COMIC BOOK FANS:

PRODUCTIVITY, PARTICIPATION AND CREATIVITY

Submitted by Denis Keegan B.A. (Hons.) Communication Studies

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Luke Gibbons

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I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Masters degree (research) Communication Studies is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: David Keegan   ID No.: 92700641

Date: 25-9-00

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Abstract

Denis Keegan

<u>Comic Book Fans:</u>

<u>Productivity, Participation and Creativity</u>

This dissertation is an examination of the consumption practices, the criteria used for judging comic books and the use of comic books to create a social identity or habitus on the part of comic book fans. It also looks at how these fans use comic books as a resource or a starting point for their own creativity. To do this, I carried out a series of directed interviews over a period of more than two years in places where the fans would feel comfortable. The rationale behind this research was twofold: firstly, to place fans, and comic book fans in particular, within the context of general cultural consumption. Secondly, to test the validity of John Fiske's adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, as it relates to fans, through research. My results seem to contradict the notion that there is an essential difference between the consumption of popular culture and official culture and the cultural capital created therefrom. The comic book fans interviewed displayed a multiplicity of strategies and criteria to explain their tastes, including those of official culture and, crucially, a canon of work enunciated independently by the fans themselves. This leads to the conclusion that comic book fans, operating in the context of a decentred postmodern culture, are neither unusual nor abnormal in their creation of distinction. Instead, like all agents in postmodern culture, they use a variety of sophisticated and conscious decisions which mix productivity, participation and creativity in order to create a sense of identity which stems from the pleasure they derive from consuming comic books.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This study attempts to place comic books and comic book fans in the context of general cultural consumption. It may also be viewed as a riposte to the majority of critical attention that has periodically been paid to comic books: it is not a discussion of the merits or demerits of comic books, nor is it a profile of the effects of comic books on comic book fans. This study does not carry out a content analysis of comic books, rather it examines fan discrimination and the development of a canon of creators and titles. This study does not investigate the relationship between the overwhelmingly male audience for comic books and the power/body fantasies so prevalent in comic books, but it does consider how narrowcasting has led to a self-referential language in comic books, which is filled with parody, pastiche and repetition.

This study differs from the majority of analyses of comic books and their audience because it concentrates on the creation of distinction by comic book fans, examining how they view comic books, from the inside, rather than applying theory from outside to 'explain' comic books. In *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics,* Martin Barker gives an extended exposition of how and why comic books and comic book readers, and by extension popular culture as a whole, have been ill-served by commentators. The problem, as Barker correctly states, is that most commentators turn their attention towards a particular facet of popular culture, analyse it based upon their pre-existing theories and fail to see textual subtleties and to differentiate between texts. This would be similar to lumping *Saving Private Ryan* together with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* because both contain scenes of graphic violence and dismemberment, or failing to see the difference in

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intent and effect of the nudity contained in *Blue Velvet* and *Showgirls*. Many commentators also fail to consider the ability of the audience for popular culture to distinguish between different texts. This study attempts to counteract the misrepresentation of popular culture and its fans caused by such simplification.

I have based my research on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction within fields, creating cultural capital. This study is explicitly based upon subjecting John Fiske's adaptation of Bourdieu's concept to accommodate fans, put forward in *The Cultural economy of Fandom* (in Lewis, L., 1992), to scrutiny through research. I wanted to see if Fiske's assertion that fan discrimination and creativity formed a 'shadow cultural economy' (ibid., p. 30) which operated alongside (and occasionally intersected with) the official cultural economy. My original thesis was that fans, and comic book fans in particular, through this shadow cultural economy, were involved in a semiotic guerrilla warfare, following a neo-gramscian oppositional approach to popular culture. What I found was more complex. I found distinction to be crucial to fans in ways that could not fit easily into a hegemonic or oppositional model.

The interviewees in this study failed to constrain themselves within the boundaries of an oppositional stance, showing themselves unwilling to associate themselves with other comic book fans and using a multiplicity of strategies and criteria to explain their tastes. This led me to question the idea of the popular and to ponder it in relation to alienation and seriality (Chapter One: *The Popular and The Individual*). Following on from this, it was essential to place comic books and comic book fans within an understandable context. Thus, Chapter Two gives a history of comic books which, in trying to explain the development of the medium, of formats and of the audience for comic books, cannot claim

to be comprehensive but does discuss most major changes. Chapter Three strives to give a snapshot of the industry and the audience for comic books as it is at present and gives weight to this study's claim of representativeness. In Chapter Four, I have attempted an exposition of Bourdieu's theory of distinction within fields, showing how it related to notions of agency and structure. I also introduce other approaches to cultural production and consumption, in particular in a postmodern context.

Chapters Five and Six are based upon the findings of my research and concentrate upon form and discrimination (Chapter Five) and productivity, capital and pleasure (Chapter Six). These two chapters are constructed with the aim of giving a fair representation of the fans' creation of habitus, of the criteria they use to appreciate (and more importantly) reject texts, creators and practices.

This study challenges the notion that popular culture can be reduced to a simplistic oppositional stance or that culture can be reduced to a dichotomy between official and popular culture. Furthermore, I have striven to show that postmodernism is not the result of a collapse of theory or distinction but rather due to a multiplicity of criteria and strategies, showing both creativity and discrimination. The subjects of this study do not read comic books because they have no other choices, but rather as a result of a variety of sophisticated and conscious decisions which give them pleasure and a sense of identity.

CHAPTER ONE

The Popular and the Individual

The Popular and the Individual

Introduction

Because comic books are a form of popular cultural artefact, it is necessary to discuss the emergence and development of the popular culture/official culture dichotomy. As this dichotomy has always been, and remains, a site of politically impelled discussion, it would be impossible to do more than introduce certain points of view. This chapter strives to show how these different points of view have informed this study, and as such, it revolves around my engagement with these different schools of thought. My argument is necessarily partial but should make explicit my position in relation to the findings of this study. In order to contextualise the popular culture/official culture distinction, this chapter also addresses some notions of the individual and society in the growth and development of capitalism and how these ideas have been treated, and have changed, in the works of writers like Marx, Gramsci, the British Culturalists and the Structuralists amongst others.

The concept of alienation is crucial to my understanding of the individual agent's place in society, as I feel it is extremely informative in relation to the position in which comic book fans find themselves. Popular culture is usually approached from a viewpoint that takes for granted its oppositional stance, but if the individual in a capitalist society is alienated from themselves, from their 'species being', then any oppositional activity by the individual is as much concerned with a reclamation of their own humanity as it is with battling a dominant ideology. Again, my reading of the texts discussed is shaped by the results of the research of this study, and, as a result, is hardly neutral.

The Emergence of Popular Culture

If one takes Johann Gottfried Herder as the originator of the distinction between 'learned culture' and 'popular culture', one must consider that Herder formed this dichotomy in the late eighteenth century, approximately contemporaeneously with the so-called 'industrial revolution' and the rise of democracy through the French and American revolutions. Thus, the distinction had from the start both aesthetic and political implications. Furthermore, this period saw the increasing commodification of culture, as it became divorced from the royal court and developed new sites (theatres, opera houses, clubs and coffee houses) for reception and new means for distribution. The phenomenal success of novels like *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson (a printer who printed and marketed his own work and that of others) forefronted the distinction between the *amateur*, the lover of the arts, and the professional creator whose position was compromised by "sullying good taste with foul mammon" (Brewer, J., 1997, p. 92).

The new commodified cultural artefacts were met with suspicion in a millieu strongly influenced by Addison and Steele's promotion of 'politeness' in *The Spectator* (1711-12), with their rejection of the libertinism of the court after The Reformation. Polite society was deeply committed to 'the pleasures of the imagination, as opposed to the 'sensual' and 'voluptuous' pleasures of the body, with which the new popular texts were associated. Thus, popular culture was caught up in the question of taste which will be discussed in relation to the work of Pierre Bourdieu in Chapter Three. What is important to this discussion is that the popular was from the start denigrated and seen as dangerous.

Politically, popular culture was associated with demagocic notions of nationhood and the emerging expression of 'folk' cultures. Both 'nationhood' and 'folk' culture were

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projects that were enunciated and developed through popular culture and were neither neutral nor transparent concepts: "Aesthetically, popular culture was related to the romantic rejection of classicism's "excessively formalistic, dry and unemotional art"" (Mc Guigan, J., 1992, p.10). This has meant that popular culture has from the outset been seen and defined in opposition to an academic and thoroughly aesthetized high culture and has thus been associated with a variety of oppositional stances. This foregrounding of popular opposition has informed all the work of the British Culturalists as will be discussed below. For example, E.P. Thompson, author of *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) expressed his position thus:

> ... I think that an immense amount of existing historiography, certainly in Britain, has seen society within the expectations, the self-image, the apologetics, of a ruling class: "the propaganda of the victors". Hence, to recover an alternative history often involves a polemic against an established ideology.
> (quoted in interview, Abelove et al (eds.), 1983, p.8)

Thompson's perspective is based upon a marxist foundation. I will not attempt to summarise Marx's work (beyond his writings on alienation which will be discussed later in this chapter), but merely descibe the context in which he produced. By the middle of the nineteenth century, when Marx was active, the ideology and structures of capitalism had become dominant. It was the period most commonly defined as industrial or organized capitalism. Marx's historicism and economic determinism was thus informed by the organized and self-serving nature of the bourgeoisie. Also, to refer again to E.P. Thompson, a working class had been created and was beginning to achieve self-awareness and its own self-serving organizations, such as trade unions.

The Emergence of 'The People'

In effect, one had created 'the people' who would become the focus of popular culture and politics. Marx's concern with bettering the plight of the proletariat ('the people') through the overthrowal of capitalism was the basis of his moral philosophy which has since guided cultural studies. Put simply, 'the people' and 'the popular' were excluded from polite society and hence they had a vested interest in legitimising their taste. In order to achieve this, it was first necessary to write a history which was 'for' 'the people'. The notion of an 'alternative history' to incorporate 'the people' was influenced by William Morris' socialism and also by Richard Hoggart's view of culture as the reception and recreation of shared meanings (Hoggart, R., 1957). This was further shaped by Raymond William's concentration on the location of cultural struggles within specific material conditions of existence in *Culture and Society* (1958).

Thus, Cultural Studies in Britain developed as a means of understanding 'the people's'' place in the drawing of borders by the symbolically powerful between 'official' and 'unofficial' cultures (Mikhail Bakhtin, 1984). Similarly, Stuart Hall has written that Culturalism "... insisted, correctly on the affirmative moment of the development of conscious struggle and organisation as a necessary element in the analysis of history, ideology and consciousness." (Hall, S., 1981, p.33). The British culturalists have involved themselves in a "politically impelled engagement with popular culture" (Mc Guigan, J., 1992, p.12) which sees 'the people' as an identifiable, sometimes organized body with historically based projects. This has meant that the British Culturalists' approach to popular culture, characterised by a Gramscian emphasis on hegemony and its emphasis on a constant struggle between the dominant and the subordinate to assert their 'meaning', to

validate their ideology, can often appear to ignore aesthetic questions in relation to popular culture. One could almost assert that the Culturalists see anything that is 'popular' as being of worth purely because 'the people' like it. As a result, the Culturalists pay insufficient to the criteria of taste which 'the people' use to choose between texts.

David Harris, a British critical theorist makes a thought-provoking argument in an attempt to show how Gramscianists have used selected examples to 'carry the burden of the argument' (Harris, D., 1992, p. 152) which privileges the concept of 'struggle' and the view of 'the people' as a source of symbolic resistance for politically impelled reasons. Harris refers to unit four of the Open University course U205, in which Golby and Purdue challenge the Gramscian 'preferred reading' of the elements of popular culture in Victorian Britain. Summarising their argument, Harris notes:

> The concept of hegemony serves oddly to explain a non-event, and a non-appearance, and this predisposes Gramscians to look for class determinants instead of, or behind, patterns of consent between the classes, to devalue what the classes had in common - liberal politics, religion, an interest in respectability...
> (Harris, D., 1992, p. 153)

He later characterises Gramscianism as a 'noble savage' approach to popular culture, as a 'well-meaning but patronising gaze' (ibid., p. 197). Again, popular culture is not important in and of itself, but for what it stands for (and what it opposes or disregards). I believe it is essential to step back from viewing popular culture in relation to 'the people' and to incorporate the role of the individual an agent within society.

The Individual as Social Atom

The shift towards humanism that was crucial to the Renaissance and formed the basis for the Enlightenment's further valorization of the single individual man has had a

lasting effect on Western culture. It is still intact in many ways and is normally seen as being 'natural' and self-evident. The struggle to establish these beliefs as anything other than heresy and vanity has been forgotten or disregarded in the same manner as Newton's alchemical experiments and bouts of lead-induced insanity.

The Cartesian theory of the duality of mind and body gave birth to the notion of the Cogito, the individual thinking subject. The highly positivistic and rationalist philosophy of the Enlightenment, combined with the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on the individual, gave rise to the modern concept of the self as an individual and sovereign subjective entity. This concept of the self was the cornerstone of the political philosophy of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Mill, and was intimately connected to the right of the individual to accumulate and protect capital and property. This modern concept of the sovereign individual emerged contemporaneously with, and abbetted, the institutionalization of capitalism.

What is crucial to this thesis is that the modern concept of the individual was highly atomistic. Society was the result of a loose social contract (Rousseau) between sovereign individuals and a small, and ideally impotent, state. Such a concept of the self, and consequently of society, precluded any notion of 'the people'. Many commentators have approached this position of the individual in society through the concept of 'alienation'.

Alienation

In order to explain Hegel's notion of 'alienation', it is necessary to first discuss his notion of freedom, put forward in *The Philosophy of Right*. Hegel's 'concrete concept' of freedom attempts to reconcile the discord within the self and between the

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self and society (alienation). Hegel sees the self as inextricably linked to the complex fabric of socio-political and cultural relations, thus, the ultimate consequence of this understanding of the self is the complete equation of true personal freedom with political liberty. Because the individual can only become self-conscious within society, and if that society is based upon reason, in other words, if the society works for the common good and not the interests of a minority, then the individual can be free. However, Hegel's conception of freedom entails responsibility to society, rather than the Kantian view of freedom as acting according to what one thinks is morally right: man is a social animal (ref. Aristotle, The Politics) and can only avoid alienation by acting for the common good.

Hegel's extremely optimistic view of human nature had a great deal of influence on Marx, although Marx's attention was focussed on the perniciousness of capitalism and explaining it as an historically specific way of organising society which could be changed by revolution. Nonetheless, Marx was also a utopian with the same deep belief in society and the state as Hegel (if a rational communist state were achieved).

Marx's 1844 Manuscripts

Marx's work was focussed mainly on the processes of production and the relations between labour and employers therein. He examined both the objective relations and the ideological framework prevalent in industrial capitalism. Marx's writings strove to be both scientific and philosophical and have been criticized for this admixture of the two. For Marx though, the objective relations were inseparable from the ideological relations. Through the notion of 'alienation' Marx exposed how ideology and the objective relations

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of production could work in tandem to propagate, maintain and naturalize the historically derived conditions and ideals of capitalism: to Marx ideology was an intentional 'false consciousness'. In the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx identified three strains of alienation which complemented each other and left the workers ('the people') in a subordinate position. These were: objectification, estrangement and alienation from 'species being'.

The first of these, objectification, revolved around the legal position of the workers in relation to the things they made. Through objectification the goods produced became 'commodities' which were to be made and sold for their 'surplus value'. These 'commodities' were the property of the employer and in fact had to be bought by the workers exactly like any other purchasers, thereby paying a part of their wages back to their employers. Previously, most goods had been made by tradesmen or craftworkers who owned what they made and could use it for their own benefit or sell or trade it as they wished. Thus the workers became alienated from the things they made and could no longer control them.

The second strand, estrangement, came from the wedge pushed between workers in the production process due to the competition for paid work. It also distanced the workers from the employers (and their representatives) because of the ever-present threat of redundancy and the control of income levels. 'Estrangement' was a result of 'forced labour' which was a means to satisfy the external need of survival:

> What, then, constitutes the alienation of labour ? ... the fact that labour is external to the worker, i.e. it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.
> (Marx, K., 1959, p.72)

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The third type, that of alienation from 'species being' was based on Marx's concept of humanity's unique ability (as an animal) to envisage a 'conscious life-activity'. This was crucial to Marx's conception of humans as being essentially creative beings:

> Man is a species being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species as his object ... but also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a universal and therefore free being...
> (ibid, p.74-75)

The stripping or constraining of the workers' creativity (and hence humanity) was capitalism's most pernicious ideological coup and spelled defeat and enslavement for the workers even when they are not working:

> ... man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions - eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and his dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal. Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are also genuinely human functions. But in the abstraction which separates them from the sphere of all other human activity and turns them into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal.
> (ibid, p.73)

While some commentators claim that capitalism has undergone changes so radical since the last century (with both production and consumption growing surely beyond Marx's wildest expectations) that it has experienced both a qualitative and quantitative change (Bocock, R., 1993, Chapter 1), Marx's analysis of the alienation of the workers is still extremely useful. It would seem that it is precisely this alienation of the workers from each other that impels the Culturalists to foreground the importance of popular culture and its supposed power to give 'the people' a means to resist the hegemony of the dominant. However, writers such as Sartre throw serious doubt on the possibility of 'the people' working in concert, as will be shown below.

Seriality, The Practico-Inert and Scarcity

In *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre, J-P., 1976), Sartre attempts to explain subjectivity in relation to marxism (Aronson, R., 1980, p.244) basing his analysis on two concepts: 'scarcity' and the 'practico-inert' (ibid, p.245). Scarcity is based on the fact that there is never enough food, enough space etc. for everyone, and hence, even friends may be seen as the Other, who may take what we want. As such, scarcity is for Sartre a fundamental determinant of our relations with matter/the world and with other people: "scarcity must be seen as that which makes us into *these* individuals producing *this* particular History" (Sartre, J-P., 1976, p. 123). While Sartre sees scarcity as the source of *praxis* (practical activity), Aronson characterises it as 'the principle of negativity in history' (Aronson, R., 1980, p.253) and is the basis of the *Critique's* failure in his view to explain man's relation with society and Sartre's inability to transcend the pessimism of Being and Nothingness (ibid., p. 262).

However, one may take Sartre's ideas as an attack on the alienation or the 'common alterity' (Sartre, J-P., 1976, p. 260) of the individual in a capitalist society (as a result of praxis). Thus, Jameson describes this 'seriality' as 'a basic social mechanism' (Jameson, F., 1971, p. 248), whereby "Everyone is the same as the Others in so far as he is Other than himself" (Sartre, J-P., 1976, p. 260). Sartre explains this via the analogy of people standing in a bus queue: they are in a series, but not a group, which implies 'isolation and at the same time profound uniformity with everyone else' (Jameson, F., 1971, p. 248), and furthermore, this isolation 'presupposes a structure of reciprocity at every level' (Sartre, J-P., 1976, P. 258). This reciprocity implies that this isolation is as a result of a conscious decision on the part of the members of the series, that it is '*actually* lived in everyone's project' (ibid., p.

