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A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY: COMICS AS THE SIGN OF POPULAR
CULTURE IN THE 20th CENTURY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY
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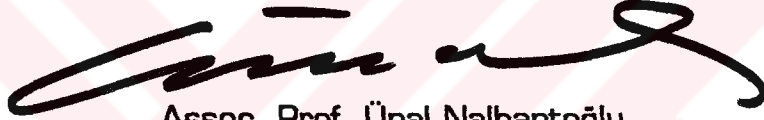
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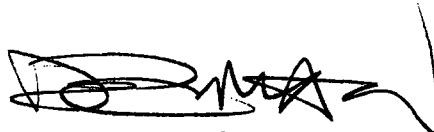
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ABSTRACT

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The intention of this study is to analyze the sociological structure of the comics within its relation to the social phenomena of the 20th century. Therefore, the concept of popular culture is taken as the key word that opens up the sociological formation of the modern -and even the post modern- man of the late 20th century. The evolution in the formal and conceptual structure of the comics throughout the century is also indicated eventually in this study. The main focusing point is on the genre of "super heroes" which fully indicates this evolution of comics up to this day.

Key Words: Comics, sociology, popular culture

ÖZET

SOSYOLOJİK BİR ÇALIŞMA: 20. YÜZYILDA POPÜLER KÜLTÜRÜN BİR GÖSTERGESİ OLARAK ÇIZGI ROMANLAR

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Grafik Tasarım Bölümü

Yüksek Lisans

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Bu çalışmanın amacı 20nci yüzyılın sosyal olgularıyla etkileşim halinde olan çizgi-romanların sosyolojik analizini yapmaktır. Popüler kültür bu çağın modern -hatta post modern- insanının sosyolojik formasyonunu açımlayan bir anahtar sözcük olarak alınmıştır. Aynı zamanda çizgi-romanın bu yüzyıl boyunca geçirdiđi biçimsel ve kavramsal evrim de tez boyunca sunulmuştur. Özellikle üzerinde durulan "genre" "süper-kahramanlar", çizgi-romanların geçirdiđi bu evrimi göstermesi nedeniyle üzerinde yoğunlaşımın noktalarından biridir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Çizgi-romanlar, sosyoloji, popüler kültür

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INTRODUCTION

This study aims to designate the role of comics in the 20th century popular culture through the sociological phenomena of the century. What have comics got to do with the everyday life of the 20th century modern man —and even post-modern man of the last decade?

Comics have the unifying role for the modern culture according to Goethe. He has decided that one of the few things that might work to unify modern culture was the comic strip, when he saw the picture novels of Rudolph Töppfer -the first name to be pronounced as one of the precedents of the comics.

The comic strip's connection to a Romantic dream of a universal language is very much related to the era that gave birth to a new philosophy: Modernity. The roots of that romantic dream goes down below to the days when humankind was welcoming a new religion. As stated in Bible, once humankind has only one big language that makes them live together, not satisfied with this, they tried to build up the Tower of Babel to reach to heaven and erase the differentiation between the language of humankind and God. From then on, it is one of the most sublime problematics of humankind to generate a common language to unify the culture to reach the romantic dream of eternal peace on earth.

Modernity has inherited this sacred mission from the Religion. Myths of the modern world have the potential to offer people this communication although they are dominating and overcoming the mind of the individual.

City of the 20th century inhabits all the Ancient Gods and heroes that live undercover as an ordinary man or woman. They pop out from the pages of comics

whenever a serious problem or a catastrophic disaster occurs in the city that disturbs the 'big machine' that runs the perfect system of the modern life. Super heroes emerged in the 1930's cities of the West.

Comics are not isolated and closed into itself. They are obviously interconnected with the other popular narrative forms such as folk stories, tales, myths, cinema, TV, computer games, etc. Narrative is another domain that employs comics, and it is another study to be dealt with.

Comics are the *hybridization* of different art forms and narrations. It is neither literature nor painting, but both, a form consisting both of them, amalgamated with each other.

To whom does it narrate something? Comics' intention was to make itself to be comprehended immediately by everyone, and without any exception originated from the literacy of the reader. Thus it coincides with the romantic dream of a universal language of Modernity.

It also made clear that the "high" and the "low" arts do not have so much differentiation by two recent exhibitions: "High & Low! Modern Art and Popular Culture, MoMA, New York, 1990" and "Art et Pub, Beaubourg, Paris, 1991" tried to indicate the symbiosis of these two formations; they are, in fact, not independent of each other.

1980s: The comics as the reporter on the street, trailing the hot interaction of the alternative cultural events: music, clubs, fashion, arts, dance, performances. Living inside this very active world, comics' artists record the daily life of the street culture. Punk and New wave magazines report the everyday life on the streets. Subcultures as commodity: Underground fanzines, punk inspired new wave fashion, music, arts magazines sell a new style. Graffiti and comics in the 80s have the resemblance both in form and content. Consumption of the images reached a

point where the consumption of the object is put aside and where the satisfaction is no longer from the object itself but from the image that signifies it.

"The End"ism, or the *fin de siècle*, effects the popular narrations of today intensively. Apocalyptic themes combined with the generic super hero themes comes as the attempts to deconstruct the narrative form of the comics in the 1980s.

Related terms for this thesis are as stated:

Comics are a form necessarily including the following elements: a narrative told by way of a sequence of pictures, a continuing cast of characters from one sequence to the next, and the inclusion of dialogue and/or text within the picture.

In this study "super hero" comics are focused on in two certain periods of this century, their genesis and revival. To compare and state out the results, main stream comics are examined as well as the underground examples. As a result, a concentration on the genre of super heroes and the divergent examples from the underground culture is taken in to account in this thesis.

Popular Culture, a term welcomed around the middle of this century, is used to define the cultural formation in the societies with the media including folk tales, myths, popular literature, advertising, cinema, TV, comics etc. It is usually tried to be ignored and looked upon by the elitist artists, intellectuals until recently. As it is settled, popular culture is not separable from the main cultural formation of a society.

