

ABSTRACT

Identity and Form in Alternative Comics, 1967 – 2007

In the late 1960s, underground cartoonists established the comic book form as a space for the exploration of personal identity. "Alternative" comics grew out of this tradition as subsequent writers produced work independently of the major comics publishers, aimed at an adult audience and encompassing a broad range of visual styles and narrative content. Throughout the past forty years, British, US and Canadian writers and artists have used this medium to explore questions of selfhood and perception, often implicitly or overtly relating these issues to the form, history and conventions of the comic book itself.

Two main threads run through this discussion of the representation of selfhood: childhood and memory on the one hand and sexuality and gender on the other. This thesis argues that for many creators there exists a useful analogy between the comic book form and mental processes, specifically between the fractured, verbal-visual blend of the comics page and the organisation of human memory. It further suggests that the historical association of comics first with childhood, and subsequently with male adolescence, has conditioned the representation of selfhood in adult comics. Comic book consumption has often centred on a community of predominantly young, white, male, socially marginal readers, buying and collecting serialised narratives. Comics creators' awareness of this audience (either in response or resistance) has affected the content of their work.

Although presented as a chronological narrative, this thesis is not a comprehensive history of Anglophone alternative comics, but centres on eight prominent authors/artists: Robert Crumb; Dave Sim; Lynda Barry; Julie Doucet; Alan Moore; the collaborative partnership of Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean; and Chris Ware. Whilst spanning a wide range of genres and themes (autobiography, fantasy, gothic horror, parody, soap opera, the grotesque and others) each confronts and negotiates with conventions regarding the representation of selfhood.

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