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256). Further, Sartre contends that the intensity of isolation 'expresses *the degree of massification* of the social ensemble' (ibid., p. 257). In other words, Hell is still other people for Sartre: alienation is unavoidable. Whereas Hegel envisioned society/the state as defined by a progess towards Absolute Spirit, Sartre saw society as the inevitable progress towards the 'practico-inert' via individual praxis. In the second volume of the *Critique,* Sartre explains this process using the example of the Soviet Union: serial individuals come together in opposition to an adversary, then, when the adversary has been defeated, the group turns inward to protect against possible defectors; functions are assigned and the group becomes an organisation, which becomes an institution, which uses inertia to preserve itself and returns its members to a serial state, and all 'without ever leaving the domain of intentional human activity, the domain of *praxis*' (Aronson, R., 1980, p.252). As such, Sartre's conception of society sees alienation as unavoidable, as opposed to Marx and Hegel's utopian views of a rational society operating for the good of all. Sartre's view of a 'serialized' subculture in society has great relevance to our understanding of the readership of comics, and the unwillingness of individuals with similar interests to act as a unit.

Alienation in Everyday Life

Another roughly contemporaneous view of alienation is provided by Lefebvre in *The Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. 1.* Lefebvre attempted to explain how capitalism not only alienated the worker at work, but throughout every part of her life, stressing the necessity to consider the mundane as well as the momentous, because 'Man must be everyday, or he will not be at all' (Lefebvre, H., 1991). For Lefebvre, capitalism conspired to alienate at all levels and to create a society wherein 'modern man finds himself ever

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more on his own and defenceless' (ibid., p. 248) which is shown most tellingly in the relationship Lefebvre outlines between work and leisure.

Leisure is characterised as part of a vicious circle where individuals work to earn their leisure, for one purpose only: to get away from work (ibid., p. 40). As a result, leisure becomes distrustful of the educational and of any kind of obligation: it must give the individual a 'break', and is therefore concerned with '*distraction, entertainment* and *repose*' (ibid., p. 33). Thus in a capitalist society, leisure is equally as alienating as work, as both conspire to atomize the individual, leaving her with merely the chance to escape into what Lefebvre calls 'the vast domain of the illusory reverse image', eg. fictions in response to the real need for happiness (ibid., p. 35). These fictions revolve around entertainment, modern appliances and gadgets which offer the individual comfort and distraction but in fact tie them to a system of desires which cannot be fulfilled and deny their power to act or to change the quality of their lives. Again, this will be of relevance to our understanding of comics as escapist or imaginative commodities. It is also important because the individual uses leisure as a means of not thinking, of escaping the everyday grind of life and work and hence, makes the use of leisure or of popular culture as a site of resistance extremely unlikely, despite the Culturalists's claims.

Subsumption

In *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, Adorno and Horkheimer make a similar argument to Lefebvre's: 'Pleasure promotes the resignation which it ought to help to forget' (Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M., 1979, p. 142). Their conception of the culture industry is formed by their view that capitalism is founded upon

enlightened reason which bases rationality and understanding on the 'subsumption of the particular under the universal' (Bernstein, J. M., introduction to Adorno, T., 1991, p.4). As a result of this subsumption, reason has become its own end, allowing science and society to operate in ways which only serve to atomize and alienate individuals (Lyotard, J.F., in During, S. (ed.), 1993, in relation to postmodernism). This has led to profit coming before the satisfaction of human needs and desires, the domination of use-value by exchange-value in capitalism. In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse also refers to the vicious circle of work and leisure and explains how the culture industry promotes its products to the detriment of what he calls 'affirmative culture' and what Horkheimer describes as 'authentic culture', which they see as offering an escape from the escapist but manipulative products of mass culture:

> The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood ... it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life - much   better than before - and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change.
> (Marcuse, H., quoted in Storey, J. , 1993, p. 103)

According to critical theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, mass culture, produced by the culture industry for profit, is pernicious because it denies 'the cognition of ends and of sensuous particulars' (Bernstein, J.M., Introduction to Adorno, T., 1991, p. 6). In other words, it is a distraction from the individual's potentiality and a means of maintaining the status quo. They obscure truth by arousing desires which will never be fulfilled (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979, p. 141). One may explain their critique of mass culture by referring to Hegel's conception of art as a particular historical community's way of expressing the absolute/the divine in sensuous form:

> It is in works of art that nations have deposited the profoundest intuitions and ideas of their hearts; and fine art is frequently the key - with many nations there is no other - to the understanding of their wisdom and of their religion.
> (Hegel, G.W.F., 1993, p. 9)

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In this light, one may ask what truth is being expressed in mass culture? The Culturalists assert that popular culture is used by 'the people' to assert their own wisdom and intuitions (ref. Hoggart R., 1957 and his descriptions of forms and practices in areas such as Hunslet, Ancoats and the Hessle Road). However, comic books, along with most popular cultural artefacts are industrially produced commodities, rather than products of a local culture; they belong to a 'mediated' culture, rather than a 'situated' culture. One may also assert that popular culture and official culture (in capitalist societies) are so intensely focussed on individual action, on the hero standing alone against seemingly insuperable obstacles (and superheroes are so closely associated for many with comic books), that aligning oneself with 'the people' runs counter to the intuitions and wisdom shown via cultural artefacts. In capitalist societies, individualism has been promoted and naturalised precisely to preclude the possibility of 'the people' working together.

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault gives a very readable and yet disconcerting description of the infiltration of what he calls 'the disciplines' into the fabric of society (Foucault, M., 1979, Part three). By incorporation, Foucault means the control of the body from within, and this was achieved by a process of hierarchization and individuation which promoted a highly structured pedagogy. Thus, education, progress and success was based on continual examination by which each individual was seen to be at a different level. Hence, each individual's sense of uniqueness was based upon an imposed hierarchical structure; power was internalised. This self-discipline led to what Foucault called 'Panopticism' (ibid., Part three, chapt. 3) wherein all were visible and hence afraid to transgress in case they were being watched. The mere idea that one may be watched, the

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internalization of surveillance, has as much control over the individual as actually being watched (ref. Bentham's Panopticon).

Conclusion

On examining the relationship between the popular and the individual, one may assert that notions of 'the people', approached within the context of the dominant/subordinate distinction are reductive and fail to describe the complexity of human activity, because they strive to place individuals via a politically impelled either/or categorisation which fails to accomodate the multi-faceted either/and nature of human activity. By constantly stressing struggles and down-playing alienation as a separating force in society, the British Culturalists tend to overestimate communal resistance. In modern society it is equally likely for an individual to resist association with any community than to join one. By concentrating on 'the people', the Culturalists ignore the importance of differentiation, which is central to Chapter Three, and fail to explain the variety of consumption patterns and the urge towards self-expression that characterises both polpular and official culture. The different theories of alienation outlined above are far more persuasive because, for all their anomie, they describe the conditions that would force individuals to assert their uniqueness as forcefully as the subjects of this study do in Chapters Four and Five.

CHAPTER TWO

A History of Comic Books

Introduction

In order to explain the development of comic books and their audience, one must examine the history of the medium, paying attention to the modes of production and consumption of these comics. Like all media, comic books had their antecedents which shaped both their style and content and the way they are produced and consumed. Levels of literacy, printing technology and market forces were crucial in shaping these proto-comics and in the development of today's comics market.

The history attempted in this chapter will encompass a description of how comic books developed out of various sources, dwelling on the importance of magazines and newspaper comic-strips to the nature of the medium. It will also describe the emergence of the first recognisable comic books and how these led to the first 'golden age' of comic books in the late nineteen-thirties and early nineteen-forties. The period following this initial success for the comic book may be seen as being probably the most crucial in forming the present state of the comics industry: the persecution of comic book publishers in the nineteen-fifties and the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 altered both the circumstances of production and the audience for comics in ways that are still evident. The history of comic books in the wake of *Seduction of the Innocent* is inextricably linked to the emergence of fan culture, and the factors shaping this will also be discussed at length. Finally, recent developments in the comic book industry will be described with reference to how they relate to comic book fans in Britain and Ireland. If this history is almost entirely concerned with American comics, that is because Irish comics fandom is overwhelmingly involved with American comics and has followed the patterns of American fandom.

Pre-history

One could argue that the Elgin marbles, Irish 'Celtic' crosses or the Bayeux tapestry were created in a comics form: both involved narrative and used sequential images for the exposition of their narratives (the Bayeux tapestry also mixed text with the visual element). Later, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, execution broadsheets were popular at public executions. They encapsulated the deeds of the condemned villain in one-page comic strips, making it possible, for both the illiterate and the minority that could read, to understand the reasons for the criminal's punishment. Also, they were violent and lurid in order to entertain, while claiming protection from moral censure by masquerading as cautionary tales (ref. Zone, R., 1990, p. 48).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, print collections and print rooms (such as that at Castletown House) were popular, and series like *The Rake's Progress* (1735) by William Hogarth were common, forming narrative sequences between the pictures while also using details within the tableaux to comment on social and political issues, a trend which has continued until the present day.

Punch magazine, which was founded in 1841, carried on this tradition, using caricatures and single panels with commentaries underneath to satirize politicians and people of note. Contiguously, the radical press and the 'penny dreadfuls' in Britain were using cartoon images for their own purposes. Even at this stage, collections of drawings and cartoons were being published and kept in book form (ref. Clark, A.&L., 1991, p.7).

In continental Europe, 'picture sheets' were the most common form of sequential art. These were one-sided tabloid-sized sheets with up to twelve pictures with text underneath, depicting mainly humorous stories. Possibly the most popular characters in these picture sheets were *Max und Moritz* (1871), created by Wilhelm Busch. As with earlier prints, these were published as a joint venture between the artist and printer and often sold through catalogues or from specialist print shops. These were

sold to an affluent public and were meant to be kept (usually being numbered to help collectors). In contrast, the 'penny dreadfuls' were crudely drawn, used cheaper paper and were more disposable.

In Britain, the first real comic book appeared in 1874. *Funny Folks* was published by James Henderson and was made up of eight black and white pages in tabloid size. While it was successful, it was superceded in both style and success by *Comic Cuts* (17th May, 1890), published by Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe), which set the template for British comics until the present day. *Comic Cuts* and its imitators (many published by Harmsworth himself) were full of demonic children and funny animals and were aimed specifically at children.

It is important to remember at this stage that up until the so-called 'Harmsworth Revolution', comics/cartoons were aimed at a general audience, which, considering their usually satirical or political nature, would have been more fully appreciated by adults. Also, because prints and magazines like Punch were high quality products, they were too expensive for children (or more correctly, for the parents who bought for children). *Comic Cuts* changed this: its motto was 'One hundred laughs for one half-penny'. Because they were cheap, and due to the imperatives of weekly deadlines and an increased space to be filled, it was not possible to pay for artists of the quality of William Hogarth or James Gillray, nor was the same level of detail in the illustrations possible, due to time constraints and cheaper paper (ref. Sabin, R., 1993, p. 16). Hence, comic books were gradually ghettoised as for children only, while political cartoons and newspaper strips were still aimed at a general audience.

In the US, comics initially spread via imigrant importations of picture sheets like Busch's *Max und Moritz*. Their dissemination was hampered by the fact that they were in the native tongues of the european settlers. The first english language picture sheet was published in 1888 by the Humoristic Publishing Co., Kansas City, Missouri. Again, the printer was the publisher, but in this case, royalties were not paid to the artist.

Magazines

Roughly contiguously, the first US humour magazines were being launched. The earliest of these was *Puck* which was founded by Joseph Keppler an Austrian-born publisher. *Puck* was in fact published in German until 14th March, 1877, when Keppler launched the first English language version. It was an imitation of *Punch* magazine and was itself widely imitated due to its success. On 29th October, 1881, *Judge* was launched by James Wales, an ex-employee of Keppler's, as a Republican reply to the Democratic *Puck*. Similarly, *Life* magazine, which would become best known as a photo-magazine was launched by John Mitchell in 1883.

These magazines and their less successful or regional imitators coincided with and were supported by the rise in affluence and literacy prevalent in the US in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. The increase in literacy and (adult) disposable income also affected the newspaper market which was growing exponentially, but was also intensely competitive. Comics and illustrations would come to play a very important role in this competition for circulation, and in turn, newspapers would be very important to the development of American comics.

Newspapers and Tycoons

At this point, the nature of capitalism was changing from small localised operations, characterised by the artist-printer relationship and that of the publisher of a single magazine, to that of the tycoon, building or commanding huge empires. This too would shape the means of production of comics and hence the ownership of characters and work.

Two of the main figures in the US newspaper industry at the end of the nineteenth century were Joseph Pullitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Both used illustrations in their papers to attract readers, as photographs could not yet be

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satisfactorily reproduced in newspapers, and both also used editorial cartoons to entertain in the same way as the humour magazines. However, it was the introduction of the Sunday supplement that most influenced the development of comics.

Pullitzer was the first to introduce a Sunday edition with a supplement in his *New York World* in 1896. The supplement was similar to its modern equivalents, concentrating on human interest and feature-led stories. Pullitzer used cartoons to enhance stories and as stand-alone items, as well as for purely decorative reasons. In October 1896, Hearst launched the *American Humorist* as a supplement to his own *New York Journal*. Within the pages of these supplements, many of the styles and themes of American comics were developed which have influenced comic books throughout the world.

On 5th May, 1895 in the *NY World*, Pullitzer published the first identifiable recurring character in US comics: *The Yellow Kid*. *The Yellow Kid* appeared in *Hogan's Alley* and was a bald jug-eared street urchin in a yellow nightshirt who commented upon the world and current events through messages on his nightshirt. He was a huge success and his creator Richard Outcault was soon hired by Hearst for twice what Pullitzer had paid him (the name of the strip was changed to *The Yellow Kid* while Pullitzer kept *Hogan's Alley* and its characters). Hearst filled the *Humorist* with other comic strips like *Happy Hooligan* (March 1900) by Frederick Opper and the *Katzenjammer Kids* (December 1897) the latter based on *Max und Moritz* which Hearst had discovered as a child whilst on a grand tour of Europe. Thus, comics shifted from being based on satire, to concentrating on characters. Another important development was the perfection of a reliable colour press which Hearst funded at massive expense, but which was crucial in the battle for circulation. This led Hearst to advertise the *Humorist* as 'Eight pages of polychromatic effulgence that makes the rainbow look like a lead pipe' (quoted in Goulart, R., 1990, p. 177). From then on, Sunday comic strips were always in colour, differing from their British counterparts in the weekly comic books, a distinction which has only recently begun to disappear.
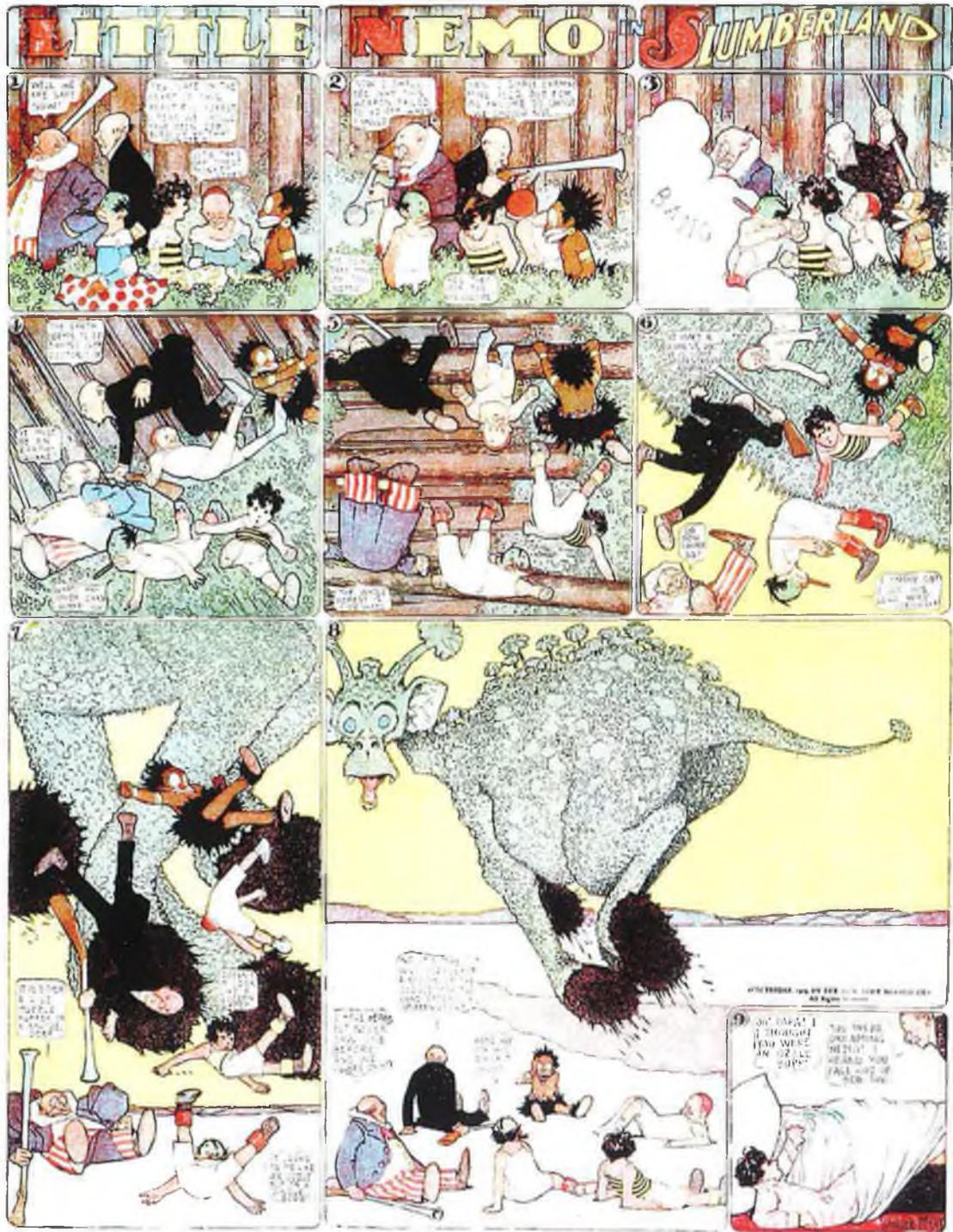
Little Nemo in Slumberland by Winsor McCay, October 3rd 1909,
reprinted by Titan Books, UK, 1990.

In 1897 Hearst published the first book of reprinted comic strips, called *The Yellow Kid*. For the next few years, the *Journal* and other newspapers published their own hardcover reprint books, but, while they were successful, they were inconvenient to produce because they were printed on the same presses as the daily newspapers. From the middle of the first decade of this century, the newspapers licensed the strips to other publishers.

Roger Sabin (1993) stresses that the hardcover and hence relatively expensive nature of these reprint books shows that comics were still seen as general reading matter in the US at this stage and were also meant to be kept rather than read and discarded. Distributed at newsstands and on trains, they were extremely popular. Their distribution was handled by The American News Co., whose purchase of $405,000 worth of comics in 1921 was one of the largest ever publishing deals at the time.

From the 1910's to the 1930's the greatest development in the comics market was the emergence of the syndicates like King Features (owned by Hearst) and the Chicago Tribune syndicate who, amongst many others, sold strips to newspapers throughout America and the rest of the world. As a result, they became the focii of attention for comics creators and have remained so for artists producing newspaper strips in the US.

Syndication drew attention to two very important issues for comics: ownership of work and licensing. A strip which was syndicated to a large number of newspapers became a very valuable commodity, but one over which the syndicate had increasing control. Some strips became the property outright of the syndicate with the creators 'working for hire' and being replaced by other writers and artists. However, some creators retained control of their work and in many cases got others to produce the work for them while profiting from their 'brand's' popularity.

Licensing, merchandising and ventures into other media were also very common, with imports from pulp novels like *Tarzan*, or from radio like *The Shadow* in the comic books of the 'thirties. At the same time, exports such as *Flash Gordon* and

Buck Rogers were also important. In fact, comic books as a medium distinct from comic strips grew out of the licensing of syndicated strips.