Underground Culture is a term emerged about the end of the 1960s'. A rejection of the on going dominant ideology in popular culture is flourished as cinema, art, literature, comics, etc. in the years following the shaking years of that decade.

Problem:

The main concern of this thesis is to point out the mutual effecting of the society on comics and vice versa. For this particular reason the certain periods in this century are picked out to illuminate how social phenomena is interrelated with the contextual forms of the comics. Therefore the samples are also chosen to prescribe the debates stated for these periods.

Limitations:

In this study limitations are defined as the certain periods from the 20th century as the social phenomena and the genres of comics that are chosen as representatives. Super hero genre in comics' history is taken to be analyzed within the social structure of the periods that they belong to.

As for the overview:

The role of the comics in popular culture will be discussed in **2.1. The Role of Comics in Popular Culture**. This will be laid down in the following titles **2.2. 20th Century Phenomena in Relation with Comics** and **2.3. Super heroes of the Modern Life** and successively in the **3rd Chapter: Divergence: Attempts to Generate Alternative Comics as a Reaction from the Subcultural Movement**, focusing on these subjects: **1930s Super Heroes**, **Underground Comics**, **European Comics in 1980s**, **Revival of The Super Heroes in 1980s** and finally a look into the **Raw Magazine as the Sign of Self-Consciousness of the Comics in 1980s**.

COMICS AS THE SIGN OF POPULAR CULTURE IN

THE 20th CENTURY

2.1 The Role of Comics in Popular Culture

For the American audience, comic strips were clearly entertainment rather than news feature and played an important role not only in contributing to the economic viability of the newspaper but also to the development of middle class moral values and life styles as such, they functioned, in a manner very similar to advertising, in reinforcing certain codes and norms of behavior. In simplified terms (given the abbreviated format), comic strips defined good and evil, virtue and corruption, familial relationships, and appropriate social and business conduct. Through its standardized format, the comic strip or book was able to encode ideological claims and address a large public (*communication*) This form of entertainment can arguably be considered as ritual (*mass audience sports: like football, for instance*) -it was so popular and its structure so codified not only in terms of style but also of narrative. Anthropologists studying the practice of ritual have demonstrated that the rituals develop from defined belief systems and function to reinforce and perpetuate such beliefs. In order to accomplish this, rituals involve a high degree of prescription, extensive repetition, and widespread participation, all of which are also fundamental to the comic strip. Thus, while studies of comic strip have tended to regard them as entertaining reflections of American life and culture, their much more significant role in actively constructing ideologies must also be acknowledged.

Lichtenstein and Warhol painted single comic-strip frames, which makes it difficult to piece together a coherent narrative thread, despite the predictability of the comic-strip plot structures. Some of the comic-strips considered most

representative of American culture (and heavily exported) were products of Walt Disney Productions.

Lichtenstein, like Johns, was interested by the formal qualities of the medium. In particular, Lichtenstein was interested in the calculated simplicity and clarity of the form that was dictated by the requirements of the mass printing process. Stated the artist: "This [comic strip] technique is a perfect example of an industrial process that developed as a direct result of the need for inexpensive and quick color-printing. These printed symbols attain perfection in the hands of a commercial artist through the continuing idealization of the image made compatible with commercial artists through the continuing idealization of the image made compatible with commercial considerations. Each generation of illustrators makes modifications and reinforcements of these symbols, which then become part of the vocabulary of all. The result is an impersonal form.

Romance comic books centered on the ups and downs of the lives of young men and women. Roughly equivalent to the soap operas on television, they provided vicarious romance for thousands of (mostly female) readers.

While Lichtenstein's choice of subject matter ostensibly refers solely to a mass form of printed entertainment, it also addresses the significant social role of romance comics. Like television soap operas, these comic-book narratives served as the equivalent, in the realm of personal relationships, to the "how-to" and self-help books that were proliferating during this period. Due to the upheaval brought about by the changing nature of the American family and workplace-rising divorce rates, increasing numbers of single-parent families, and influx of women into the corporate workplace-traditional courtship patterns and interpersonal relationships no longer seemed appropriate. These comics, soap operas, and books outlined various contemporary situations that were then resolved and provided viewers with guidelines for acceptable behavior in this new era.

These comic books were instrumental in helping a mass audience deal with the constant changes that resulted from the upheaval in the social fabric of the American life-style, and Lichtenstein's depictions reinforce the ideas presented by monumentalizing them in painting. Warhol's war comic-book images function similarly, albeit in a different social arena.

Given the United States' involvement in the Korean War and subsequently the Vietnam conflict in the years shortly after the cessation of World War II, the predominance of war comic books was not simply expected, but to a degree, a necessity. There was a demonstrable need for a mechanism or apparatus that 'translated' this constant militarism and its underlying ideological basis into terms the average American could understand. Children (especially males) who had grown up with the legacy of world war would be called upon to fight in Vietnam, and aside from the footage and reports on the evening news, channels for dissemination of information on this level were limited. War comic books fulfilled this need. In a clear, narrative format, such comics provided a continual supply (since they were produced in serials) of military action. The heroes (always identified with the United States) invariably triumphed, and the enemies (usually presented as ethnically distinct) were always defeated. Through the reiteration of this standard plot line, the certitude of America's military position was reinforced, and the image of the country's opponents as evil, corrupt, and inferior was ingrained.

2.2. The 20th Century Phenomena in Relation with Comics

2.2.1. 1930's Super Heroes of the Modern Life

"And thus is born this weird figure of the dark... this avenger of evil... The Batman." Thus concluded "The Legend of Batman", a two page introduction that led off Batman #1 (Spring 1940). Though this story appeared less than a year after Batman's introduction in the opening pages of Detective Comics #27 (May 1939), the character had already become a myth, both a resonant signifier and a valuable property -the worlds second superhero. The first super hero, Superman, represented a calculated response to the Nazi concept of the *Übermensch* : an ideal, superior man who would lead the masses to victory. Created by two Jewish high-school companions from Cleveland, Ohio, Jerry Siegal and Joe Shuster, Superman first appeared in June 1938 in Action Comics #1. A native of Krypton, Superman was a uniquely American *Übermensch* with a social conscience. Discovering his super powers, he "decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind, and so was created Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!"

