more information on the novel’s fictional universe and also construct an alternative history of comics in which Kavalier and Clay actually existed. The anthology collects work from such diverse writers and artists as Howard Chaykin, Eddie Campbell, Glen David Gold, Chris Ware, Brian K. Vaughan, Eric Wight, and Will Eisner. The impressive number of contributors to each issue signifies the anthology’s insistence on comic book production as a collaborative endeavour. And with its broad range of genres in which the Escapist supposedly appeared – from superhero to science fiction to manga to children’s comic strips – it also shows the continuing centrality of genre work in comics. Furthermore, the stories collected here are at pains to evade an ironic, distancing stance on comic books. The stories may be aesthetically refined and produced by prominent artists and writers, but they do not try to be metafictional comments on superhero/masked crime fighter comic books; they *are* superhero/masked crime fighter comic books. Here, issue #7, which consists of a single Mr. Machine Gun-story, is a case in point. While the main narrative is written and drawn in a contemporary style typical for mainstream comics as of 2005, chapter two is a ‘reprint’ of Mr. Machine Gun’s origin story, bearing the credit “Kavalier & Clay” (Chabon and Barreto 2005, 31). Unlike many postmodernist appropriations of popular culture, this chapter passes on the opportunity to comment on, ironically or not, its subject and rather presents it in a straightforward manner.

The anthology, just like the novel on which it is based, can be read as a counterexample to those contemporary appropriations of the genre that “tend to put ironic quotes around their referencing of superheroes”, like for instance the graphic novels of Chris Ware and Daniel Clowes (Behlman 2004, 63). In Chabon’s own words about the (non-)appreciation of genre and entertainment writing he perceives in general: “Intelligent people must keep a certain distance from its productions. They must handle the things that entertain them with gloves of irony and postmodern tongs” (Chabon 2008b, 13). And it is indeed Chabon’s as well as his collaborators’ refusal to use “gloves of irony and postmodern tongs” that is one of the crucial aspects of both the novel’s and *The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist’s* take on the popular commercial form of the comic book (cf. Hess 2012, 27).

¹³ More detailed accounts of the comic book series and their publication history can be found in Hess (2012, 31–37) and Groß (2012).



The other *Kavalier & Clay* spin-off, *The Escapists*, is a similar plea for the collaborative nature of comics production and an un-ironic engagement with the genre of the comic book (Vaughan et al. 2006). *The Escapists* is a six-issue limited series set in the present, written by Brian K. Vaughan and drawn by, among others, Philip Bond and Eduardo Barreto. It deals with young indie artists who manage to acquire the dormant rights to the *Escapist* and try to revive the series very much in the spirit of the 1940s. By focusing on the work of a team consisting of two boys and a girl, thus already echoing *Kavalier & Clay* on this level, the series shows on a textual level what *The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist* did on the meta-level: even if the graphic novel is the new critical paradigm in comics, it has to be read alongside comic books that wear their serial and collaborative nature on their sleeve. Furthermore, the comic book displays self-conscious qualities, as it narrates the different stages of comics production extensively in the scenes when the creative team work in its studio (Vaughan et al. 2006, 39) and also shows this on a formal level; for instance, it uses four panels to illustrate the different steps of drawing comics. The first panel is pencilled, the second adds ink, the third is basically coloured, and the fourth adds more nuanced colourings and shadings, thus showing the assembly-like nature of comics production (Vaughan et al. 2006, 22). And even though it represents the comic book industry in starkly negative terms as a capitalist machinery of exploitation and manipulation, *The Escapists* gives further evidence of the continuing centrality of the serial form of comic books. Even after the series' heroes have given up on their revival of the *Escapist*, they decide to remain in the comic book business and begin to produce a comic book of their own instead.

CONCLUSION

The historical and often openly nostalgic comics narrative of *Kavalier & Clay* comments on, criticises, and helps shape a very current development in the medium: The emergence of the graphic novel and the growing respectability of comics as art.

The novel remedies the paradoxes inherent in the strategy of appreciating the merits of the comic book against its detractors. On the one hand, virtually no one addressing the issue forgets to elaborate on nostalgic memories regarding the first exposure to comic books during childhood. The different approaches to comics almost always stress their popular appeal and a universal understanding of art that includes comics, and also the necessity of appreciating comics in order to arrive at a more holistic understanding of art (McCloud 1993, 162–184). Yet, within the ostensibly progressive graphic novel narrative, in which the graphic novel is the adult-oriented, formally refined quality expression of the medium that has helped the entire medium to finally become eligible for the cultural canon, comics are not so much appreciated for these 'popular'



reasons, but rather for a few comics' adherence to a decidedly traditional and exclusionary notion of art and culture as a normative category.