The First Comic Books

In 1933 the Eastern Color Printing Company produced *Funnies on Parade* as a promotional giveaway for Proctor & Gamble. It was the first comic book produced in the recognisable modern format and was the invention of Max C. Gaines, a salesman for Eastern. It was a great success and prompted Gaines to produce *Famous Funnies*, firstly as another giveaway, and then to be sold at newsstands for ten cents. The first issue to be sold was dated July 1934 and *Famous Funnies* soon had a monthly circulation of 200,000.

Famous Funnies and the other comics that quickly began to appear reprinted strips that had previously been syndicated in the newspapers and contained no original material apart from their covers. Again, like *Comic Cuts* and its imitators in Britain, they were cheap and aimed at children, though not exclusively. At this stage, while the format of the comic book had been achieved, it had not yet developed as a distinct entity from the strips which it simply reproduced. Between 1934 and 1938 original stories began to appear in comic books, partly because they were cheaper to buy (often being stories rejected by the syndicates), and partly because of the great need for material to fill space which could not be satisfied entirely by reprints. These original stories kept to the layout of the newspaper strips rather than using the freedom given to the creator by the new medium.

While both profits and circulation were high for the early comic books, they were still seen as an adjunct or spin-off from comic strips. Strips had been reprinted previously, albeit in more deluxe, durable formats. New approaches and new subject-matter were needed to establish comic books. As was said previously, most of the original stories were strips that had failed to get syndication. The others were mainly

influenced by the pulp novels and stories that had been popular in the US for the previous twenty years. The first edition of *Action Comics*, published by Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson's National Periodicals (soon to be DC Comics) would irrevocably change perceptions of comic books.

The 'Golden Age'

Action Comics #1, published in June 1938, contained the first appearance of *Superman*, written by Jerry Siegel and drawn by Joe Shuster. These two young men, obsessed with pulp fiction, created the first superhero and by 1941, both *Action Comics* and the new *Superman* comic were selling one million copies per month. This new type of character prompted a different style of layout and approach to comics in order to convey the superhuman deeds being performed, and hence, a new, distinct visual vocabulary developed.

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence Superman has had on comic books in America; in many ways it is impossible to disentangle the fortunes of one from the other. Superman both shaped the content of comic books in the US and was the paradigm by which many defined and still do define comic books. Comic books were a distinct medium because they had superheroes, which required a new visual language as well as a new language of sound effects, of Kryptonite and strange names. They had their own logic, expressed through the clothing of the heroes, through the more expansive layout of the pages, the interplay between preceding and following pages and panels, and importantly, because readers now approached comic books with expectations of something unique to comic books.

Superman was also typical of comic books in another way. By taking an advance for the first issue of *Action Comics*, Siegel and Shuster were deemed to have sold their rights to the character and were thereafter in a 'work for hire' situation. Work for hire meant that the creator cum artist or writer had no legal right to any of the characters
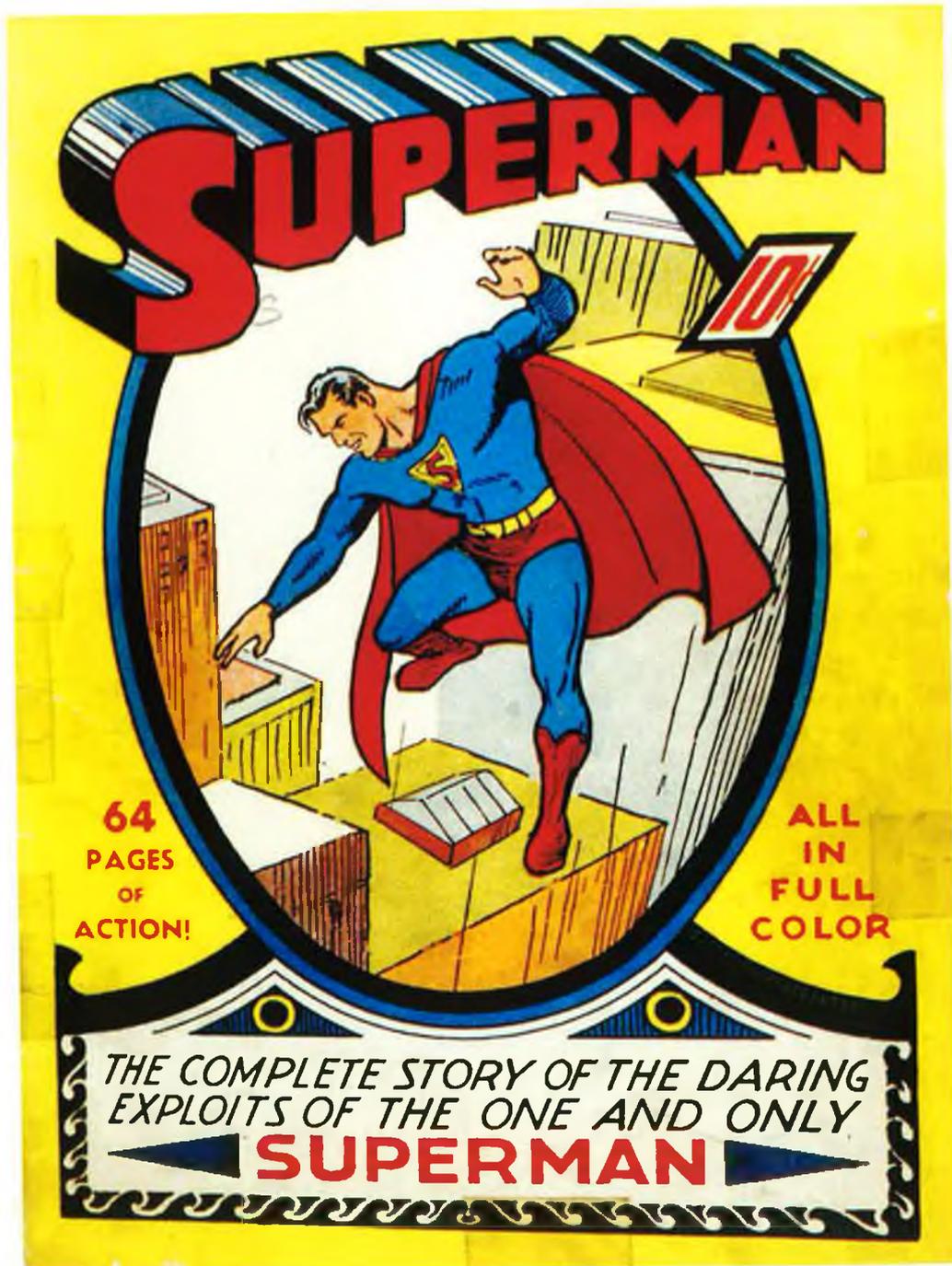
Superman issue 1, written by Jerry Siegel, art by Joe Shuster,
published by DC Comics, USA, 1939.

they created or ideas they developed whilst working on a comic book. They were simply paid per page. When Siegel and Shuster realised this in 1947, they filed an unsuccessful suit against DC Comics to regain ownership of their character. They were subsequently fired from the various *Superman* titles and received no income from their creation until 1976, when a public campaign in the months before the launch of the first Christopher Reeves *Superman* film prompted DC to pay both $25,000 per annum for as long as they lived. This 'work for hire' system has survived until the present and has only been challenged in the last twenty years as a result of the development of fan culture, as shall be discussed later. Apart from *Superman*'s creators, the 'golden age' introduced many artists and writers who helped shape modern comic books, two of who, Jack Kirby and Will Eisner, are particularly important to this study.

Jack Kirby

Jack Kirby 's importance to American comic books may best be described by analogy: the influence of Elvis Presley married to the prolific creativity of The Beatles. Kirby began working in the industry in the late 'thirties and continued to be active until his death in 1994. During the 1940's, Kirby is credited with changing the way in which superheroes and other comic book characters moved and were drawn, choreographing what has been termed a 'lyric violence' (Kane, G., quoted in Harvey, R.C., in *The Comics Journal*, #167, April, 1994, p. 5). Kirby's characters and pages were brimming with kinetic energy and were drawn for dramatic effect rather than realism. His style has since been taken and heightened by virtually every subsequent artist of superhero comics, leading to a situation where many superheroes are top-heavy brutes with spindly legs, as many artists have failed to take into account the odd perspectives which

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led Kirby's characters to have these proportions. While Kirby drew from life and enhanced it for effect, many artists have merely taken from Kirby.

The Spirit

The Spirit, created by Will Eisner in 1940 was the star of a weekly comic book given away free with a number of newspapers. *The Spirit* had no special powers, apart from his intelligence and dexterity, and was involved in a series of clever detective stories in which a single ruling motif or framing device often shaped the entire story. Eisner ceaselessly explored the potential of the page and of its elements, letting the reader know she was reading a comic book, but a very clever comic book. The action was played out in the self-conscious manner of the Marx Brothers, though its humour was very different, and the elements of the comic played off each other like the inner workings of a clock.

Eisner is renowned for his ingenious title pages for *The Spirit*, through which he set the tone of many stories, refusing to use a standard logo but instead, stretching and twisting the strips title into the fabric of the page. *The Spirit* was rediscovered by the underground movement and reprinted extensively, leading Eisner to return to comic books after a period of creating industrial and military manuals in comics form. Eisner has continued to produce comics and graphic novels alongside his teaching (his book *Comics and Sequential Art* has been very influential), and a number of the respondents in this study have been tutored personally by Eisner.

An Expanding Market

During the late 1930's and the early 1940's comic books and superheroes proliferated, with the June 1941 issue of *Writer's Digest* reporting that there were 115 comic book titles on the newsstands in the US at that time (ref. Goulart, R., 1991, p.99). Comic books attracted many publishers who had previously been involved with pulp novels, as well as printing companies expanding into publishing for the first time. The market seems to have been characterised by publishers eager to make money quickly with little interest in quality. Surprisingly, none of the major publishers or newspaper organisations became involved and, in general, the medium was seen by most to be viable only in the short-term. To a great degree this may be said to have influenced the development of the comic book market and of the medium itself. Both were considered ephemeral and not deserving of serious attention or respect for quality. Despite this, sales were very large, peaking in the mid-1940's to the mid-1950's when approximately sixty million comics were sold per month (ref. Sabin, R., 1993, p.144).

Changing Audiences

At this point it is important to explain that this surge in circulation was not uniform. In the mid-1940's, the popularity of superheroes was declining, while at the same time, wartime paper shortages restricted publishers' output. The post-war resurgence can in part be explained by the fact that remainder stocks of comic books were shipped to US servicemen. Their portability and episodic nature made them suitable material for people unable to give their time to novels.

In the aftermath of the second World War, large numbers of adults who had become accustomed to reading comic books whilst abroad, sought titles that offered more than the mainly juvenile oriented superhero and humour comics did. As a result,

new genres of comics developed, many explicitly labelled 'For Adults Only'. These new comic books tended to concentrate on crime, horror, science-fiction and fantasy.

In 1942 Lev Gleason began publishing *Crime Does Not Pay*, the first crime comic. In 1947 Gleason began printing the title's circulation figures on the front cover, claiming sales of between five and six million per month. By the end of 1948 over 100 crime comics were being published (ref. Zone, R., 1990, p. 51).

Along with the crime comic books, the horror and science fiction comics were usually explicitly violent, lurid and overtly sexual. The most successful and certainly most influential company producing horror and science-fiction comic books was EC Comics which had been run by William Gaines since the death of his father Max C. Gaines in 1947. Among other things, EC were the first comics company to encourage fan loyalty and were the subjects of the earliest comics fanzines. While EC comics are now revered for their art and stories, most horror, crime and science-fiction comics were very poorly drawn and written, and 'frightening only in their lack of merit and restraint' (Goulart, R., 1991, p.179).

In 1950 a government sponsored survey of an Ohio town found that 54% of all comic book readers were over twenty years of age (ref. Sabin, R., 1993, p. 147). If these figures were representative of the rest of the nation, then comic books at that period could be seen to have established a significant audience beyond the juvenile market. Nevertheless, commentators of the time chose to consider comic books exclusively as entertainment for children. Thus, Marya Mannes, in an article for *The New Republic* titled *Junior Has a Craving* (February 1947) called comics the 'marijuana of the nursery' and 'the lowest, most despicable, and most harmful and unethical form of trash... ... not only ugly in appearance, but ugly in thought' (quoted in Zone, R., 1990, p.51).

Seduction of the Innocent

In retrospect, it was inevitable that comics would suffer public censure. Contemporary comics commentators associate the treatment of comic book publishers in the mid-1950's with the paranoia and conservatism of the so-called 'McCarthy Era' during which this happened. Another reason may also have been the relative youth of the medium and its enormous growth in a short period. One can cite numerous examples of new media or new movements within media which have led to alarm and hostile reactions eg. video games and rave music. The protests concerning comic books may be seen as a manifestation of this tendency, as William Savage explains:

> Each reaction proceeds from a new technology or a new application thereof, and technology suggests change, as do social disorders. Juxtapose the two, and it is simple enough to blame the technology for the disorder.
> (quoted in Sabin, R., 1993, p. 157)

Alongside this distrust of a new medium (and one perceived as juvenile) was the fact, stated earlier, that no established reputable publishers had entered the comic book market. For example, Disney, whose characters had been prevalent in comics since the 1930's only briefly published their own comics (for the first time) in the mid-1970's and returned to licensing their properties in the 1980's. The few publishers with any history, had previously produced pulp novels and were not held in great respect. Comic books could in many ways be described as being made by 'shysters' who cared little for the effects their goods had on their audience.

In contrast, many protectors of the public were very concerned by comic books' effects on young people. In 1947, J. Edgar Hoover, the Fraternal Order of Police and the president of the American Prison Association described comics as 'a negative

THERE IS ONLY ONE *TRUE CRIME COMICS* — THIS IS IT!

True Crime Comics issue 1, "Murder, Morphine and Me!", by Jack Cole,
published by Magazine Village Inc., USA, 1947.

influence' and 'un-American' (Zone, R., 1990, p. 51). On March 19th, 1948, Dr. Frederic Wertham, president of the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy held a symposium on 'The Psychopathology of Comic Books'. Dr. Wertham followed this event with an article in the May 29th, 1948 edition of *The Saturday Review of Literature* called *The Comics...Very Funny*. In this article, he gave examples of the influence of crime and horror comics:

> A thirteen year-old boy in Chicago has just murdered a young playmate. He told his lawyer, Samuel J. Andalman, that he reads all the crime comic books he can get hold of.
> (quoted in Zone, R., 1990, p. 54)

Further articles and radio interviews with Dr. Wertham and others led to comic book burnings in Chicago and Auburn, New York. In Los Angeles in 1948 a municipal ordinance was enacted whereby a person selling crime comics to under-eighteens would suffer a six month jail sentence and a fine of five hundred dollars. In this ordinance, crime comics were colourfully defined as comics which contained:

> Almost exclusively, accounts of crimes of bloodshed and violence, depicted in great detail in the picture strips. Accompanying these accounts will often appear women in various stages of undress, which are highly suggestive of the coarser aspects of sex in connection with the criminal activities being described.
> (quoted in ibid., p. 54)

Between 1945 and 1950 the Senate Judiciary Committee on Juvenile Delinquency had investigated the possible influence of crime comics on young offenders. This government interest in comic books was resumed and reinvigorated by the reaction to the publication in 1954 of *Seduction of the Innocent* by Frederic Wertham, which explored the topic in detail through case-studies of youths and by taking examples of crime and horror comic pages and covers. *Seduction of the Innocent* was a best-seller, mixing scientificity and titilation with chapter titles such as *Homicide*

at Home, *I Want to be a Sex Maniac!* and *Bumps and Bulges*. For many reasons, the book was the most important book about American comics thus far.

Seduction was important to the development of comic books in the US for four main reasons. Firstly, it prompted a series of Senate sub-committee meetings on comic books with many publishers and commentators (including Wertham) called to testify. Secondly, it prompted, through the Senate hearings, the publishing of the Comics Code which is still in place for comic book publishers. Thirdly, the bad image engendered by the hearings and the new 'post-Code' comics caused a severe drop in adult readers and of comic book sales. Fourthly, it ghettoised comic books as worthless (if not pernicious) and childish entertainment.

The 'Kefauver Hearings' began in the spring of 1954 and were televised nationally. In comics lore, these hearings are regarded in the same way as the McCarthy hearings in Hollywood. They are often described as a witch-hunt or as being against the first amendment. They were obviously part of a larger social phenomenon taking place in America during that period. Their aim was to 'protect children from the effects of violence', an aim which is still espoused by many, but concerning different media. While this would seem straightforward, and many of the comics of the time were extremely violent and of little worth, the hearings did not always confine themselves to the most violent comics.

As was stated previously, EC Comics was one of the most successful publishers of high quality crime, horror and science-fiction comic books. They were also at the forefront of an increasing sense of social relevance which had entered comics as a result of increased adult readership. EC comic books were given especial prominence during the hearings, with their publisher William Gaines being called to testify.

EC Comics's The Vault of Horror, art by Johnny Craig,
published by L.L. Publishing Company, Inc. USA, 1954

Alongside their crime and horror comics, EC published *Mad* (originally a comic, then a magazine from 1954 onwards) which was initially sub-titled 'Humor in a Jugular Vein'. They also published *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat,* two critically acclaimed and decidedly anti-war war comic books. One may surmise that the quality of the EC comics made them seem more dangerous to the members of the sub-committee, dealing as they did with politics, isolation and the disintegration of the family. The EC comic books, in particular, were read by large numbers of adults, who were not the cause of the sub-committee hearings, but may have been part of their agenda: "Comics for adults must therefore have been doubly suspect: delinquency among children was one thing - but children do not vote or make revolutions." (Sabin, R., 1993, p.159)

During the hearings, many newsstands and shops refused to sell comic books and with this marked decrease in sales, the majority of comics publishers formed the Comics Magazine Association of America. The CMAA agreed upon a vetting framework, the Comics Code, (see appendix A) which would be administered by the newly created Comics Code Authority. Comic books failing to meet the standards of the code would be refused access to the distribution network. In effect, the comics industry censored itself, thereby avoiding whatever strictures the Senate sub-committee may have otherwise imposed. In summary, the code banned content involving violence, sex and attacks on authority.

By imposing the Comics Code upon themselves, publishers were seen to be responsible, but they were also admitting that comics were only for children. The Code in fact contributed to this being the case for the rest of the decade and part of the next.

The horror and crime comics which had attracted the majority of adult readers virtually disappeared with the imposition of the Code. Those that remained were ersatz versions of what had previously been available. Allied to this was the bad publicity

comic books had received and the perceived negative image of adults reading comics. Thus adult readership fell. In 1952, there were approximately 630 titles being published; by 1956, this had dropped to near 250 titles. Readership fell from approximately sixty million to roughly thirty-five million.

Ironically, Dr. Wertham protested against the Comics Code, claiming that it was arbitrary and merely called attention to violence in comics; however, he had effected enormous changes in the medium in the US. The long-term effect of this period was the ghettoisation of comic books: comics had been thoroughly devalued aesthetically and classed as juvenilia. As a result, comic books were largely ignored and allowed to develop in isolation. This would appear to be extremely important to this study: because comic books were held in such low regard, they were effectively invisible and became the preserve of enthusiasts/fans and children.

Another consequence of the isolation of comic books was that the language of comics developed slowly into a meta-language of comics about comics with many ideas taken as given and with recurring themes and cliches which made comic books to some extent 'difficult' for non-readers. In other words, comic books came to contain much hidden or assumed knowledge along with an accumulated history. At the same time, knowledge of comic books was generally hidden as it was perceived as useless, further fuelling both fan loyalty and perpetuating the self-consciousness of the medium vis-a-vis its lack of cultural worth.