Superman's overnight success encouraged the character's owners, National Periodical Publications, to commission a similar character, Batman. The host of costumed super heroes following in the Batman's wake supplied clear evidence that the phenomenon of the super hero had arrived.

The Batman mythos springs from the popular culture of the 1930s' movies, pulps, comic strips, and newspaper headlines -in which both creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger were fully absorbed. According to Bob Kane, two movies contributed significantly to the formulation of the Batman character: In *The Mark of Zorro* (1920) Douglas Fairbanks starred as Zorro, a wealthy land owner who maintained

both an alter ego as a masked and caped crimefighter and a secret cave-hideout beneath his mansion. From this film came the Bruce Wayne-Wayne Manor/Batman-Batcave duality. *The Bat Whispers* (1930) featured a dual identity of a more schizophrenic nature: that of a detective and his alter ego, the murderer dubbed "The Bat", who dressed in a costume which inspired that of Batman. This film also featured a prototype of the Bat-signal.

Newspaper accounts headlining the exploits of real-life criminals and gangsters such as John Dillinger, "Pretty Boy" Floyd, Bonnie and Clyde, Al Capone, and "Dutch" Schultz, often served as the catalyst for these crafted fictions. Operating outside the law, on their own terms, and at the expense of the status quo, criminals fascinated many a consumer of popular culture. Creating a figure who, like the criminals, created outside the law and on his own terms, yet did so on behalf of the status quo, Kane and Finger originated a popular myth that has lasted for over fifty years.

As always, the social phenomena formed the genre to be generated. The economic crises and the rising crime rate during the 30s after the World War I, changed the common belief of the society. The dominant discourse felt itself in the need to present the genre of super heroes in order to guard the modern life in the cities. It is the city life that is blessed, though it is inhabited by the villains and the impotent cops, there is always a super hero that waits awake while you are in your sleep. City is always represented as a place where the gods live and the human beings have not so much to do about their destinies. As current Batman editor Dennis O'Neil said: "Gotham is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at 3 a.m., November 28 in a cold year. Metropolis is Manhattan between Fourteenth and One Hundred and Tenth Streets on the brightest, sunniest July day of the year". After the war the super hero titles decreased, the comic book industry relied to a greater extent upon other long-standing genres.

A number of super hero revivals are experienced up to this day, almost all of them coincides with the crisis periods lived in United States such as the Cold War and the Vietnam War.



DIVERGENCE: ATTEMPTS TO GENERATE ALTERNATIVE COMICS AS A REACTION FROM THE SUBCULTURAL MOVEMENTS

3.1. Underground Comix

'Underground comix', as they are presenting themselves on the fanzines, underground magazines of those days often cheap and low in printing quality but always agitating, generate their energies from the rebellions that shake the social, economic and cultural structure of the nations. In fact, this categorization of the comic strip, magazines, books published during the end of the 60s and very beginning of the 70s is not adequate to figure out the big turmoil that would shape up the treat of the publishers, readers and as well as the apprentice artists in the medium. In the mid-to late 60s, the generation that hid been infected by the precode (the strict enforcement of the Comics Code Authority, a powerful force until very recently, resulted in sanitized comic books divorced from any reality whatever) comic books came of age and gave birth to counterculture. The unrest of that times -combined with the development of short run web printing presses- led to the creation of alternative newspapers and, soon after, "underground" comic books. Economic motives were virtually absent; artist were making comics to please themselves more than the audience. For the first time, there was a comics avant-garde smashing formal and stylistic, as well as cultural and political, taboos.

The most influential of the underground artists, Robert Crumb, seemed to re-invent comic books. His fantasies were not mass-produced, pre-adolescent, super hero power fantasies, but rather, simply post-adolescent sex fantasies. His drawings synthesize many of the best stylistic elements of the past and his stories, often without punchlines, are quirky, personal and disturbing. His works effected not only the other cartoonists but the contemporary artists also. There was a

moment in the late 60s when Crumb's imagery was so omnipresent that, for many, it still remains difficult to separate his art from his moment: a generation found its bliss listening to the Grateful Dead's *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty* while reading Crumb comic. Crumb anatomized the counterculture at a moment when it had come to recognize itself as fundamentally unserious, or at least essentially impotent. The other artists are Art Spiegelman, Hernandez Brothers, Harvey Pekar, Clay Wilson, Rory Hayes and Justin Green mostly dealt with the psychotic and acid-induced works that gave bizarre, freaky flowers. Their work insulted omitted everything mostly the conventional narration. Most of the works simply do not tell a story, annihilate the elements of narrative that resulted as the frames existing individually not within a relationship in means of a sequential order. Narrative is the main structural element that shapes up the body of the comics forming the syntactic elements of its language, for this reason, annihilistic approach to the narrative can only be reacted as extreme point if research for a new narrative, a meta-narrative, that emerged in the 80s as it will be exemplified in preceding chapter.

3.2. European Comics in 1980s

Comics aren't 'comics' in Europe -they've blossomed and mutated into something else entirely: elegant, hard-back strip albums and smart, well-produced magazines for an adult readership. These found out years ago, and without the suspect respectability of being re-packaged as "graphic novels" or labeled "suggested for mature readers". The brand that so-called cultural guardians in the U.S. attack the very word "comics" -branding them as funny and strictly for kids- doesn't trouble Europe's three most progressive comics-producing nations, France, Spain and Italy, where comics are enjoyed by a mainstream adult audience. The French named them *BDs* or *bandes dessinées*, a clinical term for "designed strips"; Spanish comics, or *tebeos*, take their name from T.B.O., one of the founding

picture papers. The Italians read *fumetti*, literally "little smokes", their visualization of speech balloons. All these terms are free from prejudice and preconception, as open to interpretation and possibility as film or theatre. Today, this openness of style and subject is crossing the Atlantic and encouraging American creators to expand their expressive range. This migration is not a departure dated in eighties, rather it may be taken as the after effect of the 'underground comix' of 68 movements which are the alienated beings fallen to the terrain of comics which dominates the general discourse both in States and Europe. There's an irony in this migration, however, because so many of the developments in the comics medium in Europe can be traced directly back to innovations in America.