In this regard, the novel shares a caveat with Gravett, who concludes his overview of 30 graphic novel "masterworks" (Gravett 2005, 12) on a cautionary note. In his "Afterthoughts", Gravett claims the importance of not forgetting that, after all, sophistication and the turn to adult-themed subjects is but one future road to take.¹⁴ In a similar vein, Wolk asks a question that touches on central problems of an all-too easy adaptation of a purely progressive framework: "Has something been lost in their shift from disposable pulp to acid-free archival paper?" (Wolk 2007, 10). That is, are there negative consequences to comics' (at least partial) shift from newsstand serial to cloth-bound bookstore inventory? And Hatfield also argues that "there is much about comics, historically and aesthetically, that may be lost in the drive to confer legitimacy on the graphic novel" (Hatfield 2005, 153).

Chabon's novel seems to share these concerns, and as a consequence attempts to broaden the purview. Instead of concentrating purely on the graphic novel, *Kavalier & Clay* juxtaposes it with the comic book and thus argues for an approach that accommodates various forms of comics as different versions of essentially the same phenomenon. Chabon's novel balances culture between two long-standing antipodes: "imitative and reproductive" features usually labelled mass/popular cultural collide and merge with "original and productive" takes, the common resort of high art (Huysen 1986, 51). The novel argues for a culture where artistic acumen and the possibility of professionalisation as well as serious content and entertainment cease to be polar opposites. Therefore, it provides us with a crucial alternative to the increasing conceptualisation of 'good' comics as autonomous works of art, namely the appreciation of heteronomous forms of comics (cf. Stein, Ditschke and Kroucheva 2009, 15). For better or worse, the comics field emerges as a heteronomous part of the culture industry where people need to make a living. And the novel reminds us that the constraints of professionalism apply even to the most ambitious artists working in the field. The graphic novel, understood as an individual expression of an artist's mind, may be a possible, even welcome, variety within the medium, but it does not necessarily have to be the logical outcome of a unidirectional development. Not in the 1950s, not today.

¹⁴ Certainly not coincidentally, he quotes from Michael Chabon's 2004 San Diego Comic-Con address: "Children did not abandon comics; comics, in their drive to attain respect and artistic accomplishment, abandoned children. And for a long time we as lovers and partisans of comics were afraid, after so many long years of struggle and hard work and incremental gains, to pick up that old jar of 'greasy kid stuff' again, and risk undoing it all. Comics have always been an arriviste art form, and all upstarts are to some degree ashamed of their beginnings. But frankly, I don't think that's what's going on in comics anymore. Now, I think, we have simply lost the habit of telling stories to children. And how sad is that" (Chabon 2008a, 91-92; cf. Gravett 2005, 184).



Fittingly, Punday argues that *Kavalier & Clay* and similar “comic book novels” “use comics to think about identity and originality after the rise of corporate culture” and that it is “a rich attempt to imagine a new way of telling stories about identity in an economic framework” (Punday 2008, 292–293).

Through its juxtaposition of different historical inflections of comics, it also succeeds in acknowledging aesthetic developments while at the same time not ‘forgetting’ older forms of comics that continue to exist and deserve critical attention. In the words of comic book veteran Jerry Robinson: “Though the comic strip, the comic book, and the comic book’s progeny – the graphic novel – have much in common, each form had its own idiosyncratic development with its own unique vision and symbolism. The various genres of cartoon art are a distinct but logical development of centuries of narrative art” (Robinson 2004, 17). Thus, even while certain parts of the narrative are portrayed in a progressive fashion of logical development, it is through the juxtaposition of different approaches to producing comics that the novel shows the distinctness of each individual genre and points out contradicting developments, breaks, and ruptures.

In the end, it may be a hopeful sign that a novel that promotes the synthesis and mutual compatibility of artistic ambition and commercial success was itself a novel that managed to bridge “that most confounding and mysterious border of all: the one that lies between wild commercial success and unreserved critical acclaim” (Chabon 2008d, 25).



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