The current fan-dominated nature of the comic book market has developed in the aftermath of the controversy caused by *The Seduction of the Innocent*. It is futile to speculate on what might have been; instead an attempt will be made at an exposition of the comics market and of comics fandom since the mid-1950's.

After The Seduction

History is always a battleground of meaning and interpretation, and as virtually all histories of comic books have been produced by people committed to the medium, it is extremely difficult to give an exposition of their development that is not biased. As was stated, many of the horror and crime comic books were worthless and exploitative. Also, many commentators are involved in a valorisation and promotion of their own counter-cultural agendas. While adult-oriented comics were important for their influence on later comics, many publishers like Harvey and Dell were unperturbed by any moral outcry because they had always concentrated on innocuous titles aimed at the juvenile market.

In the 1950's and the early 1960's, these juvenile and teen-oriented comic books took prominence in the market. EC Comics withdrew from comics, releasing *Mad* as a magazine. Romance comics, starting with *Young Romance* #1 in September 1947, attracted many female readers and were aimed at twelve to fourteen year olds who were assumed to be interested in the activities of people two or three years older than they were. They were very successful and numerous until the end of the 1950's.

During the 1950's, the increase in number of television sets prompted both a decrease in the sales of comic books and a wave of comics derived from tv series. Like the cinema, comic books were challenged by the output, the ease of consumption and the variety offered by television. Similar to comics, television would be accused of having a negative influence on children, with sex and violence again being cited as the causes of juvenile delinquency. Television seriously undermined comic books as a mainstream medium as it had greater inherent impact and movement. This study would consider this new competitor another reason for the development of comics as a fan-based medium.

If one could enjoy daily continuous doses of excitement and laughter through the television, the comic must have offered other pleasures. In much the same way as

cinema, with its conscious choice to go to a theatre and sit in darkness amongst other people, was different from television, being solitary while still social, reading comics was a pleasure to be indulged in alone. Comic books were places to escape to, part of a process whereby the creators spoke personally to the readers and through which the reader could define herself.

This process can be seen in two disparate trends in comics, both originating in the 1960's and still prevalent in contemporary comic books. These are the 'new' Marvel-style superheroes, and the underground comix.

The Return of the Superhero

The initial resurgence of superheroes began with DC's editor Julius Schwartz' revamping of the character *The Flash*. Having been tested in *Showcase*, *The Flash* was given his own title in 1959 and proved so successful that other characters were revived. By taking a new approach with old characters, DC were both nostalgic and innovative: the new *Flash* named himself after the comic book character he had read about as a child. The 'new' DC superheroes had histories that could both be deconstructed and built upon; they were inherently self-conscious and appealed to an adult audience:

> It was a thrilling moment for DC's older fans, and there were signs - letters from grateful adults scattered throughout the country that the number of fans was steadily growing. With his intelligent sense of fun, Schwartz was beginning to reach an audience who would normally have put comics behind them.
> (Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones, quoted in Goulart, R., p.245)

The success of DC's superheroes prompted Marvel Comics, who had been publishing comics to varying degrees of success since the early 1940's, to return to superheroes. Marvel's editor Stan Lee decided to take another approach: he cast his superheroes as fallible people, equally likely to be arguing and fighting amongst

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The Fantastic Four, written by Stan Lee, art by Jack Kirby, published
by Marvel Comics, USA, 1966.

themselves as with supervillains. In the midst of fantastic science and strange situations, Marvel heroes had the same anxieties and domestic problems as their readers. Audience identification was very strong and readers were encouraged to care about their heroes rather than be in awe of them.

Stan Lee, along with artist Jack Kirby, created a string of comic book characters like *The Fantastic Four*, *Spiderman*, *The Hulk*, *The Silver Surfer* and the *X-Men* which have become iconic figures. The soap-opera elements of the stories were as important to the success of these new superheroes as the fantastic things that they did. This had two consequences, important both to Marvel's fortunes and to this study. Firstly, reader loyalty was built up by the humanity and ordinariness of the characters and secondly, as a result of this, and the ongoing soap-opera elements of the comic books, readers strove to get each month's issue in order to keep up with the characters' lives. Thus, continuity between stories developed and became more important. Previously, little would be lost between issues if one missed a particular month, but now, readers who were fully confident that Spiderman would defeat the Green Goblin were unable to rest until they knew that Peter Parker's aunt May would pull out of her coma.

At the same time, characters from other titles would make guest appearances in different comic books, weaving webs of connections and relationships. These crossovers were used to interest readers in other comic books produced by the company, and to help titles with weaker sales figures. However, their most important and enduring impact was to instill loyalty to Marvel comics as a whole rather than specific characters. While Julius Schwartz had encouraged reader loyalty in the late 1950's by introducing letters pages (printing the full names and addresses of the correspondents), Stan Lee took this notion further.

Lee formed the first successful comics fan club in the mid-1960's: the Merry Marvel Marching Society, which was promoted constantly through outrageous bombastic eulogies to the 'folks' sweating in the 'Mighty Marvel Bullpen', and most of all, to himself. With a mixture of shameless alliteration and teasing hints at the delights

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to come next month, Lee strove to ensure that, once the readers' attention had been caught, it would be maintained.

Another conscious effect of continuing storylines and crossovers was the piecing together of what came to be known as the Marvel Universe. Events in one title would influence those in another; like the revamped DC heroes, Marvel characters were quickly enveloped in a history which informed everything they did. Marvel introduced the 'No Prize' which would be awarded to any reader who found a mistake in a story. The term 'continuity' evolved to describe the elaborate interlinking of the different strands of the Marvel Universe. Similarly, DC came to use the 'Bat Bible' which stipulated what had or could be possible in Batman's world and how this would affect his interaction with other DC characters. This obsession with correctness would have been pointless unless readers were following a broad range of titles, as was often the case: it became increasingly difficult to fully appreciate one's favourite character unless one knew at least something about the broader context in which they operated.

As was said earlier, DC's reappraisal of their superheroes both kept readers' interest in comic books and prompted older readers to return to comics. Marvel's emphasis on continuity made it more difficult for readers to stop consuming and also made it preferable to read a range of the company's titles. Thus, readers again began to follow comic books beyond the traditionally assumed twelve-to-fourteen age group; also, they began to amass and keep collections of their comic books in greater numbers than previously.

Comix not Comics

During the mid to late 1960's, another movement began to slowly emerge in American comics: the underground comix. By calling themselves 'comix' rather than comics, the undergrounds distanced themselves from the subject-matter, agenda, and market of mainstream comics. Rather than mimic the DC and Marvel conventions, most

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of the underground creators harked back to funny animal cartoon strips like *Krazy Kat* and the various Disney characters. But, although the underground comix paid homage to these comics, they also satirised, politicised and often vandalised them. In order to explain the undergrounds properly, one must try to describe their roots.

Mad (both as a comic and later as a magazine) specialised in parodying media and genres as well as social conventions. In this it was a descendant of magazines like *Punch* and *Judge* and of the many college humour magazines which had been popular since the 1930's. Under the editorial control of Harvey Kurtzman, *Mad* both broadened and sharpened this type of humour, giving it an extra savagery and social relevance, which is no longer extant in *Mad* magazine. Kurtzman, along with the surreal imagery and wordplay of *Krazy Kat* (by George Herriman) and the graphic and narrative innovations of Will Eisner's *The Spirit*, was a major influence on the underground creators.

Much of the early work by comix creators appeared in campus newspapers and in small-scale, self-published comics intended purely for friends and local distribution. Some appeared in counter-culture newspapers like the *Berkeley Barb* and the *East Village Other*, but their distinguishing feature was the absence of desire to work in mainstream comics. They were also characterised by the individuality of their artistic expression. *God Nose* (1964) by Jack Jackson is an example: a serious and arguably blasphemous retelling of the story of Christ, drawn in a realistic style rather than the 'big-foot' style favoured by many underground artists.

Underground comix chose to eschew the established comic book market and distribution network for two main reasons: firstly, their subject-matter and approach to control of copyright meant that no mainstream publisher would risk becoming involved with them. They purposely broke every rule of the Comics Code and insisted that creators retained complete control and ownership of all material they produced. Secondly, underground comix were not initially produced with expectations of profit,

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Untitled by Robert Crumb from The R. Crumb Checklist, by Donald M.
Fiene, published by Boatner Norton Press, USA, 1981.

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nor considered the basis of viable careers. When it became apparent that underground comix could be successful, an alternative market and system of distribution had been discovered and hence, mainstream channels were unnecessary.

Released in 1967, *Zap* #1 by Robert Crumb had a similar influence on underground comix to that which *Action Comics*#1 had on mainstream comics. Self-published by Crumb and a friend, Don Donahue, they stapled the first run themselves and sold it on street corners. Its success on the streets of San Francisco gradually led to its distribution, nationally and internationally, through the network of 'head-shops' selling hippy paraphernalia. *Zap* was an inspiration for many artists who had heretofore seen comix as merely a pastime. Crumb saw the function of the undergrounds (in relation to his own work) thus:

> You had to break every taboo first and get that over with... y'know, doing racist images, any sexual perversion that came into your mind, making fun of authority figures... and get past all that, and then really get down to business.
> (quoted in the film Comic Book Confidential, Ron Mann (dir.), Canada, CastleHendring, 1989)

While few comix managed to progress beyond sensationalist attacks on 'straight' society, they were extremely important in proving that an alternative comics press could be viable and because they promoted creators' rights. Although the undergrounds were seriously undermined by the decline of the head-shops and the disintegration of hippy ideals, many of the most influential underground creators are still active and developing.

Despite the fact that they seemed diametrically opposed, the markets for the underground and mainstream comics merged in the growth of fandom in the US and later in Britain and Ireland. Because of the tight continuity and inter-weaving of storylines prevalent in Marvel and DC comics in the 1960's, many fans were left with gaps in their collections or found themselves forced to search out back-issues of titles they had discovered late. Both Marvel and DC were still distributed on a sale or return

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basis through newsstands and corner-shops, and could be erratic because they were 'tagged on' to the distribution of newspapers and magazines. As a result, publishers were forced to wait up to six months to see if a particular issue of a comic book was successful; this left them with little knowledge of their readers beyond the letters they received.

Direct Sales

With the success of the underground comix, some head-shops began stocking second-hand and remaindered comics alongside their other merchandise. Specialist shops began emerging in the late 1960's in the Bay area around San Francisco and with the introduction of 'anti-paraphernalia' laws in 1973, others developed their comics business. The lines between fans of mainstream comic books and the undergrounds were often blurred. From the mid-1960's, much of Marvel's audience had been formed by college students, who were often involved in the counter-culture and would certainly have been well-versed in both mainstream and underground comic books. At the same time, some who had become interested in comix because of their oppositional stance, became fans of the medium as a whole.

Comic book fandom was also heavily influenced by science-fiction fandom, which, being longer established and more organised, offered an informative model and often a piggy-back to comics fandom (in Ireland, Octocon is still the main comic book convention, though strictly speaking a science-fiction convention). Mimicking science-fiction antecedents, the first regular American comics fanzine *The Comic Reader* was published in 1961. The first comic book convention was held in New York in 1964, and concentrated on buying and selling precious back-issues. Throughout the decade these conventions grew larger and better organised, and in conjunction with fanzines and informal interaction between fans, a pantheon of writers and artists slowly evolved.

Although fan loyalty had been encouraged by DC and Marvel, the next, and possibly most important, stage in comic book fandom (which also significantly changed the comics industry) was purely fan-initiated.

Fanzines and conventions had led to an ad hoc system of sourcing back-issues, but new comic books could still only be bought through newsstands and shops. In the late 1960's and early 1970's both the newsstands and 'Mom and Pop' shops were being pressurised by the spread of supermarkets. As a result, fans found it increasingly difficult to get the comics they sought as the number of titles kept by shops and newsstands contracted. The comic book publishers were also understandably perturbed by the seemingly inexorable dismantling of their market.

In this context, both DC and Marvel, while dubious, were glad of the approaches made by a New York convention organiser, Phil Seuling, founder of Seagate Enterprises. Seuling proposed to buy large shipments of new comics from the publishers and to sell them to specialist shops himself. Unlike the sale or return system used with the normal distributors, the 'direct sales' system let the publishers know quickly which titles were selling well, where, and to whom. Also, the expenses involved in over-printing could be avoided to a great extent by having a better idea of what fans wanted. Plus, expenses incurred would be recouped much more quickly and with less quibbling over exact numbers of returns.

As a convention organiser and fan, Seuling was well placed to judge which titles would be popular with other fans. Allied to this was his realisation that particular writers and artists combined with specific titles, or on the basis of their reputations alone, would sell more than others. By supplying new comics (usually before they were available on newsstands), Seuling further established specialist shops as focal points of

comic book fan culture. By taking control of the channels of distribution, Seuling and other fan-entrepreneurs were effectively able to shape the comic book industry in their own image. Direct sales can be said to have saved comic book sales in the US, with 90% of all comic book sales being derived from direct sales by the 1990's.

By the end of the 1970's there were approximately four hundred specialist comic shops in the US; by the early 1990's, this had risen to over five thousand (with many also selling baseball cards). These shops reflected the development of comic book fandom, and, while welcoming to fans, they were and remain off-putting to others:

> Inevitably the shops had a particular atmosphere - by nature specialist and rather insular. They were also extremely 'male', dealing in a particular kind of macho power-fantasy: women were not made welcome. To outsiders therefore, the shops appeared as slightly sinister places - bizarre, gaudy and obsessive...
>
> (Sabin, R., 1993, p.65)

The exclusive nature of comic shops, allied to the increasingly self-referential art and storylines of most comic books popular with fans meant that, while direct sales and the spread of shops increased sales, readership did not widen as much as it deepened. Increased availability and reliability of comic books meant there were more fans, but more importantly, fans bought more comics and collecting became increasingly prevalent. Publishers no longer had to strive to attract new readers as fans were growing older but reading and collecting more comics and were willing and able to spend more money on comic books. Comics were increasingly made for fans by fans; outsiders who neither understood nor valued comic books were irrelevant.

The new distribution network owed much to the DIY approach of the undergrounds and direct sales gave new opportunities to independent publishers. Direct sales meant that, like Marvel and DC, independent publishers could pinpoint their audience and avoid the delays in payment which were unavoidable in the newsstand sales system (which would have refused most because of their subject-matter and lack of commercial potential). Thus fans were able to produce and sell to other fans. Unlike

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earlier decades, these new publishers were more interested in seeing their comic books on the shelves than making money from gullible youths.

The Emergence of the Independents

The growth in the independent section of the market led to a greater variety of subject-matter in comic books. It also led to changes in the means of production and consumption in the industry. In 1978, Eclipse Enterprises published *Sabre*, the first graphic novel aimed solely at the direct sales market. The theory behind the graphic novel was that if fans were willing to spend more on comics and were collecting them, then they would spend more for comics printed on better paper that had longer, complete stories.

In 1981 Pacific Comics began publishing *Captain Victory and the Galactic Rangers* (by Jack Kirby) amongst other titles. The creators retained ownership of the copyright and received royalties on sales. This was another move influenced by the policies of the undergrounds and forced DC and later Marvel to do likewise (to a diminished degree). The direct sales meant that while Marvel and DC were still 'The Big Two', they no longer enjoyed the duopoly which had existed since the mid-1960's.

The control which Marvel and DC had maintained was, again undercut by the fan loyalty and devotion which had initially given them their power. With the ad hoc development of a comic book canon and the concomitant genesis of a star-system through fanzines and conventions, it made sense for publishers to feature popular artists' and writers' names on the covers and insides of comic books containing their work. Previously, publishers had striven to keep contributors uncredited (apart from Stan Lee and those who helped him realise his vision) to avoid any misunderstanding in relation to the 'work for hire' system in operation. Direct sales meant creators could now self-publish or work with smaller publishers who paid better rates and gave percentages on deals.

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Increasingly it was found that art was valorised above content and character by the majority of fans, further undermining the strength of the major publishers. This led to an increase in self-motivated work and an increase in more sophisticated subject-matter and finished artwork (in more expensive and higher quality formats). Another effect of the fan-led market was that comic book art was increasingly at a remove from real life. Whereas the first generation of comic book artists, typified by Jack Kirby, had based their work on life-drawings which were then stylised for effect, subsequent artists took the stylised work as their starting point and either copied or exaggerated their quirks further. Thus, comic books developed a meta-language which made them more difficult still for outsiders to penetrate.

The Alternatives

The late 1970's and early 1980's also saw the appearance through direct sales of many so-called 'alternatives', which continue to be significant in the comics industry and were mentioned by many of the subjects of this study. These alternative comics were often quite similar to the underground comics in tone and content, although they also contained many other types of comic books. As a whole, they tended to express the personal visions of their creators; I will concentrate on four titles (all of which are black and white publications) which, for their longevity, popularity and distinctiveness may be seen to be representative: *Cerebus*, *Love and Rockets*, *Hate* and *Yummy Fur*.

Cerebus (1977) is the on-going story of its titular hero, an aardvark, which began as a satire on sword and sorcery comics and books and has since developed into an alternatively witty and affecting evocation of a complete world, through which *Cerebus* wanders. It is unusual in that its creator Dave Sim is also the publisher and in
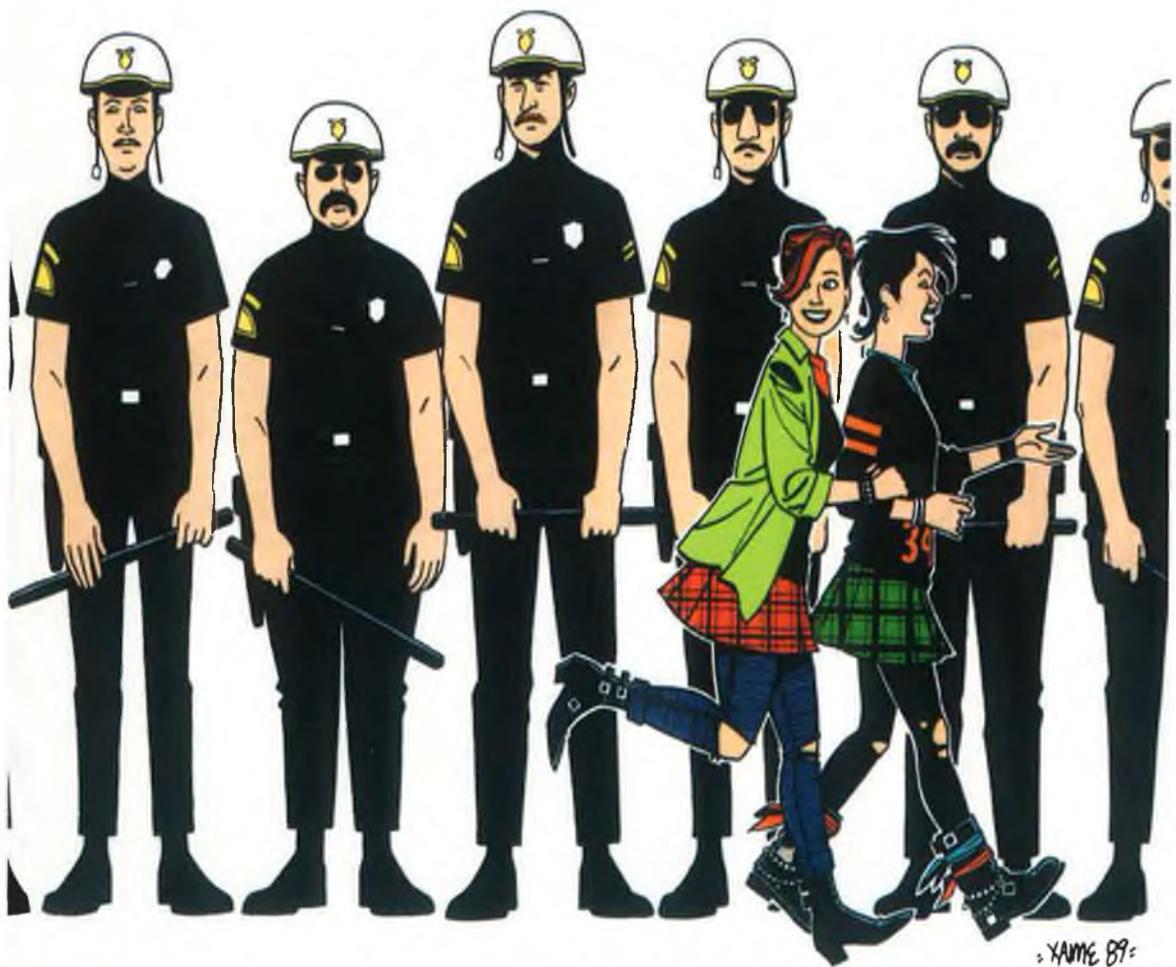
Love and Rockets, published by Fantagraphics Book, USA,1989.
Front cover from issue 33 by Jaime Hernandez.

that Sim has committed himself to 300 issues of the comic, a project that is over halfway through its thirty year run. This unique involvement with a single character has allowed Sim to explore both *Cerebus* and the world in which he operates with a depth, subtlety and level of character development that is unprecedented in comic books. The title's extremely loyal readers have also allowed Sim to depart from the normal constraints of monthly story-telling, with its imperative for a beginning, middle and end, or some major plot development.