After Herge no other French-language comics artist has exerted as powerful an influence on Euro-comics as Moebius. He came from the classical tradition, illustrating the lush Wild West adventures of *Lieutenant Blueberry*, which he still draws under his real name of Jean Giraud. He released this persona, tentatively at first beginning in 1973 in short experimental stories. By 1975, in a new radical adult magazine, *Metal Hurlant*, he began to draw fantastic stories. His masterpieces were the strange, silent, dazzling colored *Arzach* and totally improvised, open-ended *Airtight Garage*. An aborted collaboration with filmmaker Alexandro Jodorowsky on designs for a film of *Dune* resulted in their joining together to craft new comics stories, notably the six-part *Incal* series featuring the bumbling hero John Difoof. Moebius was one of the first BD artists to make his name in America; first in the late 70s in *Heavy Metal* magazine, then in Epic Comics. Science fantasy is also the principle genre of another French bandes dessinateur, Enki Bilal, but his visions are in a much darker, somber vein. They reflect his upbringing in a war torn Eastern Europe (he was born in Belgrade). His absorption of the films of Tarkowsky and Zulawsky. In the 70s, Bilal made his name with several albums that were written by Pierre Christin, Lovecraftian allegories on terrorism and threats to the region's cultural identity, contemporary fables that mixed the fantastic and the political. With his *Gods in Chaos* album in 1980, Bilal

truly arrived as both writer and artist of this drama set in a decadent future where an Egyptian god borrows an Earthman's body. The same characters reappear in *The Woman Trap*, but that album's principal character is Jill Bioskop, a troubled journalist with chalk-white skin and blue lips and hair whose "scriptwalker" sends her reports back into past. A trail of death follows her from London's tribal street-wars to the ill-fated return of a space mission near Berlin. Bilal's brooding use of painted color -earthy, oppressive, sensuous, atmospheric- prompted director Alain Resnais to commission Bilal to design sets for his film *Life is a Bed of Roses*. Resnais advised Bilal as he directed his first film, *Bunker Palace Hotel*, shot in Moscow. Jacques Tardi, another French artist that prefers to work in black and white, was among the first BD auteurs to break from the conventional format of the albums, which were traditionally 48 pages in color. With the support from the publishers, Casterman, and their literary approach to the medium in their new monthly magazine *A Suivre* (To Be Continued), launched in 1978, Tardi and others could create true novels or BD romans that ran to whatever length their telling dictated.

The groundwork for these developments was laid by the underground comix in America in the late 60s. Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman led the way with a message that comics could be liberated, explicit, countercultural, individually expressive visually, and published by the artists for their own generation and not for children. Their message sounded a call across Europe. In the aftermath of the 1968 student uprising, the French intellectual Left was ready to take up comics as it had that other American artform, jazz, and give it status. In the French roster of the arts, BD was added as the "The Ninth Art". In other European countries, local artists emerged, responding to the underground propaganda. In Holland, it was Joost Swarte, who combined underground sensibilities with the classicism of Herge; in Belgium, the graphic stylist Ever Meulen, and in Britain, the madcap fantasist Hunt Emerson. Spain, however, was a late developer, as Franco's suffocating state censorship forced adult comics in that country truly

underground on threat of imprisoning the publishers. But after his death in 1975, a wealth of new magazines sprang up, foremost among them the no-holds-barred *El Vibora* (The Viper). Javier Mariscal became one of its key contributors, and since then has also been an active post modern designer also. In his works he brings Mediterranean warmth and exuberance, mixing and matching the Modernist influences of Kandinsky, Matisse and Klee with that of popular-culture icons like Disney, Steinberg and Michelin. His main characters, Fermin and Piker-Los Garriris, are second cousins twice removed old Krazy Kat and Mickey Mouse. Their days are filled with riding their vespa, picking up girls, and fishing with their dog, Julien, and no matter what happens, things always turn out for the best. Eternally optimistic, Mariscal's art teems with vitality and a feel for the 50s that remains timelessly fresh. In Italy Massimo Mattioli's refined style consisting of the American animated cartoons in *Pinky* as well as the American underground. He conjured up *Joe Galaxy*, a cocktail of sex, science-fiction and Saturday morning TV, and *Squeak the Mouse*, a surreal silent goretoon, in which a disparate tomcat is terrorized by a killer-zombie mouse. Mattioli's brash, brightly colored, almost liquid Expressionist productions echo George Romero's splatter movies and Russ Meyer's exploitation films, as well as the funny animal antics of animators Tex Avery and Chuck Jones. Lorenzo Mattotti came to comics from his training of architecture. In 1980, he formed the experimental Valvoline group with Igort, Carpinteri, Jori, and Brolli, later joined for a time by Mattioli and Charles Burns. *Fires* is claimed to be his masterpiece which is a work that opens up so many expressive possibilities for comics that its place is assured in the medium's history. The story tells about a naval officer's intense search for peace and a return to nature; we follow him from his opening thoughts on deck as he gazes at the blue ocean, to his possession by earth spirits, to the climax where he jumps into the sea as his ship explodes. To convey the story's powerful feelings and events, Mattotti adopts the vocabulary of fine art: for the crew's nightmares, the distortions of Expressionism; for the magical island, the warmth and abstract

colors of Post-Impressionism; for the light house, the enigmatic architecture of Edward Hopper. He uses few words, sensitively chosen and resonant, often allowing frames to breathe silently.

As it is conveyed from the brief summary of the 80s, comic book artists are combining many forms of arts and narratives together to achieve a hybrid form consisting the past, the present, the future together; telling stories which can be read as well as to be watched. They're not only artists of comics, designers and novelists also. They are *not* only themselves, but the old masters of art, comics and writers of those good old days. Thus the medium is not isolated from the other media; it is the hybridization of the arts, design, literature and media. As argued in the 3.3., the narrative structure of the comics is subject to change in the 80s towards a meta-narrative.



