

Joshua Lazarus

An Analysis of Modern Comics Criticism

In order to analyze something, one must take the first step of defining what it is they are about to analyze. To most people, anything in the medium of sequential art is considered to be a comic book or the funny pages, even if the content is not intended to be comical or humorous. Even the medium defining term sequential art barely sees mainstream use. People go to comic book stores, not sequential art stores.

Comics are not the only medium to have a name defined by its history. The term movie, for example, is short for moving pictures. At the time of invention, people were astounded that these films –another term for movie that is made obsolete in the sense that filmmakers no longer use actual film- contained what seemed to be images moving on a screen.

Will Eisner coined the term “sequential art” in his often praised book *Comics and Sequential Art*. (Eisner) Sequential art outdates comics by millennia. Cave paintings and Egyptian hieroglyphics both fall under the form of sequential art, as they were pictures used to tell stories. (McCloud)

The term graphic novel has been both praised and criticized both inside and outside of the comic industry. Alan Moore, writer of the seminal work *Watchmen* –which is referred to as a graphic novel by the mainstream- proclaimed in an interview that

"It's a marketing term ... that I never had any sympathy with. The term 'comic' does just as well for me. ... The problem is that 'graphic novel' just came to mean 'expensive comic book' and so what you'd get is people like DC Comics or Marvel Comics — because 'graphic novels' were getting some attention, they'd stick six issues of whatever worthless piece of crap they happened to be publishing lately under a glossy cover and call it *The She-Hulk Graphic Novel....*" (Kavanagh)

What Moore seems to be describing is currently referred to as a “trade paperback” or “trade hardcover” depending on the binding. A “trade” is usually five or six issues of an ongoing comic series such as *Captain America* or *Batman* collected in a format that is sturdier than the binding of original comic magazines. Marvel and DC both have entire departments devoted to putting together trade editions to release to the market.

A graphic novel has come to define a stand-alone comic work all bound together. An example of this would be Brian K. Vaughan and Niko Henrichon's *Pride of Baghdad*.

There are, of course, works that skirt and blur the line. For example, *Incognito*, by Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips –with colors by Val Staples- was originally released as six individual comic issues. It was collected in paperback, which would make it a trade paperback, but could also be defined as a graphic novel because the six issues collected are a complete stand-alone story. No other material from the world of *Incognito* yet exists, and if nothing else were ever released, the work would lose none of its value. Therefore, it could also be described as a graphic novel. The same applies to Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. It was originally a twelve-issue limited series –limited series being a multiple issue spanning finite story- but gained even more popularity and respect once its collected edition was released. It is a stand-alone story and collected into a single volume. *Watchmen* is easily described as a graphic novel.

Another question that arises is, “When do we analyze a work in the comic medium?” This question is further complicated by the serial nature of most mainstream comics. This question can only be answered on a case by case basis. While individual issues may be reviewed

or critiqued, many criticisms might be addressed upon completion of the limited series or of the story arc within the ongoing series. Therefore, it would be easier, and more accurate, to wait until the limited series or story arc within a larger ongoing series is complete before proper analysis can begin. While there is some value to maybe reviewing an individual issue, this would be valued more as a business prospect than an academic one. Many comments made about individual issues talk about pacing that might not be the best when read as an individual issue, but is needed to serve the larger story being told. This problem has recently been defined in a review of an issue of Marvel Comics' limited series *Secret Warriors*. Reviewer Chad Nevett wrote,

Since the first story arc of “Secret Warriors,” it’s been increasingly difficult to focus on the individual issue as a work that exists by itself apart from the larger story, since Jonathan Hickman seems intent on structuring the series in a manner where issues present a series of scenes that build upon one another, pushing toward some unknown destination that will be reached at some point in the future. Lacking a central character or even a true central cast, “Secret Warriors” spans four organizations and numerous sub-groups within each; characters who were vital last issue may not appear for months, and previously unseen characters take center stage. It’s a more novelistic approach that is entrancing and intriguing for those that keep up, but does make each new issue less satisfying than it will ultimately prove... (Nevett)

Despite the many positives of this issue, it’s hard to view it as a singular cohesive whole when it’s so informed by what came before and the scenes included lack the drama and entertainment value they possess for someone who’s read every issue. The focus of this series shifts so easily that which characters are shown seems random until the eventual payoff, which may not be for some time. It’s a great series to read, but not necessarily one issue at a time. (Nevett)

This is not a problem on the part of the work itself, but it is instead a problem of the way it is being viewed by the reviewer. The issue is not a complete story. It is not advertised as a complete story. It is advertised as an episode of a larger serial. This is not a negative quality of a work. This is why reviewers and critics need to consider what the work they are writing about actually is before writing about it.

Now that the object of criticism can be defined, it can now be analyzed. The next question to ask is what type of analysis to write. Most analysis of comics should fall under review or criticism.