Love and Rockets (1982-96), by the Hernandez Brothers was a consistently acclaimed book that, ironically, was far more successful in Britain and Europe than in the US. Its two main stories concentrated on *Maggie* and *Hopey*, two hispanic punks who were at one stage lovers (Jaime), and on the village of *Palomar* in Mexico (Gilbert). Jaime's work detailed the minor dramas of young disaffected people, slowly being drawn into the adult world despite themselves, while Gilbert's *Palomar* stories mixed magic realism with political and moral corruption. Both depicted explicit sex and violence, but neither used these for gratuitous purposes, but rather, they fitted seamlessly into the strips. Since completing issue 50 of *Love and Rockets*, both have proceeded to publish their comics separately and are distinctive voices within comic books.

Peter Bagge, creator of *Neat Stuff* and *Hate*, has used a cartoony style of artwork to discuss the oddities of American society and its often repressive nature. His work is often angry and yet hilarious, skewering the confused motivations (and lack of motivation) of his protagonists. His most enduring character has been *Buddy Bradley* (originally a character in *Neat Stuff*, now the main focus of *Hate*). *Buddy* is a lazy, stupid and untrustworthy 'slacker' whose only concern is self-preservation. He is an

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essentially negative character, too dim or uncaring to realise that his actions will always backfire on him.

In *Yummy Fur*, Chester Brown has developed a vehicle for autobiography and surreal adventure which has been widely acclaimed. At times controversial (its *Ed the Happy Clown* story contained scenes of grotesque torture and a character who was unable to stop defecating and lived on the toilet), and allegedly blasphemous (Brown completed a strange adaptation of the *Gospel According to Matthew*) in its early issues, *Yummy Fur* has concentrated recently on recounting critical episodes from Brown's life. Brown's artwork is crude but effective, creating a somewhat dispassionate atmosphere which echoes the artist's approach to his material.

Revisionism

1986 is often touted as the year in which comics grew up, a claim that disregards much of the history of comic books (ref. Sabin, R., 1993), but is based upon the emergence of a trend that was extremely important in comic books for a number of years. This trend is best described as revisionism. This fashion led to the reassessment of many characters, usually through a darker lens. It was also mainly focussed on super-heroes (as was discussed in Chapter One). At the time, it was seen as a paradigmatic rupture which was changing comic books irrevocably, although this may now be seen as an overreaction to a new approach to comics. Part of the reason for this overreaction was the desire to gain respect for comic books outside the confines of fandom; another reason was the genuine shock and excitement felt by many at the reinterpretation of super-heroes performed by a variety of creators. Of these, the first and most influential

were Frank Miller and Alan Moore, creators of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* respectively.

It is important to remember that both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* were specially commissioned series and were the result of their creators' individual views on comics and on life, as opposed to the many imitators they inspired. Furthermore, both creators saw their works as part of a process of renewal that has been evident in American comic books since the nineteen-forties (ref. Moore, A., interviewed in The Comics Journal, #138, Oct., 1990, p. 80, & Miller, F., interviewed in Pearson & Uricchio, (eds.),1991, p. 34).

Although both comic books became well-known outside comics fandom, they appealed to fans very strongly because of the understanding and affection with which they dealt with their subjects, due to the fact that both had themselves been comic fans:

> I was talking to a friend recently, and we both came to the same conclusion. That, however silly it might seem, if I had to look back to the biggest single factor that shaped my moral code as a child, it wasn't my parents... it wasn't the school; it wasn't the church. It was Superman.
> (Moore, A., interviewed in Wiater, S. & Bissette, S., 1993, p. 171)

This deep involvement with comic books allowed the creators to dissect many superhero conventions without divesting them of their resonance and in fact made their work more powerful. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Miller invested *Batman* with a mythic power which had been all but lost through nearly fifty years of the imperatives of monthly issues and the need to keep the audience interested. *Watchmen*, on the other hand, humanised superheroes, delving into the psychological impulses behind their actions in order to question both the heroes and contemporary society's fascination with them. Unfortunately, the comic book industry and comics creators have to a large extent

failed to develop the ideas in *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, resulting in a situation where the description 'adult comics' often has the same connotations as 'adult films'. Despite this, Moore and Miller's work has led some creators to attempt more sophisticated work and their work remains forceful and exciting.

Watchmen

Originally published as a twelve part series for DC comics in 1986 and later collected into a graphic novel, *Watchmen* has been one of the most influential and highly praised comic books of recent years. Its creators, Dave Gibbons (artist) and Alan Moore (writer), became stars, leading Moore (the focus of the majority of the excitement) to describe himself disparagingly as 'fandom's first girlfriend' (Interviewed in The Comics Journal, #138, Oct., 1990, p. 90). The outstanding feature of the comic was its intelligence and its considered tone. Its initial premise was that someone was trying to kill or neutralise costumed heroes, a 'mask-killer', and the attempts of Rorschach to find the culprit. It was not an action-packed succession of brawls between costumed adventurers and their adversaries, but rather an examination of the impulses that motivated the characters to become heroes and the effects their presence (and its subsequent lack) would have on the world at large. As such it was in part a response to the inadequacies of many comic books, particularly those containing superheroes; Moore would later describe how he and other creators were inspired to create more challenging comics as a result of these inadequacies:

> That's what we all do. I think bad culture, in some organic way, seems to play its part in that. Fertilizer stinks, but you really need it to raise decent-smelling flowers.
>
> (Interviewed in The Comics Journal, #138, Oct., 1990, p. 76)

Watchmen was a deconstruction of the myths of superhero comics from within and mixed its critical awareness with nostalgia for a simpler past: the book includes flashbacks to an earlier group of heroes called *The Minutemen*, who were the first generation of heroes in the world depicted in *Watchmen*. However, this nostalgia is used as an instrument of Moore's critique, as the members of *The Minutemen* were all inspired by the appearance of *Superman* in 1938. The comic also forces the reader to examine her nostalgia precisely because it presupposes the reader's knowledge of the history of comics:

> *Watchmen* couldn't have existed without a lot of prior knowledge on the reader's part of what the super-hero genre was all about. It was making reference to and playing off a lot of previously existing stuff. It was trying to do something new with it.
> (ibid., p. 76)

The Dark Knight Returns

Frank Miller's work and philosophy is markedly different from that of Alan Moore's, being far more visceral and committed to genre fiction and adventure stories. Miller differs also in that he is equally renowned for his artwork as his writing; in fact, Miller first became noted for his art, and was later allowed to script the titles he worked on as a result of his popularity with the fan community. His work is charaterised by his daring use of the page and dramatic lighting and textures. His willingness to experiment and his often monumental images make his work extremely powerful and propel the narrative with a directness and assuredness which is matched by few other artists.

The Dark Knight Returns by Frank Miller, published by DC Comics, 1986.

Fortunately, this forcefulness is allied to an expressiveness and subtlety of characterisation which gives an emotional depth to his work and makes his scenarios more affecting. Miller·has been heavily influenced by Japanese art, comics and thinking. Many of his comics contain page layouts and silent sequences which are far more prevalent in Japanese comics than in the US. His line-work also shows this influence, using a mixture of bold strokes and unusual detailing work in order to create an impressionistic sense of movement and feeling.

The Dark Knight told the story of an ageing *Batman* who has been retired for ten years and is a suicidal alcoholic at the start of the story. Like *Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight* questions the place of the hero in a world that has rendered them obsolete, but to very different ends: Miller stresses the importance of individual action to a much greater degree. *Batman* is shown as obsessive and unstable: the only constant in his life is the pain and need for revenge caused by his parents' murder. He is portrayed as a tragic hero, trapped by his inability to change and portrayed by Miller in self-consciously mythical terms:

> I wanted to strip the stuff down to its basic material and use it for all the power it was worth. I've always loved characters of tremendous force and a sort of Wagnerian stature, and at the time I came into comics people seemed to be lost amid the continuities and details, the choreography of these gigantic complicated universes filled with so many good guys you would step on one whenever you turned around.
> (ibid., p. 222)

Batman is inherently politically incorrect in Miller's view of him, but therein lies his power: he is abnormal, an aberration, larger than life (ref. Sharrett, C., in Pearson & Uricchio, (eds.), 1991, p. 38). Comic book heroes had become increasingly domesticised by the soap-opera elements of monthly comics; *The Dark Knight Returns* is, in contrast, operatic in tone. By the end of the comic, *Batman* has found renewed

reason to live, deciding to train a group of teenagers in a variety of disciplines. There is no happy ending but Batman seems to have found a way to live with the trauma of his parents' death: Miller achieves *Batman*'s integration into society by having him train others to be as capable of independent action as he is.

Maus

In 1980, Art Spiegelman and his wife, Francoise Mouly, founded *Raw*, an annual anthology of avant-garde comics, which is still extant. Spiegelman began publishing *Maus* in *Raw*, which told the story of his ambivalent relationship with his parents and of his father's time in Auschwitz, and in 1986 it was collected and released as a Penguin paperback. While some have complained that Spiegelman was guilty of stereotyping nationalities by depicting them as various animals, but Spiegelman has explained his reasoning thus:

> ...the preface quotes Hitler's words that 'The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human', and it was just a metaphor that kept coming back to me: it was clear to me that drawn as people, the comic would not have worked so well.
> (quoted in Sabin, R., 1993, p. 91)

Visually, *Maus* is intentionally crude and drawn in black and white, maintaining the reader's focus on the story rather than the finish. Also, it is printed on grey paper which gives it a muted monochrome feel. The images themselves are small and claustrophobic, with many panels given over to details such as lice and the diseases they carry, and together the impart an atmosphere of containment and caution, even in the contemporary scenes.

Maus is more significant to this study for its use as an example of how comics may be taken seriously by non-fans than it is as an example of comics which are popular amongst fans. Its most significant market has been bookshops, where it has to an extent formed a bridgehead by which other comics could be sold to a general market outside specialist shops. However, in recent years, the market for comics in bookshops has dwindled significantly.

Re-Incorporation

The impulse to collect has long been an important (if not a defining feature) part of being a comic book fan. Gradually, as supply began to meet the demand of fans, a new obsessiveness came to the fore, with the search for complete sets of titles and a desire to have all paraphernalia connected to a character or creator becoming common. Comic books came to be seen as investments. This led to collectors buying multiple copies of particular issues with a view to selling them at a later stage, along with absurd care being taken to preserve comics in pristine 'mint' condition. By the end of the 1980's this obsession with collecting meant that in the *Dow Jones Top 100 Movable Commodity Index* (June 1988), comics were listed fourth, after industrial diamonds, fine art and furniture.

As a result of the increased speculation on the future worth of comic books and as a way of boosting revenues, publishers have used gimmicks such as foil covers, releasing new titles with up to five different covers (*Spiderman* #1, 1992) and giving trading cards away with comic books. Sales for these particular issues, along with the myriad crossover stories and publicity-seeking stunts (the *Death of Superman, Azrael* temporarily replacing Bruce Wayne as *Batman* etc.) have been huge. Unfortunately, these gains seem unsustainable and display a short-term attitude on the part of many publishers.

At present there is a glut of superhero titles available which has occurred for a number of reasons. With the initial success of direct sales and of independent publishers, the supremacy of Marvel and DC was somewhat eroded. However, in the mid-1980's the independents suffered an implosion and collapse due to an over-proliferation of titles and variable quality and popularity.

During the same period, comic books received a lot of attention from other media because of the success and acclaim for *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen* and *Maus*. Much was written about comics having 'grown up', but despite other successes, the most notable effect was that, through the deconstructions of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, superheroes were revitalised yet again. Due to the revisionist trend of these superhero comics, Marvel and DC profited most (as they had the largest rosters of established characters to be revised). Non-mainstream comic book publishers found it more difficult to convince retailers to stock their product. The 'Big Two' regained much of their influence (by this stage, however, DC had a much smaller market share than Marvel and was increasingly aiming its products at adult readers).

By virtue of their size and resources, Marvel and DC were better able to promote or suffer losses incurred by releasing special editions than their competitors and were thus able to spur on collectors and speculators. At the same time, independent publishers producing mainstream comics were forced to act similarly or else be left behind. In many ways, those risking most were retailers, which were predominantly small businesses, forced to pre-guess the popularity of titles and to pay for them in advance. Ironically, the direct sales market which allowed the independents to flourish has recently been inhospitable to them.

Image and Competing Universes

Within the superhero genre, however, this new fan obsessiveness has led to the emergence of Image Comics. Image was founded in 1991 when seven of Marvel's most

popular artists, unhappy with working conditions and payment, left to set up their own imprint. As early as 1993, Image was judged to have 13% of market-share in the US compared to DC's 17-20%. Again, the Image creators hold ownership and copyright on all their characters and work, but their power with distributors and retailers is unprecedented for an independent publisher, especially a creator-led company. The Image phenomenon is still too recent to be evaluated properly, but shows how fan favour may be used by creators, and has resulted in the formation of a number of other companies (Valiant, Malibu and Dark Horse) attempting to create their own 'Universes' full of superheroes, androids and crossover epics in order to compete with the 'Big Two'.

The most prominent of the original seven Image creators is Todd Mc Farlane, whose *Spawn* has had sales of approximately one million every month since it began running. Mc Farlane is a bullish outspoken defender of his work and of Image, and is fully conscious of the market at which he is aiming his work:

> People say "Todd, you don't have a lot of substance in *Spawn*." Unfortunately, 10-15 year-olds don't want Shakespeare... ... Those kids want superhero stuff just like you and I wanted superhero stuff when we were kids... ... I don't care if a forty year-old is bitching that *Spawn* is not the greatest comic book, I'm not aiming it at forty year-olds. If all the thirteen year-old kids say it sucks, then we have a problem.
> (Mc Farlane, T., interviewed in *Hero Illustrated*, Vol. 1, # 3, September, 1993)

Despite the conspicuous success of certain star creators, the hermetic nature of the comic book industry is still guilty of the abuse of most of its creators. At present most creators producing comic books are fans who managed to make a career out of the medium they love. This has a number of results: firstly, the work becomes steadily more exclusive to outsiders; secondly, non-fans are less likely to become interested in producing comic books, and thirdly, poor pay and working conditions continue in a culture where creators feel lucky to work with their heros.

2000AD: The Comic of the Future

2000AD is unique among British comics for the loyalty it engendered in its fans and the close connections it has with American fandom. Until its launch in 1977, or possibly its predecessor *Action* in 1976, mainstream comics in Britain were generally divided between humour comics and 'Boys Own' or girls comics. To comics fans, they were duller than American comics (they were usually black and white in contrast to the 'polychromatic effulgence' of the American comics) and less dynamic. American comics, partly because they were difficult to obtain and hence 'special' were the objects of fan appreciation to a greater extent than domestically produced comic books. Furthermore, many of 2000AD's creators were fans of American comics and have since become successful in America: Alan Moore, Brian Bolland, Steve Dillon, Dave Gibbons, Grant Morrison, John Wagner and many others. *2000AD* attracted enormous fan loyalty by using a mixture of mainstream and underground creators, allowing it to be satirical, exciting and innovative. It was, and continues to be, widely collected and was an entrance into comic book fandom for many (as shall be discussed later). The need to collect back-issues led many fans to discover specialist comic shops and hence to become aware of movements in American and world comics.

It was characterised by the quality of its writing which often satirised modern Britain and America, and could be enjoyed at a number of levels. Its tone was frequently cynical and anti-authoritarian and it quickly gained a significant adult

Judge Dredd in an episode of The Cursed Earth from 2000AD prog. 78,
published by IPC Magazines Ltd, 1979. Script by Pat Mills, art by Brian
Bolland.

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readership. Artistically, the comic boasted many fine talents, who, given the freedom to expand their work beyond the narrow confines usual to British comics in both content and layout, produced some startling work. In recent years, there has been a decline in quality, mainly due to creators being lured to the more lucrative US industry, but between 1978 and 1985 approximately the comic was filled with vitality and invention and was extremely exciting.

2000AD's major star has always been *Judge Dredd*, a futuristic law officer, whose unflinching and often brutal adherence to the law have led some to complain of excessive violence in the comic, and to dub *Dredd* as a fascist. However, this is to miss the subtle humanity and humour in the strip; *Dredd* has in fact been used as a cipher for the attractiveness and yet danger of totalitarianism, and has at different times, shown a sensitivity and compassion which undercuts the perception of the strip as being based on violent aggression. *Dredd*'s strength is in its ability to entertain and raise serious questions at the same time and in its ability to encompass many different moods and viewpoints while remaining consistent; its message is frequently in its subtext and in the reader's knowledge of the larger history of the character.

Conclusion

While not having quite the same evolution, comic book fandom in Britain and Ireland has modeled itself closely on the US, mainly because much of its attention was directed at American comics. The main point distinguishing British and Irish fandom from American is the greater willingness to accept black and white comics, and hence non-mainstream comic books, due to the traditionally monochrome British output. An example of this may be seen in the fact that *Love and Rockets*, an American black and white publication, is a best-seller in Britain and Ireland while it is very much a cult item in the US despite critical acclaim. Comics are not as closely associated with

superheroes in Britain as they are in the US and thus more shelf-space is made available to independent publishers than is common in the US. Partly this is because British and Irish fans seem more political and more willing to embrace comic books with social relevance than US fans.

Despite this, the British and Irish fan markets are tending increasingly towards superheroes and viewing comic books as investments. It is hoped that the findings of this study will further describe both the present state and the development of comic book fandom in Ireland and hence in Britain. This study approaches the Irish and British experience as similar in most respects as both share the same distributors, retailers and pre-history. The next chapter attempts to describe the present state of the comics industry and its audience.