3.3. Revival of the Super Heroes in a New Vision

Humankind is fast approaching another *fin de siècle*. This French phrase is difficult to translate accurately into English, because it carries connotations of end of the century, end of an era, end of the world, and in this particular case, the end of the millennium. It also connotes the end of modernity conceived as the rationalistic child of the Enlightenment, and the movement into something that is vaguely called post modernism, the popular opinion that everything is relative and therefore as good (or bad) as anything else. (S. G. Mestrovic, *The Coming Fin de Siècle*. p.1)

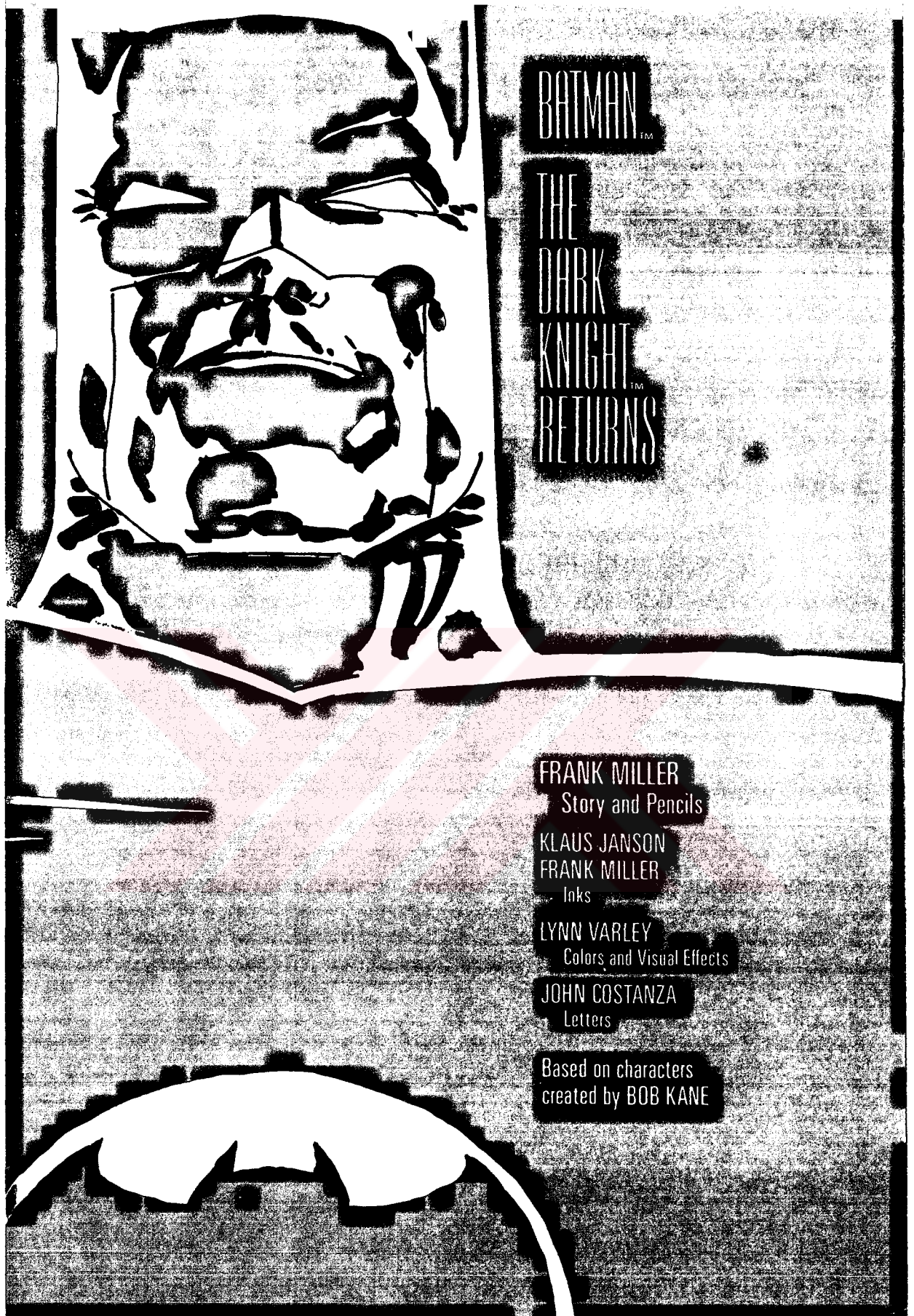
The coming *fin de siècle* made American popular culture of the 80s to regenerate super heroes of comics as they once did during the 30s. In those days Batman and Superman were the predecessors and the most well known ones among the others. Within the social context they have always been one of the "genre" patterns of the popular culture bearing the texts from the folk tales -verbal texts proceeded for centuries-, and the classical literature. Nietzsche's *Übermensch* text can be read under the text of Superman, where in Batman it is possible to differentiate the ongoing story of the "obsessed loner" through many classical texts, such as *Don Quijote*, *Zorro*, *The Lone Ranger*, etc. among many others.

These modern heroes of the modern life returned to be read over the older texts of super heroes, where the vertical intertextuality goes on with the new texts added upon them. There came the "hybridization" of the popular narrative, which drew attention on recent developments in narrative theory. They are no more the defenders of the modern world as they have their own problems to be fought for, and the world is no longer a 'land of hopes'.

If there is a single artist most identified with the revival in popularity of Batman it is without question Frank Miller. His 1986 graphic novel *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (fig. 1) not only made Bob Kane's 1939 creation once again the most popular comic book hero, but played a big role in the incredible blossoming in the 1980s of the comics industry. Inked and colored by Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley, *Dark Knight* offered a troubled, suicidal, alcoholic Bruce Wayne in his mid-fifties who tries to repress the urge to again put on his Batman person after a ten years retirement. The worsening scene (totally corrupting Gotham City, the world on the edge of a nuclear war, Joker released from the mental hospital) forces Batman to engage into one last fight, which is for the author, Miller is the "Great American Super hero story" a four part "opera" about the fall of the hero in a world that has rendered him obsolete. This book and the follow-up, *Batman: Year One*, became part of a general reevaluation of hero worship in comic book narrative.