The difference between what defines review and what defines criticism has been the subject of much debate and discourse. R.C. Harvey put forward a theory in an article he wrote for *The Comics Journal* that I find to be quite a good way of looking at the two practices. He starts by defining review.

The purpose of a review is to acquaint readers with something they probably haven't seen. So tell 'em what it's like, *kimo sabe*. A review answers the question: Does this item contain things I might want to see on my own, enough of them to justify the price I will have to pay? (Harvey)

Reviews...should reflect no opinion. As purely descriptive enterprises, they should describe as objectively as possible. (Harvey)

This is true for reviews we see in newspapers for movies, or on the internet every week on the major comic book news websites. These should not be seen as criticism, and a consumer should not decide whether or not to buy a product based on a single review. What can best be

hoped is that a consumer finds a few reviewers whose tastes prove, over time, to be similar to their own, and only then base their decisions on the opinions of the reviewer.

R.C. Harvey goes on to describe critique, and how it differs from his previous definition of review.

A critique is evaluative. The minute an erstwhile review offers an opinion about the work being described, the review becomes criticism. If a reviewer says whether something is good or bad, worthwhile or not, he stops being a reviewer and becomes a critic. (Harvey)

A critique adds the weight of its judgment to a review. A critique has at least two purposes: first, it either recommends something -- or condemns it; second, a critique adds to the analytical discourse about the art form under scrutiny.

Critiques set artistic standards. And to the extent that artists agree with the standards, criticism may influence the actual performance of an art. (Harvey)

Criticism is necessarily all opinion. And since everyone is entitled to an opinion, we can't fault a critic for his opinion. We can, however, agree or disagree. And we can demand of critics that they provide logical reasons for their opinions.

(Harvey)

Too often, reviewers or critics use reviews and their position of power -- being published on a widely viewed website- not to evaluate the work, but instead to write more of an opinion-editorial style article about the work. Sometimes, this leads to outright snark, as in the review of the single issue biography of *Twilight* series author Stephanie Meyer.

When you're doing a biography of Stephenie Meyer, you're going to run into a problem right off the bat, namely the fact that Stephanie Meyer is really f--king boring. (Sims)

Really, we're not even trying to dis Meyer here, but the fact of the matter is that she just hasn't done a whole lot. She never sailed down the Mississippi like Mark Twain, she never married a complete lunatic like F. Scott Fitzgerald did, heck, she never even did a ton of coke and got run over by a van like Stephen King. We can sum up her entire life in twenty words. Watch:

"Stephenie Meyer grew up in the Southwest, got married, had kids, wrote some books about vampires and got rich. Batman."

We threw "Batman" in there to make it more exciting. (Sims)

Unfortunately, this is the accepted standard by the majority of the comics journalism community. Comics Alliance, the website that hosts this particular "review," is run by AOL and is one of the more popular and respected sites.

Even Newsarama and Comic Book Resources run afoul of this type of review too often. Timothy Callahan's review of *Ultimatum #5*, the last issue of Marvel's "Ultimatum" event, on ComicBookResources.com barely even mentioned the issue that the review was supposed to be about. The review instead feels like a commentary on the entire event.

For a comic as gruesome as "Ultimatum," issue #5 is surprisingly short on sound effects. So before I review the finale of what many have called Marvel's "snuff comic," I'll flip through the issue page by page, and add the appropriate (yet missing) sound effects here as needed: snikt, slice, boom, splort, splort, splort, wham, boom, drip, zam, splort, boom, gurgle, splort, crack, splort, solemn-high-five. (Callahan)

Such onomatopoeics alone are surely enough to indicate the kind of comic we're talking about here. "Ultimatum" #5 is the fifth part of, not a story, but of a line-wide clearing of the decks. Though Jeph Loeb set these events in motion back in the first issue of the abysmal "Ultimates 3" series, this isn't some complexly plotted "event comics" masterpiece. No, it's a series of pages in which someone does something while yelling or gritting his or her teeth, and someone else dies. It's practically page after page of murder, disembowelment, evisceration, and decapitation. And all of it driven not by the logic of characterization and prior continuity, but cynically arranged because the Ultimate Universe had lost its way, or wasn't getting enough attention anymore. (Callahan)

There's plenty to dislike about this comic. From a larger contextual perspective, it's just a brutal and inglorious way to end the Ultimate line. Perhaps the Ultimate Universe comics were always cynical -- just a way to grab more cash by taking the Marvel characters and "updating" them for a new generation (an Iceman do-rag here, a Harry Potteresque Reed Richards there, a rad new Green Goblin in between) -- but the stories themselves contained a wide-eyed innocence. The Ultimate Universe comics (arguably until Millar and Hitch came along) were about enthusiastic youth overcoming incredible adversity. It was a Marvel Universe Remix, and many of the stories in those early years were better than their contemporary Marvel counterparts. So to see all of it -- not just the always grim and cynical Ultimates, but *all* of it -- end with wholesale slaughter and dozens of heroes listed in the "In Memoriam" section at the end? It feels cheap. It feels sleazy. (Callahan)

It's like the majority of so-called comics journalism falls under the branch of opinion-editorial disguised as reviews or criticism just so the major news sites could have sections for reviews and criticism. The worst part of it is that the "reviewers" and "critics" for the larger sites are getting paid for their articles. You would think that a job would require some sort of standard of professionalism. Not everybody can write good criticism. Other jobs require that applicants have certain skills so that they can perform their jobs well. What are the requirements to write for a major comic book news website? I highly doubt that these reviewers have any sort of formal training in either literary critical theory or art critical theory.

