

CONCLUSION

The comics world has changed significantly over the past four years. When Matthew Pustz wrote *Comic Book Culture* in 1999, he discussed the direct market as the current dominant model of comic book retail. In his conclusion, he claimed that “[e]fforts to create a general public acceptance of comic books have been unsuccessful, leading to continued isolation and the continued creation of comic book culture by fans and professionals”.¹ In 2008, this is no longer really true. The market that Pustz describes has recently been supplemented, if not exactly usurped, by the “graphic novel” sections increasingly found in major bookshops such as Waterstones and Borders. These shops sell book-length comics, graphic novels and collected editions from both mainstream and alternative publishers, plus an ever-growing range of Japanese imports; they do not sell single issues of serial comics. Whilst statistics are hard to come by, it seems likely that the decline of the direct market and the corresponding rise of the graphic novel section have had some impact on the readership of comics, particularly with regard to its traditional gender imbalance. As was the case in the mid-twentieth-century newsstand market, it is now possible to come across a comic whilst shopping for something else – a magazine, say, or a language textbook, or a birthday card. There are undoubtedly disadvantages to this shift: bookshop staff are rarely as knowledgeable as the managers of specialist stores, and the sense of community found in comic book shops is seldom experienced in the graphic novel section. Furthermore, there is still a huge amount of material that is unlikely ever to be stocked by the mainstream shops. Truly independent comics, particularly self-published comics in unusual formats, rarely make it into major bookstores. Furthermore, as Warren Ellis recently lamented, if no one buys the single issues of a serial comic, the publishers are unlikely to risk producing a trade paperback in the first place.² Although the rise of the graphic novel section has helped to move certain comics out of the direct market ghetto, it is still the case that, as Tom Spurgeon put it, “if comic book shops didn’t exist, many of us would dream of a place where they did”.³

1 Pustz (1999) 210-11.

2 Ellis’s remarks were quoted by comics retailer Stephen Holland in his “Talking Shop” column for *Comics International* 203 (August 2007) 43.

3 Tom Spurgeon, “Why Comic Shops Still Matter, Or At Least Why They Should”. *The Comics Reporter*. 10th September 2007.

<<http://www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/briefings/commentary/10923/>>

The other major market change has been the growth of online booksellers, through which many comics can be purchased more easily, and often more cheaply, than in any bookshop or comics store. As I mentioned in my discussion of Dave McKean, Scott McCloud argued that in the future, comics would increasingly rely on digital media for their design, production and delivery.⁴ Although as I have suggested, alternative comics writers are often resistant to new methods of comics production, in terms of distribution McCloud has largely been proven right: the internet has had an incalculable impact on the availability of small press and alternative comics.⁵ Out-of-print titles, once extremely difficult if not impossible to track down, are easily found through second hand booksellers such as Alibris, Abebooks and Amazon. Given that much of Lynda Barry's work is currently out of print, for example, this thesis would not exist in its current form without the help of these resources. The impact of online booksellers upon high street retailers has been the subject of much discussion in the field of book history, but its impact on comics retail, and other changes in the comics retail market, are worthy of further research.⁶

In my introduction, I summarised the alternative comics form according to a definition that had been current since the 1990s, suggesting that in addition to distinctions of content and visual style, alternative comics tended to have low production values and a small circulation, being self-published or produced by small, independent publishers. In conclusion, it is necessary to raise a question mark over the continuing accuracy of this description. Not only has the retailing of alternative comics changed, but the circumstances under which comics are being published are changing rapidly as well. One significant development has been the increasing number of trade publishers producing comics: Random House's Pantheon/Jonathan Cape graphic novel imprint, for example, started in 2000 and is now publishing many of the biggest names in the business including Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, Daniel Clowes, Posy Simmonds, Marjane Satrapi and Ben Katchor. Throughout this thesis I have used the term "mainstream" to refer to publishers of popular action, adventure and crime comics such as DC and Marvel, but in a broader sense, Random House, in its size and dominance of the trade

4 McCloud (2000).

5 Tinker (2007).

6 The New York-based Book Industry Study Group produces regular publications on trends in the US book publishing industry, including studies of online retail and used book sales. On the British market, see Mintel, *Book Retailing* (London: Mintel International Group, 2007).

publishing market, is surely as mainstream as publishing gets. The broad division between “mainstream” and “alternative” has been helpful in the period covered by this thesis, but it is under strain, and may not be of use for much longer.