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' mammoth graphic novel *Watchmen* (about a 1980s US very similar to our own where super heroes are an accepted part of the landscape with disastrous results), and Moore's *Miracleman* and *V for Vendetta*, use the super hero as a vehicle for challenging received notions of charismatic authority and leadership, among the driving strategies within the comic book renaissance. (C. Sharrett, *Batman and the twilight of the idols:...., The many lives of the Batman*)

The *fin de siècle* shapes up the scripts of the post modern super hero texts, such as the chaotic life in the cities ending with an apocalyptic, long-awaited disaster; a nuclear assault, a rise in the crime rate, a condemned plague for the human kind as it had been once in the Middle Ages.



BATMAN™

THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS™

FRANK MILLER
Story and Pencils

KLAUS JANSON
FRANK MILLER
Inks

LYNN VARLEY
Colors and Visual Effects

JOHN COSTANZA
Letters

Based on characters
created by BOB KANE

fig. 1 F. Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, DC Comics, 1986

The original excitement generated by Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* hasn't been sustained by the predictable slew of dodgy imitations, tired old vigilante noir nihilism and pastiche revamping of super hero mythology. (J. Mc Clellan, *Comics: Has the Bubble Burst*, *The Face* magazine)

The postmodernist mixing and borrowing of diverse themes from scattered contexts ensures that no one can ever distinguish fully the sinister from the benign themes. In responding to the popular media, we laugh at the same time that we are filled with horror. Much the same difficulty exists in everyday relationships among individuals.¹

The previous fin de siècle introduced a radically new conception of heroism: civilization and enlightenment became such heavy burdens that the ordinary person surviving an ordinary life became heroic. It is difficult to endure modernity! The next fin de siècle will only accentuate this new heroism. Stress is on everyone's lips, and stress is the modern person's road to Baudelaire's (1863) type of heroism. Again, the popular media refracts this modern theme in its typically unconscious way. For example, Batman, Superman, Mighty Mouse, and most fantasy heroes are heroes in the modern, not the classical sense of being Herculean. They all lead double lives of ordinary, humdrum existence (consider Clark Kent) contrasted with the secret life of superhuman powers. Contrary to Riesman's (1950) claim that comic book heroes do not permit identification, it seems that many

¹S. G. Mestrovic, *The Coming Fin de Siècle*. Routledge, 1991.

persons living in the coming fin de siècle can relate to the postmodern hero, because they feel that postmodernity requires something superhuman from them.

The incarnation of the mythical heroes reminds the statements of Barthes for the myths' being independent from time. Although they are contextually bound with the time implied in their 'texts', mythic heroes of the comics decontextualized the time notion and became immortal. They do not grow older passing through the decades or either they disappear at the end of an era and then incarnate in any other time with a new contextual being, as it is contemplated in the case of the super heroes' revival.

The recent popular narrative, with their increasing hyperconsciousness about both the history of popular culture and the shifting status of popular culture in the current context. Although it is so, "The hyperconsciousness of popular narrative in the eighties is not a matter of popular culture "suddenly" becoming self-reflexive"². The popular texts in the eighties reflect the force upon them which Umberto Eco calls them "the already said".

Jim Collins argues the "interestingness" of meta-semiotic cultures taking Umberto Eco's article "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage" into account for stating that Casablanca's and Batman's intertextual narration differs in means of "the already said". What differentiates one from the other for him is; Casablanca suggests the pastiche while Batman "reflects a meticulously constructed intertextual arena in which the text positions itself within its own invented array"*.

But Eco seriously underestimates the "interestingness" of meta-semiotic cultures, and his preference for the naivete of Casablanca (and its authors and audiences) seems like badly misplaced nostalgia that fails to specify when a

²J. Collins, "Batman: The Movie, Narrative: The Hyperconscious", The Many Lives of the Batman. Routledge, 1991.

semiotic sophistication somehow corrupted the innocent pleasures of popular culture. What Eco fails to pursue here is just when this semiotic nourishment began, or when audience became "instinctively" something other than they were before. (J. Collins, *The many lives of the Batman*)

The hyperconsciousness of contemporary popular narrative depends upon a simple narratization on the part of both the producer and the audience: popular culture has a history; earlier texts do not simply disappear or become kitsch, but persist in their original forms as well as diverse reactivations that continue to be source of fascination for audiences, providing pleasure in the present and forming a fundamental part of cultural memory. What characterizes the "meta-pop"³ texts of the eighties is their appeal to a body of popular texts which are now seen as inseparable from those cultural values since those texts have been the most forceful vehicles for their transmission and/or contestation.

The fascination for the antecedent/originary text is part of a complicated process that distinguishes meta-pop culture -the ad hoc construction of "traditions" within popular culture, operating outside the realm of the academy. So, thereby, what Jim Collins names as the "graphic matches"⁴ -which can be also named as the 'graphic intertextuality'- is observed in the graphic novels like *The Dark Knight Returns* or *Watchmen*. The narration by amalgamation is made heterogeneously by the inclusion not only of other visual discourses, but also entire range of non-visual discourses representing different articulations of super hero as cultural artifact.

Hybridization of the popular narratives, caused a response to the cultural terrain of comics, coming to us framed by different genres, different discursive frameworks, and the divergent ways of seeing puts forward the necessity to

³ibid.