Another questionable practice of comics journalists is the tendency to give credit to a particular writer or artist. Kieron Gillen, writer of *Phonogram* and *Thor*, wrote about this on his blog.

What I'm talking about is the problem of properly crediting innovation. Specifically, comic reviewers - especially mainstream comic reviewers - tend to dissect art and writing separately, and credit all praise or hatred at the artist or writer respectively. Which of course, is fair. Their names are on the book, after all. But on another level, it's totally delusional. From the outside you have no idea of the machinations of the book. Writers and artists push and pull against each other constantly. The book warps. If a writer asks for a specific effect and the artist simply executes it, while the specific rendering is to the artist's credit, the actual choice of the moment lies with the writer. Conversely, if an artist adds a panel, creating a specific heart-breaking glance, it's more likely the writer will get the credit for choosing to capture this heart-on-sleeve. Especially if then, after the fact it's been added, they've added a half-line there in response with the artist's

innovations. I can easily pick up bits of Phonogram where I've got credit Jamie should have got, and vice versa.

Because from the outside, no-one would know. So why do we pretend we do? (Gillen)

Point being: since they're [the writer and artist] attempting to become a faux-cartoonist for the space of the work, maybe it could be interesting to treat them as a faux-cartoonist and consider all their work together as a single entity. The closest parallel is bands, the other small groups of impassioned individuals gathered together for a larger purpose whose work - even the work which can be clearly originated by one member of the collective - is best analysed as part of the whole. Tracing Gillen McKelvie's work is a different thing than just tracing Jamie McKelvie or Kieron Gillen's work. Run a finger down - to choose a couple of examples - the Ennis Dillon, the Diggle Jock or Morrison Quitely spines and you're seeing something which is unique between the creators, of how they work off each other and all that. Of - fundamentally - how they make each other look good. (Gillen)

Of course, it's true of most forms. For example, directors get far more than their fair credit for the worth of a film... but in comics, where there's so relatively few people involved, bifurcating the two elements and giving them all to one individual or the other strikes me as worse. And, equally obviously, there are often more individuals who shape a collaborative comic than just the writer and artist. Even the artist can be multiple individuals, with the inkers and colourists... But, much in the same way the Director getting so much credit was a result of little more than deciding *someone* should get the credit from the film instead of the studio, it's acceptable just in trying to get people thinking about comics in a different way (i.e. It's a utilitarian argument). As in, thinking of the comic created by a novel gestalt that should be considered as such. (Gillen)

On the reader's side, it seems that to get through the drivel, one must ask important questions of the writers. One must ask for their qualifications, since very few have any sort of formal training in comics studies.

And the writers are not entirely to blame. They -at least the ones for the largest sites- are being offered money to get away with writing what so often requires little revision and little form, and they get to see their name in a byline, which boosts their visibility in a field where they might as well be someone with a private blog and not getting paid to write the same thing.

The means exist for comics and sequential art to be considered worthy of serious academic study. All it requires is for industry insiders and journalists to start treating their chosen profession as an actual profession rather than a hobby. There can be no change in the way the outside world sees comics if the people inside the industry do not treat themselves and the medium with the respect they both deserve.

Works Cited

Callahan, Timothy. Review: Ultimatum #5. 1 August 2009. 5 May 2010
<http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=user_review&id=1264>.

Eisner, Will. Comics and Sequential Art. Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1985.

Gillen, Kieron. The Gillen McKelvie Paradigm. 10 January 2010. 3 April 2010
<http://gillen.cream.org/wordpress_html/?p=1775>.

Harvey, R.C. Review or Criticism? 2002. 30 April 2010
<http://archives.tcj.com/3_online/b_harv_090299.html>.

Kavanagh, Barry. The Alan Moore Interview. 17 October 2000. 5 May 2010
<<http://www.blather.net/articles/amoore/northampton.html>>.

McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics. Northampton: Harper Perennial, 1993.

Nevett, Chad. Review: Secret Warriors #12. 29 January 2010. 5 May 2010
<http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=user_review&id=1825>.

Sims, Chris. The Stephenie Meyer Comic Book: So Much Worse Than 'Twilight'. 12 November 2009. 28 April 2010 <<http://www.comicsalliance.com/2009/11/12/stephenie-meyer-comic-book-twilight/>>.