CHAPTER THREE

An Audience and Industry Profile

An Audience and Industry Profile

Introduction

Having outlined the history of the American comic book industry and of comics fandom, it is necessary to describe the current state of the comic book industry and its audience in order to explain the context of the respondents of this study. As was stated in the previous chapter, comic book fans in Britain and Ireland concentrate most of their attention on American comics. Thus, this short chapter will examine the American situation in the belief that it is sufficiently similar to the Irish context to be informative. This is despite the fact that Irish and British readers are more disposed to alternative titles; the predominant orientation of Irish fans is still towards American mainstream comics.

This chapter is organised into two distinct sections: the first deals with the current state of the US comic book industry, describing the size of the industry, its rate of growth, the types of products included, and a rough outline of the type and number of publishers operating in the industry. This industry profile also includes an exposition of the most recent changes in the medium, specifically the increased participation of conglomerates in the industry, the emergence of Image as a competitor for Marvel and DC, the increasing level of media crossover prevalent, and trends for the future of the industry.

The second section of this chapter deals with quantitative studies of comic book fans, describing who buys, what they buy, their lifestyles and consumption of other media, plus how these compare to other consumers.

The Industry

In the November 30th,1992 issue of Variety, the US comic book market was estimated as being worth $650 million per annum. 85-90% of this total was judged to come from specialist comic shops, which numbered roughly five thousand by the beginning of the decade. 20% of this overall comics market is comprised by comics-related merchandising: t-shirts, action figures, trading cards, price guides and products to care for and to keep comics. In an article in the *All About* section of the New York Times of February 17th, 1991, it was estimated that sales of comic books and related paraphenalia were increasing by 10-20% annually. This high level of growth has continued despite economic recession in the wake of the Gulf War and is reflected by the four hundred percent rise in the value of stocks in the Marvel Entertainment Group Inc. since becoming a public company in 1991.

Traditionally revolving around entrepeneurs and (comparatively) small independent companies, the comic book industry has slowly attracted the attention of the stock-market and hence of conglomerates. Marvel is sixty percent owned by New World Pictures; DC is owned by Time Warner Inc., the world's largest media group. On a smaller level, new companies such as Valiant and Malibu have attracted much investor interest, while Dark Horse Comics have established strong links with Twentieth Century Fox, adapting many of their films (eg. Terminator, Predator and Aliens) and further, producing on-going series using these characters. Since 1991 Dark Horse Entertainment has operated from the Twentieth Century Fox film lot, developing its own characters for cinema and television use, most notably *The Mask.*

In recent years comic books have been the source of numerous successful (and unsuccessful) feature films. As a consequence, both the comic book industry and other media have become aware of the potential of comics as a source of ideas and of news (eg. the Death of Superman). Despite the recent wave of comic book adaptations in the

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cinema, the trend of media-crossover does not seem to have exhausted itself. Describing the industry leaders, Lisbeth Barron, entertainment analyst with SG Warburg claimed that "Marvel's situation is very similar to where Disney found itself in the early 80's, with a really great group of assets that it hadn't really exploited fully." (quoted in Variety, Nov. 30th, 1992)   This trend of viewing comic book characters as assets to be exploited has been one of the most notable trends of the last decade: in 1992 Marvel bought Fleer Corp., a trading card and action-figure company; in 1990 MCA bought 20% of Archie Comics and has since produced feature films based on both *Richie Rich* and *Casper the Ghost*. Surprisingly, in the light of this trend, in 1992 83% of Marvel's revenues were still derived from comic books.

The comic book industry, despite its diversification into other media and ancillary products is still mainly dependent upon monthly issued comic books and on the direct sales market. Although it is difficult to determine exactly how many publishers are active in the US comics industry, the Comic Buyers Guide listed one hundred and twenty-five in 1992, a figure which may have risen slightly. Of these, Marvel is still the largest, with a 52% market-share and an average paid circulation of 12,250,848, and DC second largest with 17-20% and an average paid circulation (per month) of 2,476,962 for its juvenile orientated Superman/Batman Group (figures courtesy of the Audit Bureau of Circulations as of 31/12/1992). Each month approximately five hundred titles are published, and to buy every comic book published in any one month would cost between $1200-1500 (estimate courtesy of Comic Buyers Guide).

With such a proliferation, there is an ongoing struggle for market-share and hence profit and prominence in the industry. As a result, publishers have striven to

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publish even more comic book titles in an effort to establish their place in the market-place and in the minds of consumers. The battle for shelf-space and the fan loyalty which, it is hoped, will be engendered by having a range of titles, has led to a glut which has created problems for retailers. However, these problems have not as yet affected publishers:

> The irony of this war is that there can be no losers, only degrees of winners. The market is expanding so rapidly that I can't imagine anyone losing actual dollars, as opposed to losing points.
> (Lou Banks, Marvel Director of Sales - Direct Sales, quoted in State of the Industry, Comic Buyers Guide, 1993 Annual)

In fact, what has happened is a retrenchment on the part of both publishers and consumers in the traditionally successful genres of comic books: superheroes and adventure. Alternative publishers and titles have encountered increasing difficulties gaining the attention and trust of retailers and have become less significant (albeit still numerous) in specialist comic book shops. Because of this, as the direct sales market becomes increasingly 'disdainful and neglectful of the alternatives', the alternatives are resorting to record shops and 'weird pop culture shops' (Kim Thompson, Vice President, Fantagraphic Books, ibid.) which have begun to sell comic books. It may be that the alternatives, like their antecedents the undergrounds, will be forced to use different systems of distribution, using ties with popular cultural movements rather than depending on comic book fans.

The Audience

This brings us to the nature of who actually buys comic books. Two studies, both initiated by DC Comics, showed the gender spread of readers as 12.4% female and 87.4% male (survey conducted by Mark Clements Research, 1991) while the other showed it to be 93.1% male and 6.9% female (survey conducted by Media Research

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Inc., 1992). In fact, this second survey showed a complete disregard for the effects or views of female readers by removing all female replies: the study was titled *A Survey of Young Upwardly Mobile Men.*

The question of why so few women read or create comics is usually debated by reference to their predominantly male imagery, an approach which is attacked by Martin Barker (Barker, M., 1989, chapter 5) who claims that girls reading the Beano etc. identify with characters as people, rather than males and females, and to gender roles. Carol Bennett, publisher, Knockabout Comics, puts this quite succinctly: "I really think that as girls get older there's a 'double barrier' against reading comics... a) the fact that they're considered for kids, and b) the fact that they're a male domain." (quoted in Sabin, R., 1993, p.221) One might quite successfully argue that a less marked clinging onto adolescence may explain the lesser number of female comic book fans.

The MRI *Survey of Upwardly Mobile Young Men* is interesting for its analysis of spending patterns and cultural consumption, and seems to mirror many of the respondents' actions in my study. All but one of the respondents in my study were male, and the single female respondent did not categorise herself as a fan although she did read comic books. The MRI survey found that 76.5% of respondents were college educated, almost double the US average of 40.2%. Also, with a median age of twenty-seven, with 71.2% of respondents aged between eighteen and thirty-four, readers were older than the traditionally perceived 12-14 year group, with 22.9% aged thirty-five and over.

Amongst those surveyed, it seemed that extensive buying was the norm: the median number of comic books bought (in the last thirty days) was 39.6 with an average expenditure of $97 dollars in the same period. 97.1% bought comics to add to their collection, but no figures were sought in relation to buying for profit or expected value of the comics bought.

Disabusing the perception of comics readers being semi-literate, 91.6% had bought books in the last twelve months, compared to a US national average of 44.1%,

with comics readers nearly four times more likely to buy hardcover books than the national average. The average number of books bought was twenty-five versus a national average of seven. Comic book readers listened to music over twice the average and were six times more likely to play or own video games. Similarly, those surveyed by MRI went to the cinema twice as much as the national average and three times as regularly. Science-fiction books and films were the most popular among respondents, while the most widespread sport amongst those surveyed was weightlifting (more than four times the national average) which makes remarks about male body fantasies appear to be correct.

Overall, the MRI survey portrayed comic book fans as voracious consumers of cultural artefacts and to be well educated. It also claimed that respondents were on average more successful in their careers than the national average and had higher disposable incomes which they spent on comic books and other media. While the findings of the present study are of a qualitative rather than a quantitative nature (eg. the MRI survey), they reflect similar patterns of consumption. It is hoped that these findings will aid in an explanation of why and how fans use comic books and, at the same time, describe the nature and impulses of fandom in general.

CHAPTER FOUR

Struggle, Strategies & Postmodernism

Struggles, Strategies and Postmodernism

Introduction

This chapter attempts to describe recent theories relating to agency and structure and to relate them to cultural consumption and production. In so doing, it is heavily influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose concepts of fields and of cultural capital are central to my research. To begin, I attempt to introduce Bourdieu's main theories and show both the similarities and the contrasts in his thinking to that of the structuralists. Bourdieu's ideas are then taken and used both to explain the processes of dedifferentiation involved in postmodernism, and to devise a context in which fan activity may be made understandable and be related to cultural consumption in general. Further, the development of consumption is discussed in order to explain its central significance in contemporary society. Finally, this is related to the choices available to social agents in a decentred, postmodern context, once again questioning the assumptions inherent in conceptions of the popular and notions of dominance and subordination.

This study strives to achieve a postmodern critique which avoids the notion of postmodernism as an anti-system involved in a denial of distinction, but rather as a way of explaining the multi-layered, often contradictory, but discernable modes of achieving distinction and hence social identity. Furthermore, by concentrating on the active, participatory nature of comic book fandom, it allows an appreciation of popular culture which avoids reducing it to what it (popular culture) stands for.

A Cultural Economy

Bourdieu's main contribution has been his development of a theory of 'fields' which grew out of his metaphor of markets in a cultural economy. I will outline

these 'fields' to demonstrate how the changes in agency and structure described by Bourdieu may be useful to my studies.

If one contemplates a cultural economy, one must assume a supply-side, a product, and a demand-side. The supply-side is comprised of the producers of cultural goods such as artists, writers, curators, gallery owners, publishers and agents. The product is the cultural good that is to be valuated and/or exchanged. The demand-side is made up of the consumers of the cultural good. Within this cultural economy as in the ordinary economy there are many different markets. For instance, the market for avant-garde works of art would differ from the market for video cassettes of Sylvester Stallone features, even though there may be a crossover between both markets. What both of these markets share with the other markets in the cultural economy is the reliance of the cultural good on the 'affective affinity' the consumer has for the product.

The Aesthetic Disposition

This 'affective affinity' is the degree to which a person likes or dislikes a cultural good; it is a function of taste. In his book *Distinction* (Bourdieu, P.,1984) Bourdieu examined the social factors contributing to the shaping and development of taste. He explicitly criticized the way that the 'ideology of charisma' sees taste as a gift of nature (ibid.p.1). Instead he claimed that cultural needs (to use the metaphor of a cultural economy again) are produced by upbringing and education :

> Thus the encounter with a work of art is not 'love at first sight' as is normally supposed, and the act of empathy, Einfuhlung, which is the art-lover's pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code.
> (ibid., p. 3)

Following on from this, Bourdieu described 'the aesthetic disposition' (ibid.,p. 29) which allows one to consider things (not just works of art) purely in terms of form and not function. To use this 'aesthetic disposition' is to have at one's disposal the cultural codes discussed above. Hence the aesthetic disposition is necessarily a

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historical way of thinking. Bourdieu uses the example of two works by Piet Mondrian and Gino Severini to show this (ibid., p. 52). Both paintings are the artists' renderings of the excitement of popular music, but while the 'gay abandon' may arguably be more evident in Severini's painting, anyone without a prior knowledge of Mondrian's work would almost certainly miss the relative exuberance on show. In the same way, a lack of knowledge of the schools of art or art history would make any appreciation of a work impossible beyond the 'sensible properties' contained within the work (ibid., p.2). These 'sensible properties' include the perception of skin as downy or calloused, lacework as delicate, or stonework as rough. They also include the 'emotional resonances' prompted by these properties such as an 'austere' melody or 'joyful' colours. Thus the person who has not developed an adequate disposition is stuck at the 'primary stratum' (ibid., p.2) of meaning which is based on our ordinary experience. The 'stratum of secondary meanings' which is concerned with the meaning of what is signified is where the 'aesthetic disposition' is used.

In *The Aesthetic Adventure* (Gaunt, W., 1988) William Gaunt vividly describes the struggles of artists and writers in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. They fought for the right to create 'Art for Art's Sake' and to live accordingly. In *Distinction* Bourdieu shows how this has been turned into a distancing from necessity (Bourdieu, P., 1984, p. 53). The French bourgeoisie see the gratuitous disinterested nature of art as being one of the greatest manifestations of 'ease' (ibid., p.54). This detachment when allied to the 'aesthetic disposition' gives rise to a further distinction from the everyday or vulgar, leading to an increasing 'stylization of life' (Weber, ibid., p.55).Style is thus used to distance life, art and the person with an 'aesthetic disposition' from the relations of power as well as from economic necessity.

Fields

If taste is a matter of distinction and distancing oneself from the everyday, then autonomy and the drive towards it is crucial to the understanding of the cultural economy and of the society that begets it. Bourdieu's concept of the 'field' will hopefully help to explain this.

Bourdieu developed his theory of fields out of his concept of markets. A field is a more generalized market, without the implications of direct exchange that the earlier concept had. The field allows for allegiances and mobility as well as struggles and strategies. Whereas the market allowed only for exchange, the field is based on differentiation. Thus even though no literal exchange may occur, the person or group in a field may differentiate her/themselves through their 'affective affinities' or their valuation or rejection of cultural goods.

There is a supply-side once again with fields. This is made up of the de-limited field of production while the demand-side is the field of consumption. Within the de-limited field of production there is a constant struggle for symbolic power. One may see similarities with the workings of apparatuses, although Bourdieu has little time for Foucault's work. Further, one may see how Bourdieu's notion of fields may be related to hegemony, with fields operating in a more generalised way, which allows for struggles both between and within classes, and which has been accepted by the British culturalists as a useful approach.

Priests and Prophets

Bourdieu explains the struggle for symbolic power by generalizing Weber's metaphor of priests and prophets. The 'priests' of the de-limited field strive to maintain stasis and to uphold an orthodoxy which they (or their predecessors) established through a struggle with the previous orthodoxy. The 'prophets', on the

other hand, try to usurp the orthodoxy of the priests in favour of their own heterodoxy. The 'priests' have much to lose and the 'prophets' much to gain. Both are struggling to hold onto or wrest control of symbolic power in the de-limited field of production, and hence in the field of consumption.

Although the value of a cultural good depends on the value given to it by the relevant consumer community, Bourdieu contends that these judgements are usually determined by the amount of symbolic capital the producer has accumulated. This symbolic capital is what the 'priests' and 'prophets' are fighting for: the right to legitimate one's own knowledge, abilities or works. An example of this is the struggle of the impressionist painters of the nineteenth century to gain acceptance. In this case the 'priests' were the salon, along with curators and gallery owners who rejected the impressionists' choice of subjects for their paintings and also the techniques used and the effects striven for. The struggle was not merely a question of the cultural goods being produced; it was also based on the notion of 'Art for Art's Sake' or the function and position of art and the artist in society.

The impressionists' rejection of allegorical art and their concentration on the possibilities of light and texture in painting were a direct affront to the academicism of the salon and to the patrons and art dealers of the time. By painting people in cafes and highly stylised landscapes, the impressionists transgressed the generally held assumptions of what were fitting subjects for paintings. The social project behind this was to assert the autonomy of the artist and of art from the field of consumption. According to Bourdieu, the more autonomous a field is, the greater the extent to which production is only for other producers and not for consumers in the social field. This would explain the valorization of modern art (having been legitimated and now contrasted with the work of postmodern 'prophets') and yet the confusion and even anger of many people when confronted with modernist works.

Education

The education system mediates between the de-limited field of production and the field of consumption and helps explain how autonomous fields develop and are accepted. By legitimising particular knowledges and discourses through including them in curricula, the education system institutionalizes the valuation of certain cultural goods and denies the cultural worth of others by their exclusion. By giving out formal qualifications and by establishing standardized levels of learning in particular subjects through exams, the education system confers 'titles of cultural nobility' (Bourdieu, P., 1984, p.18) on the successful student. At the same time it excludes the autodidact who must constantly prove herself and is either ignored (if 'orthodox') or rejected outright (if 'heretic').

Bourdieu then asks the question: how then is there such a strong correlation between educational achievement and the 'aesthetic disposition'? This he attributes to the seemingly contradictory term 'legitimate autodidactism'. This informal learning is both valorized and expected as one progresses to higher levels of education :

> Thus, it is written into the tacit definition of the academic qualification formally guaranteeing a specific competence (like an engineering diploma) that it really guarantees possession of a 'general culture' whose breadth is proportionate to the prestige of the qualification.
> (ibid, p.25)

Following on from this expectation of the accumulation of a particular level of 'general culture' is the 'entitlement effect' which allows an academic like Umberto Eco to write and talk on many disparate topics outside his realm of specialization while refusing this right to others with less cultural or academic capital. In the end Bourdieu says that :

> ... it is because they are linked either to a bourgeois origin or to the quasi-bourgeois mode of existence presupposed by prolonged schooling, or (most often) to both of these combined, that educational qualifications come to be seen as guarantee of the capacity to adopt the aesthetic disposition.
> (ibid., p.28)

One may also assert that the entitlement effect stems from the implicit incorporation of 'the disciplines' (Foucault, M., 1979) which mark the formally educated person as operating within accepted discourses, which, while they might be transgressive, are more likely to be open to assimilation into the status quo.

Habitus

If Bourdieu's theory of fields is based on differentiation, then it must be concerned with positioning. It is also a theory of practice as it is based on capital accumulation, exchange and heterodoxy. Bourdieu termed the agent's position her/their 'habitus' and described two main categories of practice : strategy and struggle. I will attempt to show how both strategy and struggle operate within Bourdieu's theory of fields by contrasting traditional and modern societies and through an exposition of his differences with the structuralists.

The habitus of an individual in a field is shaped by her cultural capital and symbolic power. This is achieved by a mixture of strategies which are individual actions within the field. An individual's particular strategies are carried out with the intention of accumulating cultural capital. Their aim is wealth, status, mobility and power. Struggles, on the other hand, are collective actions, which aim at getting power, and the imposition of a set of either orthodox or heterodox norms and symbols (Lash, S., 1991, p. 249). Thus, while strategies are based upon assumptions of a static society, struggles are actually involved in fundamental changes to the class order of a society. However, the agents involved in struggles are equally as concerned with differentiating themselves from others involved in the same struggle as those against whom they are struggling. In other words, the adversary must be attacked, but those on one's own side are only temporary allies of convenience, a point which the Gramscians play down in their considerations of Bourdieu's work.

Agency and Structure

In order to explain this more clearly, I would like to describe Bourdieu's ideas on agency and structure. Like Mauss, Bourdieu found in the primitive society of Kabylia in North Africa (the focus of his early research) that relations of power were effectively 'exchange relationships' based on debt. Gifts were given and received and had to be answered (after a sufficient time had elapsed to obscure the motivation for the reciprocal gift). In the same way, insults had to be answered in order to avoid being seen to be under the power of the aggressor. Thus 'symbolic power' was exercised intersubjectively in traditional societies. This was based on a day to day use of obligations and by the protection the leader gives to the subordinate. In effect, it involved a continuous 'weaving of affective bonds' (Lash, S., 1991, p. 256). By reading structures into the same interactions, Levi-Strauss sees power in a 'legalistic' modern way. Levi-Strauss took Mauss' idea of the gift (an exchange between subjects) and turned it into a structure, a 'constructed object'. In this way Levi-Strauss assumed it to be an 'unconscious principle', but Bourdieu argued this ignored the reality of the symbolic power the creditor has over debtor.