⁴ibid.

reconsider the "genre" as a category of narrative. Genre depends on the relative stability of its distinctive characteristics that make possible its recognizability as a style for both the producers and consumers of these texts. Hybrid texts are aggressively destabilizing, retaining extremely familiar conventions, but juxtaposing them in ways that undermine the purity or integrity of genre as a category. Hybrid popular narrative are distinguished by their adoption of those well-known semantic units, deployed according to different syntactic strategies, more precisely these narratives adopts or appropriates diverse semantic units which, in the development of popular culture, are always encrusted with one or more sets of syntactic associations that are inseparable from those individual units. The composite splash page in *Dark Knight Returns* , where Batman races through the city on horseback, trailed by an army of street punks, not only combines different semantic elements, different types of iconography, but also juxtaposes divergent syntactic relationships between *heroism* and *villainy*, *civilization* and *savagery*, *order* and *disorder*, etc., investing those icons with such different semiotic and ideological values.{fig. 1}

The conception of "meta-syntax"⁵ generates with the hybridization's development of a second order syntax, setting new relationships between minimal units that are already arrays of the syntactic relationships. It can be presupposed from the simultaneity of the array on the structure of genre narrative, that: such a meta-syntax could be constructed out of the heterogeneous, ever-shifting, ever rearticulated "already said"; texts like *Dark Knight*, *Watchmen*, *Batman*, *Blade Runner*, etc., committed as ad hoc versions of meta-syntax, resist any kind of easy "re-gentrification", though they are composed entirely of generic material that remains clearly marked as such within these texts, their very hybrid nature works as a recognizable, coherent set of formulae that audiences may read predictively.

⁵ibid.

Therefore the hybrid popular narratives could be considered "post generic" as they resist syntactic stabilization, but are still composed of generic artifacts. These texts remain generic, but only if it is recognized that "genericity" is now a matter of *rearticulation* and *appropriation* of semiotic categories, no longer the ritual confirmation of deeply held community beliefs, nor the secret agenda of Hollywood as "dominant ideology". Genericity in this context is not a form of myth, but a feature of *hyperconscious discourse*, which might still be seen as myth, but only in "quotation marks", as the citation of the precedent texts rather than the innocent, direct expression of transcendent values. Texts like *Batman, The Movie, The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* featuring 'narration by amalgamation' suggest the emergence of a new type of narrative which is neither a *master narrative* that might function as a national myth for entire cultures, nor a *micro-narrative* that targets a specific subculture or a sharply delimited semiotic community. The popularity of these texts depends on their appeal not to a broad general audience, but series of audiences varying in degrees of sophistication and stored cultural knowledge (i.e. exposure and competence). As *aggregate narratives*, they appeal to unequal but often overlapping audiences, by presenting different incarnations of the super hero simultaneously, so that the text always comes trailing its intertexts and rearticulations. The significance of the super hero can be ascertained, only in terms of an encyclopedia rather than a dictionary, as an assemblage of intertextual representations rather than a set definition. The simultaneity of the array, then, produces a form of narrative which is itself an array of narrative and visual codes that tells the story of the super heroes, but also tells in the process the history of their cultural significance. The rearticulation of the already said, the ways in which narrative conventions are hybridized and forced to account for a quiet different terrain become another type of "action" that has become a central feature of popular entertainment. At this point, distinctions between the telling and the told, the narration and the narrative, the diegetic action the extra-diegetic intertextual references become not only difficult to make, but decidedly misleading.



fig. 2 F. Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, DC Comics, 1986.

In the hyperconscious narrative, the intertextual arena can no longer be confined to the realm of the extra-diegetic, nor can the conditions of the narrative's eventual circulation be considered somehow "outside" the text, and in the process narrative pleasure become a process of negotiating the array for both the creators and audiences of those texts.



3.4. "Read Yourself: RAW" magazine as the Sign of Self-Consciousness of Comics in 80s

In 1980, impressed by some of the work coming out of Europe, and distressed by the lack of forums for interesting comics in the U.S., Françoise Mouly and I began publishing RAW magazine. It introduced American readers some of the exciting new work from Europe and Japan, and presented work by new talents who had no place to show what were they up to. The intensity of the work and the deluxe, large sized format induced many who had been convinced that comics were only sub-literate trash that they ought to take another look. (A. Spiegelman, "Commix", Print Magazine, Nov/Dec 1988)

Edited by the cartoonist Art Spiegelman, a name well known from the underground magazines, and his wife Françoise Mouly, *RAW* (fig.3) included the work of the artists who had at least a foot in the gallery world, among them Sue Coe and Gary Panter, besides, new artists' works and extraordinary pieces from the anthology of comics. As Spiegelman stated, comics should be named as *commix* because of their mixing of the images and the text together. *RAW*'s new wave graphic design, distinctive tabloid format, and eight dollars price made it recognizable among the others. Spiegelman tried to make the comics to be treated as a new art form and succeeded in a way.

The selected works represent a new approach to the story telling tradition of the comics. Artists use the basic elements of the comics out of their conventions in order to experience new breakthroughs. The activation of the graphical layout of the page interacting with the elements of the comics evolves new meanings inserted into the narrative, not always enhancing it but sometimes intentionally weakening the direct relation between text and image to make the reader

RAW

CMix

LYNDA BARRY
NUCLEAR
FAMILY
EXPLODES AT
BARBECUE

SUE COE
PORKOPOLIS:
MEAT FOR
BEGINNERS

HENRY DARGER:
JANITOR
OR GENIUS?

JACQUES TARDI
DEATH WALKS
THROUGH
PARIS

BODDY ROGERS
BABE, SEX
SLAVE OF THE
CENTAURS

ART SPIEGELMAN



MAUS
NEW CHAPTER



REQUIRED READING FOR THE POST-LITERATE

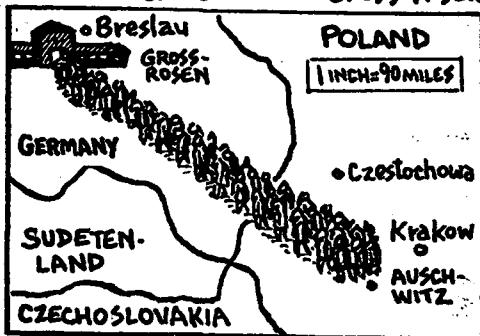
fig.3 RAW Magazine, Raw Books and Graphics, 1990.

experience new narrations. The styles belonging to different genre narrations are bound together to hybridize the narration to destroy the clichés.