Arguably the most significant market change, in terms of its potential impact on the narrative content of future comics, has been in the changing age demographic of comics readership. A central point of this thesis has been the fact that most creators of alternative comics spent their childhoods reading comics, and more importantly, that they grew up defining themselves as comics readers and relating comic book narratives to their own lives. Alternative comics are full of references to superheroes and Disney characters, and the adult protagonists of these narratives are frequently preoccupied with their recollections of childhood. Many of the comics I have discussed describe the lives of children and adolescents teetering on the brink of adulthood, clumsily trying to define a sense of selfhood in a confusing and often hostile world. None of these comics, however, were written for a child readership. Children’s comics have been in steady decline since the 1970s, and, television spin-offs aside, there are now relatively few British or US comics aimed primarily at children.⁷ Twenty-first-century children are faced with a broad range of entertainment options: not only television and film but games consoles and web-based activities such as social networking sites compete to fill their spare time.⁸ It seems unlikely that these individuals will grow up with the strong sense of nostalgia about the comics form expressed by those comics writers and artists who grew up between the 1950s and 70s. As Bradford Wright notes, divisions between adult and youth cultural forms are collapsing in a culture that is “based largely on the perpetuation of adolescence.”⁹ If today’s British, US and Canadian children become comic book creators, there will be no reason for their work to continue in the same self-conscious, nostalgic, introspective tradition that I have discussed here. It would be foolish to fall back into the old clichés of “comics have grown up!”, but through the changing personal backgrounds of comics readers and producers, the medium is losing some of its historical ties with adolescent experience. This being

7 Imported comics are a different matter, and beyond the scope of this thesis: manga are becoming increasingly popular amongst young readers. See Paul Gravett, *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (London: Lawrence King, 2004) 155-6.

8 See Kirsten Drotner, ed. *International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture* (London: Sage, 2008).

9 Wright (200) 284.

so, I suggest that the period described by this thesis, from *Zap* #1 to the present day, is not merely a convenient, arbitrary forty year period but an era of comics history defined by a specific set of thematic concerns. Adult identity and its roots in childhood experience have been the predominant subjects of alternative comics since the late 1960s, but it is unlikely that this will remain the case throughout the twenty-first century.

2007 also marks the downturn of another tendency, namely the expression of anxiety about the status of the comics form. I have shown that from 1967 to the early twenty-first century, selfhood and its relation to the comic book medium have been dominant preoccupations in alternative comics. Numerous historical factors have led authors and artists not only to centre their narratives on questions of personal identity, but to return constantly to the question of what it means to tell such stories in comics form. For many, this question has centred on a pervasive feeling of discomfort about the cultural value of the comic book, an awareness that the comic was widely perceived to be a trashy, low brow, humiliating medium read primarily by men without girlfriends (as *The Simpsons'* Comic Book Guy puts it).¹⁰ I suggest, however, that if the current trend continues and alternative comics continue to become more highly respected, more widely read and less marginalised in the retail market and the popular imagination, then the dominance of identity struggles in these comics is likely to diminish. The anxieties that have for several decades attended the consumption of comic books by adults are likely to appear increasingly irrelevant. In my last chapter I identified a sense of strain in Chris Ware's impressively produced and highly successful books which emphasise the sad and marginalised nature of the comics reader and his or her chosen medium. It is possible that Ware marks the end of an era, a point beyond which lamentations about the humiliatingly low status of the comic book medium are no longer quite convincing. No medium is innocent; cinema and prose fiction have their historical baggage too. But today, it is possible to imagine a time when comics writers and artists will abandon their acute self-consciousness about the form itself, and the comic book, with all its strengths and weaknesses, will become a medium like any other.

10 "Husbands and Knives". *The Simpsons*. Dir. Nancy Kruse. FOX. November 18th 2007.