For example, in Kabylia, Bourdieu found that in relation to marriages, the point was not to look for the rule as the structuralists did, but instead, to discern the strategy behind the type of marriage decided upon. Thus, while Bourdieu's subjects were aware of the rules involved in marriages, they were normally invoked as a 'second order strategy' (or an excuse). In modern societies however, power is mediated through various fields. Thus in traditional societies, individual action or agency is the norm, while in modern society power is mediated through structures: fields (ibid, p.261).

Another difference is that in traditional societies, the culture is shaped by a single 'doxa' (normally formed by the more immediate and shared necessities of survival), while modern society is characterized by the struggle between orthodox and heterodox values. This means that traditional societies are based on consensus while

modern society is formed by discourse. This implies that, while in traditional societies stasis is the rule, in modern society, where social and cultural changes are introduced through heterodoxy, there are classes (or class fractions) whose interests are served by change (ibid, p.262). In effect this means that in traditional societies, the mode of exchange/practice is via strategies, while in modern society both strategies and struggles are used in cultural exchanges.

Bourdieu sees modernization as a process of differentiation wherein the de-limited fields strive for autonomy from the more general field of power. The field of power (as seen in traditional societies) operates on a 'friend vs. foe' logic based on obligation and slight, while as fields become more autonomous (more modern) they operate increasingly on the logic of 'true vs. false', on discourse. To Bourdieu, modernization is a process of change from agency to structure, creating an increasingingly differentiated habitus, wherein power passes from people to 'titles', to occupational 'place' and to 'things'. In modern society, institutions ('mechanisms in fields') reproduce themselves purely by functioning. Structures are formed by the objective relations of agents in the fields, with the fields then operating as structures. The objective relations have two roles : 1) they determine the habitus, and 2) they form the basis of the empirical interactions in the fields. The empirical interactions then produce outcomes: the symbolic objects which have symbolic power in the social field. Thus the structure (the de-limited field of production) is the supply-side while the individuals in the social field are the demand-side.

Bourdieu and Structuralism

Through his work on fields, Bourdieu has shown his belief that structures are central to understanding society. However, he is not a structuralist and has explicitly criticized structuralism and its disciples for two main reasons. The first of these, as described above, relates to Bourdieu's rejection of legalistic structures in primitive

societies, as proposed by Levi-Strauss. Secondly, he argues against the elitism and lack of reflexivity of the structuralists and poststructuralists. While Foucault and Althusser followed Levi-Strauss in their desire for objectivist scientificity, Bourdieu sees the social scientist as being equally as involved in the scramble of everyday life as any other actor in society. He describes the 'immediate investment' (Lash, S., 1991, p.255) necessary to survive in university life in order to achieve position and prestige.. In contrast to this, Foucault strives to show himself as being above the strategies and struggles Bourdieu describes :

> But the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a "we" in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a "we" possible, by elaborating the question.
> (Foucault, M., 1985, p.385)

Effectively, Foucault is stressing the autonomy of the academic field (and the logic of 'true vs. false') while Bourdieu sees the academic field as being involved (to varying degrees) in the 'friend vs. foe' logic of the field of power and stresses that academics are deeply involved in (ironically) Foucaultian power/knowledge assumptions. One might say, that by simply questioning established discourses, one creates an 'us and them' which implies a nascent "we" despite Foucault's protests.

Dedifferentiation

Bourdieu's theory of fields is based on a view of modernity as a process of differentiation. While his work has dealt mainly with the modern context, and distinction with reference to legitimate culture, his ideas have been adapted in order to explain postmodernism and popular culture.

In *Sociology of Postmodernism*, Scott Lash develops Bourdieu's theory of fields in order to accommodate his theory of postmodernism as a process of de-differentiation. Firstly, Lash asserts that 'full modernity' presupposes absolute autonomy of fields, but

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fields are always sites of struggle and are thus always involved in the friend or foe logic of the field of power and hence, never truly involved in the true versus false logic of an autonomous field (Lash, S.,1991, 262). Secondly, he sees postmodernism as a process of de-differentiation and a reversal of autonomisation, which includes the de-differentiation of fields (ie. the partial collapsing of the aesthetic into the social), of agency, and of the habitus (through a partial breakdown or decentring of the classificatory rules which structure the habitus).

Lash contends that this decentring is powered by two 'motors' (ibid., p. 263): firstly, the emergence of new social classes as vehicles for the production and reception of postmodern forms, and secondly, a new avante-garde, a type of postmodern 'prophet'.

Lash describes the emergence of a 'new' middle-class which is post-industrial in nature (ibid.,p. 27) and the related disappearance of the working-class due to 'embourgeoisment'. This new middle-class has developed through access to education and is grouped around the communications industries, information technologies and education. While the 'old' middle-class inherited much of its cultural capital, the 'new' middle-class has acquired it and is actively involved in a struggle to establish its own norms and values.

These new middle-classes can increase their cultural capital by de-differentiating between high art (which is too expensive for them) and popular culture, which is more affordable and in which they are well versed. Also, because of their increased participation in the culture industries, the new middle-classes have become part of the de-limited field of production. The delimited field has gone through 'mass-ification' (ibid., p. 263) and has begun to be subsumed into the social field. It is my belief that this blurring of differentiation between the social and de-limited fields of production is an integral facet of fandom.

Fans

In *The Cultural Economy of Fandom* (in Lewis, L., (ed.), 1992), John Fiske applies Bourdieu's fields to fandom, describing a 'shadow cultural economy' (p.30) that is "associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race." (ibid., p. 30) Fiske sees two main problems with Bourdieus work: 1) his emphasis on economics and class as the major dimensions of social discrimination and 2) his failure to give the same analysis to the culture of the subordinate as that of the dominant. In relation to this second point, Fiske believes:

> This leads him seriously to underestimate the creativity of popular culture and its role in distinguishing between different social formations within the subordinated. He does not allow that there are forms of popular cultural capital produced outside and often against official cultural capital.
> (ibid, p.32)

Bourdieu characterises the 'popular aesthetic' as an 'anti-Kantian' aesthetic which refuses to give 'the image of the object autonomy with respect to the object of the image' (Bourdieu, P., 1984, p. 42), which rejects the 'arbitrary or ostentatious gratuitousness of stylistic exercises or purely formalistic experiments' (ibid., p.40). As a result, Bourdieu believes the popular aesthetic is based on

> the affirmation of continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function, or, one might say, on a refusal of the refusal which is the starting point of the high aesthetic...
> (ibid., p. 32)

Bourdieu's notion of the popular aesthetic therefore positions it as the opposite of the aesthetic disposition, explicitly stating that the refusal of the refusal is not due to a 'lack of familiarity' (ibid., p. 32), but rather, its need for participation. He appears to contradict himself here: if the aesthetic disposition is based on knowledge (through

which cultural capital is gained) and distancing oneself from necessity (or from the field of power), then the popular aesthetic, characterised by a lack of cultural capital (knowledge) and disadvantaged in the field of power is forced to rely on participation precisely because of its difficulties in legitimating its habitus, in its inability to speak the language of those with more cultural capital. If one is to use the analogy of a cultural economy, then one must explain cultural poverty in the same terms as cultural capital, rather than obfuscating the issue by claiming a qualitative, rather than quantitative, difference between the advantaged and disadvantaged within that cultural economy. One may refer to Barthes' *Dominici, or the Triumph of Literature* (Barthes, R., 1957) to show how the culturally/linguistically disadvantaged suffer at the hands of those possessing more cultural capital. It seems that Bourdieu is to an extent a victim of the bourgeois mentality that he describes.

Though he accuses Bourdieu of underestimating popular culture, Fiske accepts the distinction between official cultural capital and popular cultural capital. Fiske believes that fandom offers a way to fill a cultural lack and achieve the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital. He describes how fans use this 'shadow cultural economy' through three main headings: 1) Discrimination and distinction, 2) Productivity and participation, and 3) Capital accumulation.

Discrimination

Fan discrimination depends upon the distinction between fans and non-fans and upon the notion of authenticity by which one is included or excluded from the category of fan (in relation to this, in *Unpacking My Library*, Benjamin writes about 'a real collector, a collector as he ought to be' - Benjamin, W., 1973, p. 67) and by which

cultural objects are judged worthy of fan adoration. In order to do this, however, fans are forced to use the criteria of official culture to judge the objects of their interest, which leaves popular culture as 'the art of being in between' (ref. de Certeau, Fiske, J., 1989, p. 35), where texts must allow participation and have relevance to their audiences. As such, popular cultural discrimination is almost entirely concerned with social identity, with habitus:

> Popular discrimination, then, is not merely the process of selection and rejection from the repertoire of cultural resources offered; it involves a productive use of the chosen meanings in the constant cultural process of reproduction by which texts and everyday life are brought into meaningful contact. It is not concerned with the evaluation of quality, but rather the perception of relevance. It is less concerned with the text than with what the text can be made to do. It is thus textually disrespectful. The relevance of the text to the everyday allows its textuality to be participated in; readers are cultural producers, not cultural consumers.
> (ibid., p. 151)

Hence, the popular text is 'producerly', but by attempting to promote popular culture he ends up utterly devaluing its texts. One might ask that if the readers are not concerned with quality, why do they consume them? Why not simply man the barricades? Further, by stressing the 'poverty of the individual text in popular culture' (ibid., p. 125), and hence, popular culture's intertextuality, he denies the raison d'etre of fans: the worth to the fans of the particular texts which give them pleasure.

Productivity

Fiske categorises three types of fan productivity. The first of these is semiotic productivity which is common to all popular culture, whereby consumers make meanings of social identity and social experience from the texts they use. The second, enunciative productivity, may be characterised as 'fan talk' and may often be as

important a factor in becoming a fan of something as the inherent characteristics of the texts of which the person is a fan. The third type of fan productivity is textual productivity: fans creating their own texts, based on or influenced by the industrially produced texts which are the source of their enthusiasm. Fiske describes them as being 'narrowcast' and hence lacking outside the fan culture which informs and supports them. In the case of comic books, one may justifiably claim that the majority of industrially produced texts are themselves 'narrowcast'; one may make the same assertion for the majority of heavy metal music and its numerous sub-genres.

Fiske describes this fan productivity as proceeding from the refusal of the subordinate habitus to distance text and artist from the audience, that while there is reverence, there is a lack of the deference common to official culture and a feeling of possession of both text and artist as somehow 'theirs'. This, he claims, is because the moment of reception is the moment of productivity in popular culture. One may ask if this differs significantly from the moment of reception in official culture? If one accepts Bourdieu's claim that taste is a means for creating distinction, then surely the person appreciating fine art is as active in possessing the work of art as the fan (otherwise, why else would they buy prints and art books or discuss exhibitions they had visited?).

Capital Accumulation

Fiske claims that the productivity apparent in popular culture may be explained by the process of cultural capital accumulation by fans: fans use their knowledge to increase their power over and their participation in the original industrially produced text; the dominant habitus uses knowledge to enrich appreciation of the text, while the popular habitus uses it to 'see through' the production processes hidden in the text (ibid, p. 42). Thus, while in official culture, texts are viewed as the creations of individuals, in popular culture, they are acknowledged as industrially produced. This leads to the ongoing struggle between the industry which tries to 'incorporate' fans, while the fans

strive to 'excorporate' these texts. While accepting much of this analysis, one must ask whether or not the 'aesthetic disposition' of the connoisseur is not itself a means of participation in the text, which by its officially sanctioned cultural capital also allows the audience to 'see through' the text, and thus to lessen the distance from and deference to the text? Similarly, one must question Fiske's assertion that fans of popular culture are in subordinate positions in society: the American organization Viewers for Quality Television (VQT) has a predominantly professional and affluent membership, while remaining a fan collective. VQT challenges Fiske's assertion that quality is less important than social relevance in popular culture as the organization was formed with "the mission of 'quality television' as its goal (Brower, S., in Lewis, L., (ed.), 1992, p. 181) Also, knowledge of the production of comics by specific individuals, by auteurs, and the valorisation of these producers was universal amongst the respondents in this study.

Secret Gardens

This is not to deny that popular culture is functional, as one must accept Bourdieu's assertion that no field may be completely autonomous, and hence, all are to an extent involved in the field of power. Fields themselves are based upon power/knowledge, and thus distinction is inherently functional. What I would like to assert, however, is that the high culture/popular culture dichotomy obscures the identical impulses behind both by opposing a dominant with a subordinate. Distinction operates with equal force amongst the subordinate and for the same reasons; as Fiske himself writes:

> Cultural tastes and practices are produced by social rather than by individual differences, and so textual discrimination and social distinction are part of the same cultural process within and between fans and other popular audiences.

Viewed this way, the fan or the connoisseur's affective affinity is based on particular events and the creation of particular meanings which are difficult to express (Ang, I., 1985, p. 85). These affective affinities are based on bricolage, the 'structured improvisation' that Hebdige describes (Hebdige, D., 1979, p. 96), brought about by a mixture of 'conjuncture' and 'specificity' as particular solutions to circumstances (ibid., p. 81). However, where Hebdige sees subcultures as 'noise' (ibid., p. 90), temporary blockages in the system of representation and as 'profane articulations' (Levi-Strauss), my assertion is that bricolage or eclecticism may be viewed as part of a larger structure of meaning, in which fans (and others) create meanings and habituses from a variety of strategies and discourses. Furthermore, if one considers the conflation of the aesthetic and social fields described by Lash and the associated promotion of popular culture by the 'new' middle-classes, the distinctions made between official and popular culture become blurred (intentionally so) and thus, the differences between uses of cultural capital and reception strategies/participatory activities described by Fiske become more difficult to support, as we will see in our concluding discussion

Collecting

Fiske also describes how collecting is an important part of the accumulation of cultural capital for the fan, claiming that fan collections differ from other collections by their emphasis on quantity rather than quality (Fiske, J., in Lewis, L., (ed.), 1992, p. 44). However, he seems to contradict himself by later in the same article claiming:

> Because the industrial text is not an art-object to be preserved, its ephemerality is not an issue; indeed its disposability and constant, anxious search for that which is new, stimulating and yet acceptable to the people are among its most valuable characteristics.
> (ibid., p. 47)

This may be challenged on two fronts: firstly, the ephemerality of comics has added to the rarity and value of particular issues and is the source of concern for many collectors who go to great lengths to preserve their collections. Secondly, surely all culture is motivated both by the twin impulses of preservation and the discovery of new works which develop and expand the canon?

In *On Collecting Art and Culture* (in During, S., 1993) James Clifford attempts to describe the impulses behind collecting (both for individuals and for galleries and museums). In so doing, Clifford does not distinguish between the impulses of the fan of popular culture and the high culture buff. His conception of the collector's practices is very similar to Bourdieu's description of the development of habitus through distinction which Clifford describes as a "sort of 'gathering' around the self and the group - the assemblage of a material 'world', the marking-off of a subjective domain that is not 'other'" (Clifford, J., in During, S., 1993, p. 52). Similarly, Benjamin believed that a collection 'loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner' (Benjamin, W., 1973, p. 67), as it would thus lack 'the final thrill' of acquisition which locked the contents of a collection within a 'magic circle' (ibid., p. 60).

The collector creates distinction through ownership, and for Benjamin, this distinction is founded upon the scarcity and quality of the objects which she has collected and others do not possess. The emphasis on quality common to all collectors may be seen as a means of justifying their avaricious nature:

> The inclusions in all collections reflect wider cultural rules - of rational taxonomy, of gender, of aesthetics. An excessive, sometimes even rapacious need to *have* is transformed into rule-governed, meaningful desire. Thus the self that must possess but cannot have it all learns to select, order, classify in hierarchies - to make 'good' collections.
> (Clifford, J., in During, S., 1993, p. 52/3)

Discrimination and discernment is therefore crucial for the collector, rather than an uncritical pleasure in every artefact she sees. Thus, the collector of popular cultural artefacts like comic books must apply equally stringent criteria as the fine art collector in deciding what to include and what to leave out of their collections. This contradicts the notion of popular culture being *for* something, as being functional (ref. Fiske, J., in Lewis, L. (ed.), 1992, p. 35), in fact, Benjamin claims that the collectors care little for the functional value of their collections (Benjamin, W., 1973, p. 60). The importance of discernment to collectors (and to fans) may also be seen in Benjamin's description of writers as people 'dissatisfied with the books which they could buy but do not like' (ibid., p. 66): the more developed one's critical faculties and knowledge of one's area of speciality becomes, the more the fan/collector is pushed towards textual productivity.

Finally, because all collections are by nature *ad hoc,* no matter how much effort and thought is put into their expansion, they always contain oddities, objects that seem to be out of place (ibid., p. 61), they require multiple strategies in order to explain them. The collector's urge to acquire and her shifting tastes lead to a mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous, treasures and mistakes, rather than consistency: collections, because they are based on the 'shifting set of allegiances' (Fiske, J., 1989, p. 24) of the collector refuse to conform to any explanatory system.

Pleasure

While Fiske's work on fans attempts to explain the uses to which texts are put in order to create a habitus, there is little or no discussion of that which inspires a person to become a fan in the first place: the pleasure specific texts (and types of texts) give the fans. This is a major failing of Fiske's and of the Culturalists which may be explained by the difficulties in explaining/admitting to pleasure in popular culture that many

consumers have. In *Watching Dallas* (Ang, I., 1985), Ien Ang deals with how *Dallas* gives pleasure to its viewers and also the difficulties they have in legitimating this pleasure. As a result, her study focuses on the relationship between pleasure and ideology, and she attempts to read her respondents' letters 'symptomatically' in order to explain this relationship (ibid., p. 11).

Ang conceives of the pleasure of a text residing, not in the 'satisfaction of needs', but rather, in 'the effect of a certain productivity of a cultural artefact' (ibid., p.9). In the case of *Dallas*, this productivity is a result of the 'emotional realism' of the programme (ibid., p.45). Emotional realism operates at the connotative rather than the denotative level; thus, an 'inner realism' (an emotional resonance) may be mixed with an 'external unrealism' (a wealthy family all living in the same house, every storyline revolving around that one dysfunctional family), which allows a stylization of the world that is appealing to the viewers (ibid., p. 47). One may relate this to the way in which many comic books are set in fantastic scenarios but fail or succeed according to the degree that they ground their characters in an emotional realism that allows the reader to care about them. In this way Ang can claim that the escapism for which Dallas and other soaps are berated does not deny reality, but rather, gives the audience an opportunity to 'play' with reality via an 'imaginary participation' which gives pleasure (ibid., p. 49).

An important feature of this 'play' with reality is the knowledge on the part of the audience that the narrative is open-ended and unlikely to reach a complete resolution: it is a serial, and as a result, the prime source of involvement is not the suspense of the narrative, but 'the creation and slow consolidation of a complex fictional world' (Johnston, S., quoted in ibid., p. 57). This relates to what Ang calls 'the tragic structure of feeling' (ibid., p. 46): the feeling that happiness is always precarious and that life is a series of ups and downs, rather than a progression to a triumphant resolution (comic books normally adhere to the serial format, where the characters are

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only marginally changed by their experiences, while their raison d'etre remains constant). She relates this to the 'melodramatic imagination' which is

> the expression of a refusal, or inability, to accept insignificant everyday life as banal and meaningless, and is born of a vague, inarticulate dissatisfaction with existence here and now.
> (ibid., p. 79)

Importantly, in melodrama, the psychological credibility of the characters is subordinated to the use of melodramatic situations (which are surrounded by social and cultural myths and fantasies) in order to increase the emotional effects on the audience (ibid., p. 64). Thus, Batman's crime fighting is constantly shown to be as a result of the murder of his parents and the constant parade of super-villains with every type of neurosis imaginable. In *The Myth of Superman,* written in 1962, Eco unfortunately concentrated on the negation of time in comics which contained stories that were complete and stood alone, rather than the comics with on-going storylines which were spreading at the time he was writing (eg. *Spiderman* and *The Fantastic Four,* who he mentions but does not discuss). However, his view of the mythic content of *Superman* seems similar to Ang's (Eco, U., 1981).