Spiegelman published his own masterful *Maus*, in 1986, in RAW which runs for years, is a reconstruction of his father Vladek Spiegelman's life in Poland before and after the Holocaust. The first half of *Maus* took Spiegelman six years to complete, runs 150 pages, brings together his analytic skills, political conscience, and deeply-rooted human concerns. The foreground narrative of Vladek's family's attempt to survive the Holocaust is told in flashbacks, intercut with the present day narrative of the author interviewing with his father. So, while Vladek's story clearly dominates the book, the story of the son trying to draw out and come to terms with his father remains a major element in it. In both stories, we find human beings trying to overcome obstacles. For both father and son, it is a story of discovery. By interviewing his father, Spiegelman constantly faces a frustrating and problematic relationship; Vladek's story, of course, is one of deprivation, humiliation, and survival.

It is obvious that this story is one of the hundreds of novels, films, TV series, documents and even commercials that forms the meta-narrative of the Holocaust in the World War II done by Nazis. The reality had already been turned into a 'Big Story', somewhat neutralized, that can be recycled and reused over and over again. Spiegelman, aware of this handicap, experienced another way to form the reality. It is to Spiegelman's credit that the story unfolds so naturally and with such apparent ease that the reader is moderated into believing that there was no other way to tell the story. Spiegelman insistently reiterates the biographical nature of the narrative by shifting between past and present; thus he personalizes the horror of systematic genocide so that the experience becomes less abstract, less a matter of statistics, and more a matter of individual lives. Paradoxically, much of this effect is also achieved through a series of graphic abstractions. The most ingenious and most visible is the substitution of anthropomorphic animals for

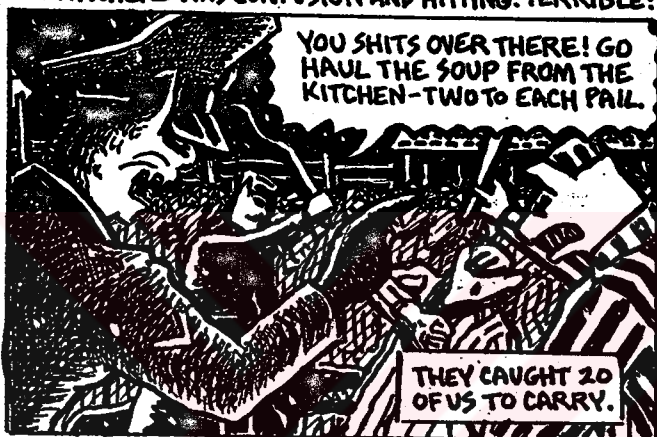
AND SO WE CAME OVER TO GROSS-ROSEN. HERE WAS A SMALL CAMP, WITH NO GAS.



IT WAS THOUSANDS OF PRISONERS FROM ALL AROUND BEING PULLED BACK INTO GERMANY.



EVERYWHERE WAS CONFUSION AND HITING. TERRIBLE!



THEY CAUGHT 20 OF US TO CARRY.



I GRABBED FAST A GUY WHAT WAS STILL STRONG LIKE ME.

MOST COULDN'T EVEN LIFT. THEY WERE WEAK FROM MARCHING AND NO FOOD.



BEHIND I HEARD YELLING AND SHOUTING. I DIDN'T LOOK.



WE GOT AN EXTRA PORTION SOUP FOR THIS. MOST WERE NOT LUCKY TO BE STILL STRONG.



fig. 4 A. Spiegelman, *Maus*, Raw Magazine, 1990

human characters. It is also mentionable that the deceptively simple, casual-looking line drawings, which gave the narrative the flavor of a diary. The treatment of the violence is surprising: In a scene where Nazis murder a child by smashing against the wall, the moment of impact is not shown, and even the resultant blood stain is obscured by a word balloon belonging to the father Vladek narrating the story to his son (fig. 4). The decision of Spiegelman not to charge more "realistic" drawing makes his narrative connote itself into the conscious of the reader in a way that combining the suggestiveness of prose with the instant clarity of images. Spiegelman shaped the narrative, defined the imagery, selected the panel to panel continuity and turned his father's story into art.

RAW Magazine, whose ever changing subtitles include *The Magazine for Postponed Suicides*, *The Magazine That Lost Its Faith In Nihilism* and *The Graphix Magazine of Abstract Depressionism*, reveals another alteration in the comics world: It is the end for the stories, thus the end for the generic narratives that shape the mainstream reader. A new obsession for the material, the comic book itself, compensates the need for buying comics for reading. Readers are now collecting the comics to satisfy their need for possessing the material that bear the images of comics and its history. The more diverse the styles and genres gathered together, the more satisfied is the consumer.

CONCLUSION

Comics are accepted to be the real signifiers of the popular culture for a hundred years time. It is interesting to observe that comics take part in the narrations of both the dominant and marginal cultures' which signifies that there never existed a real distinction between the high and low cultures, rather they are a 'big-discourse' where the kinds of narratives are shaped.

What Lichtenstein saw when he looked closely at the little dots is what we see when we look closely at the comics themselves: not fixed, repetitive imprisoning structure, but a mosaic of adaptable elements, an array of possibilities. If the comics provide a language, it is a language like any other: an all purpose code kept in play to say different things at different moments. (Adam Gopnik, High & Low, MoMA. 1990)

The belief to the meta-narratives dissolved, so the self-conscious comics artists and producers felt themselves to find out a way out from the crisis by the self deconstruction of the narratives exist in the comics world. It is conveyed that overcoming the narratives -the guards of the dominant discourse- is not possible by simply denying them as it is experienced by the underground comix.

Narratives insist on staying alive. A new medium for telling stories emerged, led by computers. There exists a culture, named as the "Game Culture". New popular heroes are born in the Games World, well known among the people who share this domain created by the generic games where all the generic narratives shifted from the other media towards them. While you are playing the game, you are in fact reading the text you have already been reading for years, in so many means of mass-media.

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