The Ideology of Mass Culture

It is precisely this rejection of the banality of the everyday and the emphasis on an open-ended succession of peaks and troughs for which serials, comic books and popular culture are generally denigrated. Lefebvre describes the bizarre as a 'spice for banality', which merely offers 'a shoddy version of the mysterious from which the mysterious has disappeared'

(Lefebvre, H., 1991, p. 119). Similarly, the emphasis on emotion and the absence of an examination of the socio-economic context within which the characters operate conspire to aid 'the gratification of desire while in reality continuing the negative integration of society' (Bernstein, J.M., in Introduction to Adorno, T., 1991, p. 3). Serials and comic books are consistently deprecated for a perceived lack of worth, or for social conservatism; this has many consequences, particularly for fans' explanations of the pleasure they derive from their preferred texts. However, as was discussed in Chapter Two, many critics of popular culture fail to see or ignore the satirical side-swipes and subtexts of many popular cultural texts (*The Simpsons* is one of the few texts whose intertextuality and self-consciousness is consistently acknowledged).

If one approaches pleasure as above all a 'practice' (and also a 'habit'), that is, not as a 'conscious directed activity' (Ang, I., 1985, p. 83/4), descriptions of this pleasure can only be partial, as Ang explains with reference to her letter-writers:

> They do their utmost to give explanations for that pleasure, but somehow they know that the explanations they can put into words are not the whole story, or even perhaps the 'right' story.
> (ibid., p. 85)

Ang believes that this is because her respondents are forced to explain themselves using the terms of reference of 'the ideology of mass culture' (ibid., p. 95) which supplies ready-made conceptions that may be used without hesitation (characterised by respondents beginning statements with "obviously..." etc.) and which view the fans' preferred texts negatively. In this context, Ang sees three options through which fans may explain themselves, all of which place the fan in a position of disadvantage.

The first of these entails internalising the judgements of the ideology of mass culture, in other words, admitting that the texts are bad and yet continuing to like them

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(ibid., p. 104). The second consists of defending the texts by claiming that they are in fact 'good' despite prevailing notions of their worth (ibid., p. 106). This was the most common strategy used by the respondents in this study, but defensiveness implicitly acknowledges the weakness of one's own position. The third option involves the use of irony, where fans express an 'intimate involvement' while at the same time displaying a 'detached irony' (ibid., p.108). Significantly, Ang claims that 'irony gains the upper hand when watching *Dallas* is a social occasion' (ibid., p. 108): knowing the low regard in which the object of one's affections is held mitigates against a public expression of the pleasure one gains. The difficulties in finding respondents willing to discuss comic books for this study would seem to confirm this.

Finally, Ang considers Bourdieu's notion of the popular aesthetic as a way of combating the ideology of mass culture and asserts "what matters for the popular aesthetic is the recognition of pleasure, and that pleasure is a personal thing." (ibid., p. 116) In other words, the ideology of mass culture refuses fans the language to legitimise their affinities and as a result their pleasure becomes a matter of personal taste. However, this is an example of what Bourdieu calls the 'ideology of charisma' (Bourdieu, P., 1984, p. 1), albeit from a less privileged position than that which Bourdieu sets out to examine in *Distinction*. As such, it must be approached in the same way as the aesthetic disposition. This study hopes to show, via a discussion of the debate on postmodernism, how the audience's relationship with popular culture has become increasingly problematized.

Consumption

In order to explain this problematization, it is necessary to address the process of consumption as this study deals with subjects operating in a consumerist society and in particular with their relationship to a particular form of commodity. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen, T., 1953) Veblen first coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' to describe the activities of bourgeois Americans living on the eastern coast of The United States. This group of people was characterised as the first body in a capitalist society to live more for consumption than for work. During roughly the same period, Weber developed his concept of 'social status' which was integrally bound to a way of living in which material objects and the art of living were signifiers of what kind of person one was.

This consumerism slowly extended beyond the 'leisure class' to become an increasingly important phenomenon amongst all strata of western society. In *Consumption* (Bocock, R., 1993, chapter one) Bocock describes how this became significant in Britain and Europe in the 1950's, explaining it in terms of 'Fordism' (ref. Gramsci, ibid., p. 20), whereby workers were paid high wages which inspired mass consumption, as the process of relative embourgeoisment meant that greater amounts of disposable income were widely available. This consumerism has developed and (according to Bocock) been naturalised and internalised to an extent that Bocock asserts that it has undergone a qualitative change which is postmodern in its nature:

> A state of flux has replaced earlier forms of stable group membership in post-modernity in this perspective. The status symbols of earlier generations have become increasingly unable to convey their former meanings, as the names of the high-status fashion houses appear on clothing, and body accessories, which are purchased by anyone who can afford them and who wishes to purchase them.
>
> (ibid., p. 31)

Conversely, 'street culture' and popular cultural products have been co-opted by the bourgeoisie.

This change may also be seen to operate on a deeper level: Baudrillard conceived consumption as almost purely symbolic, which led to the sense of emptiness experienced once an object had been bought:

> If consumption appears to be irrepressible, this is because it is a total idealist practice which has no longer anything to do (beyond a certain point) with the satisfaction of needs, nor with the reality principle...
> (Baudrillard, J., 1988, p. 24)

Continuing the Freudian allusion, one may say that consumption has been linked unconsciously with the erotic, while Baudrillard further alludes to Lacan's assertion that the 'Real' can only be achievable through the symbolic, thus: "Consumption offers the *promise* of satisfaction, not the 'real thing', which would be actual orgasmic satisfaction." (Bocock, R., 1993, p. 115) According to Baudrillard's view of consumerism, the desire for satisfaction through the symbolic, through consumption, has led to hyperrealism. Hyperrealism is produced via the process of simulation: 'the generation of models of a real without origins or reality' (quoted in Storey, J., 1993, p. 162). In other words, the 'real' and the imaginary become inseparable and understandable only in terms of consumption and desire. As such, capitalism has entrapped the social agent in a symbolic system which prevents criticism of the relations of production by tempting the individual with promises of gratification that must always be repeated.

Incredulity Towards Metanarratives

Foucault's rejection of 'global' theory in favour of 'local' criticism has been typical of most postmodern commentators. While this has been stigmatised as leading

to a chaotic anything goes culture, the problematizations and acceptance of complexity may also be viewed as part of a critique of metanarratives which have proven to be insufficient, both in their descritive and prescritive capacities:

> The ministers of knowledge have always assumed that the whole universe was threatened by the very changes that affected their ideologies and their positions. They transmute the misfortune of their theories into theories of misfortune.
> (de Certeau, M., in During, S. (ed.), 1993, p. 156)

Jean-Francois Lyotard has been extremely influential in this critique, particularly through his assertion that there is a crisis in the status of knowledge in western societies (ref., Storey, J., 1993, p. 159). According to Lyotard, metanarratives operate "through inclusion and exclusion as homogenizing forces, marshalling heterogeneity into ordered realms; silencing and excluding other discourses, other voices in the name of universal principles" (ibid., p. 159).

Metanarratives thus operate through the relationship between power and knowledge and through distinction. Lyotard believes that for the last fifty years science's goal has shifted from truth to performativity and no longer strives to improve the conditions of life:

> We are in this techno-scientific world like Gulliver: sometimes too big, sometimes too small, never at the right scale.
> (Lyotard, J-F., in During, S., 1993, p. 173)

The erosion of faith in science and in universal theory has led to a culture in which micropolitics and particularity become increasingly important.

Ien Ang shows how this effects notions of audiences in *Desperately Seeking The Audience* (Ang, I., 1991). Her book systematically shows how "'television audience' only exists as an imaginary entity, an abstraction constructed from the vantage point of the institutions, in the interest of the institutions" (ibid., p. 2). Ang gives an extremely

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informative exposition of how the institutions, in their desire to objectify the television audience as members of a 'taxonomic collective' (ibid., p. 36), have inadvertently 'streamlined' their research until the disparities between different segments of the audience make the generalizations which are the aim of their research impossible (ibid., p. 58). As a result, Ang proposes an ethnographic understanding of the social world of 'actual audiences' which, by its nature is particular and bound to practices (ibid., p. 169) and is useful as a critique of the objectifying tendencies of theories which aim to make universal statements about audiences.

This critique of universal theories has also been applied to the high culture/popular culture dichotomy. In *Uncommon Cultures* (Collins, J. 1989), Jim Collins acknowledges the British Culturalists' understanding of the diverse nature of audiences and hence the multiple contexts of readings, but asserts that there are also conflicting production discourses. He uses the example of prime-time television and academia, both of whom are generally accepted as belonging to the category of 'the dominant', and yet their discourses and aims are contradictory and often in opposition to each other. He thus claims that the notion of a unified culture industry with cohesive interests is as much a methodological fiction as a 'ruling class' (ibid.,p. 42), that any idea of a 'master system' can only be seen as a 'stucturalist fabrication' that downplays fundamental differences in 'pursuit of universal laws or paradigms' (ibid., p. 100):

> The multiplication of 'alternative' ideologies, each envisioning the dominant in significantly different ways, forces the question: alternative to what, if everything is presented as an alternative to "x" - even those texts we might consider the very essence of "x"?
> (ibid., p.91)

The Fetishisation of Belief

In this context, postmodernism, while certainly involved in the dissolution of the 'universal style' (ref. Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton), need not be considered to have caused the disappearance of differentiation. In fact, one may claim that postmodernism, precisely due to the conflation of the social and aesthetic fields (ref. Lash, S., 1991), and as a result of the blurring of the lines between high art and popular culture has increased the need for distinction, intensifying the need for 'significant differences', leading to what Collins describes as the 'fetishisation of belief' (Collins, J., 1989, p.119).

Collins' argument should be seen as a riposte to Jameson's dismissal of postmodernism as a culture of pastiche, involved in the 'complacent play of historical allusion' (Jameson, F. 1991). Jameson bases his characterization of postmodernism on the apparent disappearance of norms by which one can judge good from bad, art from popular culture. Without norms, parody is impossible (parody presupposes norms which may be mocked or transgressed), and hence one is left with 'blank parody': pastiche (ibid., p. 17). Such a 'culture of quotations' marks the 'death of the subject' for Jameson (ibid., p. 17), the end of individualism and of

> style in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the individual brushstroke which results in the collapse of the high modernist ideology of style - what is as unique and unmistakeable as your own fingerprints, as incomparable as your own body.
> (Jameson, F., 1991, p. 17)

Thus, postmodernism involves the 'failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past' which leads to 'flatness' and to 'superficiality'.

In response to this, Collins asserts that while a unitary culture has disappeared there has been a proliferation of discursive ideologies which are striving to legitimate

themselves as privileged modes of representation as opposed to the universal style of modernism (Collins, J., 1989, p. 100). As a result, rather than causing the death of the subject, these competing discourses have increased the importance of the subject: "The category of the subject remains highly viable in large part because it has never been so hotly contested" (ibid., p. 144). Thus, in the absence of norms, the resulting lack of unity in interpellation means that the postmodern subject must be defined by activity rather than passivity, by selection and participation rather than reception. The individual is forced to create her habitus in a decentred culture in which distinction is more important than ever.

A decentred culture implies decentred fields wherein, rather than ignoring aesthetic judgements, these judgements are relocated and redefined at the 'junctures between opposing discourses, where critical, ethical, and ideological decisions are made' (ibid., p. 141). This means that eclecticism involves the interrogation of competing discourses within fields rather than an anything goes attitude: the fetishisation of belief. As such, postmodernism makes everyone a fan in some way. One must choose to position oneself, and to adopt a number of strategies to do so in the absence of a master-system/metanarrative. Collins wickedly refers to most anti-postmodern commentary as yearning for a 'Panopticon Lost' (ibid, p. 141), but in the consumerist society of the late twentieth century, the subject, created via distinction and thus locked into a variety of discourses is 'perfectly individualized and constantly visible' (Foucault, M., 1979, p. 200).

Conclusion

If the impulses behind the consumption of cultural objects and the participative nature of culture is the same for high art and popular culture, then the oppositional stance attributed to popular culture proves invalid, because it impoverishes popular culture by reducing it to a politically impelled struggle and precludes its discussion in a

wider context. One may consider the complexity of culture by considering Quentin Tarrantino's claim to have chosen the name *Reservoir Dogs* for his first feature film as a result of his mother's mispronunciation of *Au Revoir Les Enfants*. Apochryphal or not, it displays the catholic influences and impulses of the fan. It is the complexity and the particularity of cultural consumption that make an examination of its role in the formation of social identities informative, rather than its simplification in order to support universal theories. The incredulity towards metanarratives does not militate against truth, it is part of the process whereby historically specific communities strive to achieve truth.

The following two chapters, based on the findings of my research, allow the interviewees to explain their own views of what comic books mean to them, and show as many differences as similarities in their uses of comic books. Whilst they consume and produce popular cultural artefacts, it is difficult to reduce their activities to a convenient oppositional stance.

CHAPTER FIVE

Form and Discrimination

Form and Discrimination

1 Methodology

1. 1 Introduction

The motivation behind this research was to examine the assertions made in Fiske's *The Cultural Economy of Fandom* (in Lewis, L., (ed.) 1992), in order to see if they were borne out by the activities of Irish comic book fans. Thus, it was conceived as an investigation of what exactly comics mean to their readers, and to allow them express their 'articles of faith' in their own language. By so doing, one could examine the strategies and struggles in which comic book fans were involved, via the three main headings which Fiske identified as characterising fandom: discrimination and distinction, productivity and participation, and capital accumulation.

A series of structured interviews was used to collect the necessary information because firstly, questionnaires are best suited to evincing general trends and activities, giving a quantitative analysis, which was not what was required. Furthermore, by their very nature, questionnaires are cumbersome, may ask irrelevant questions, and force the respondent to answer within the restrictive framework of the researcher's language. The interview format was fluid enough to accommodate widely different views, digressions and to clarify misunderstandings. During the interviews it was often necessary to ask certain questions in several different ways, partly because of different interpretations of the questions, or because initial answers may not have been sufficiently clear in their meaning, but also because the questions themselves may not have been satisfactorily constructed.

This ability to make amends or to restate ambiguous questions and responses was extremely useful and helped the interviewees to express themselves fully and to feel they had been treated fairly. While the interviews were structured, in order to get as much information as possible, the interviewees were encouraged to speak freely: to return to earlier topics to expand upon particular points, or to balance earlier statements. All the interviews were recorded on a professional Walkman and later transcribed. Great efforts were made to relax the subjects and avoid putting them under pressure: while the interviewer had set questions to ask and an agenda to follow, the framing of the questions was altered to suit each context. In order to achieve this, notes were not taken as it was felt that this would inhibit the speakers, furthermore, the interviews were conducted in places where the subjects were at ease: at home, at work or in cafes of their choice.

1.2 The Interviews

The interviews were a mixture of individual, two-person and group discussions. While all were extremely informative and useful, there were some differences between the different groupings which may have been significant in shaping the answers given. Of the three interviews conducted with two respondents, the tone of one of them became extremely nostalgic. Although this may also have occured if both were questioned separately, the starting point of most answers was very obviously influenced by the interplay between the two friends.

In the one large group interview, a leader of sorts quickly asserted himself and tended to answer first and at most length. Thus, while efforts were made to address questions directly to other group members, the other participants did not become as involved in the discussion,

apart from areas of particular interest, and often merely agreed or qualified the 'leader's' statements. This may have been because the group was formed on an *ad hoc* basis: whoever was free and willing to talk. While these people worked in the same premises and all knew each other, the group most probably was not their ideal group, and hence the willingness to talk and the answers given may have been adversely affected.

The majority of the interviews were one-to-one discussions and were free-flowing and varied in both the opinions expressed and the comics mentioned. All of the interviews were characterised by an eagerness to discuss the topics raised, as well as an in-depth knowledge of comics and a broad range of cultural references. At the same time, there was initially a marked suspicion of what the research was trying to examine. All the interviewees were reticent about being involved until it was explained to them that the interview would not be about the effects of comics, nor would it be a psychological profile.

1.3 Difficulties Finding Respondents

In fact, while all the respondents seemed to enjoy talking about a subject dear to them which is often frowned upon or belittled (many expressed relief afterwards that it had not been what they expected), finding participants was difficult. Over two hundred fliers (see Appendix B) were distributed to people with standing orders in Forbidden Planet, while more were left on the counter of that shop. These fliers were also posted in cafes and restaurants in the city centre, but to little avail. Out of all these, only one reply was received, and that was because of the question 'Do you want to make your own comics?' on the flier.

Approaching readers in comic shops was ruled out by the owners (apart from Sub-City during the second round of interviews) because of the perceived nuisance-value and possible loss of custom, and outside of this, there are no comic book fan organisations in Ireland. There are some science-fiction organisations which are somewhat concerned with comics and some of the respondents came through this avenue. Most of the people interviewed are involved to some degree in producing comics; some do it as a hobby after school, while others are attempting to follow a career in comics. Others were found through constantly asking acquaintances and colleagues if they knew comics readers, while some were friends or colleagues.

1.4 The Respondents

Most of the respondents in this study were over twenty years of age, with the eldest interviewee aged thirty-four. Because of this, questions relating to the juvenile nature of comics were obvious: these people were not conforming to common prejudices with relation to comics. Most had studied in third level institutions of some sort, so it could not be assumed that they read comics because of difficulties in reading; derogatory comments about comics being for the illiterate did not apply. On the other hand, three participants (including the two youngest) explicitly referred to the fact that they rarely read books. The reasons given for this were that work commitments meant that reading was mainly confined to magazines and comics (as source materials) and that books were only possible during holidays (M. A.). The younger readers claimed that books didn't have enough action and that they were 'a bit boring' (L. and Pe. A.).

Most of the respondents claimed to read mainly comics that were aimed at older readers and showed a predominant tendency towards alternative comics. By the same token, all were still willing to look at any kind of comic, although they did not expect to buy most. Also, many said that they spent very little on comics now, while the younger interviewees spent almost all their disposable income on them. One can see a demographic breakdown of the respondents in table one.

2 Discrimination and Distinction

2.1 Introduction

Discrimination and distinction are crucial to social positioning, to the creation of habituses. In relation to fans, one may see discrimination operating as a means of denigrating the objects of their attention: comics are usually considered to have little merit. However, fans also use their own discriminatory criteria to decide the boundaries between fan and non-fan and to create hierarchies of worth, eg. a canon of comic book creators and titles. Thus, in order to explain comic book fans' activities and opinions, one must examine first how fans see their positions within the general cultural economy, and then examine positioning within the sphere of comics fandom.

TABLE ONE

Age	Sex	Profession	Third level
27	m	Graphic design	y
30	m	Art history lecturer	y
23	m	Comics artist	y
25	m	Comics artist	y
22	m	Comics artist	y
34	f	Comics artist	y
20	m	Comics artist	n
12	m	Student	n
14	m	Student	n
29	m	Psychology lecturer	y
26	m	Comics artist	y
28	m	Writer	y
28	m	Film director	y
25	m	Solicitor	y
24	m	Graphic artist	y
24	m	Graphic artist	y
20	m	Philosophy student	y
24	m	Fine art student	y
23	f	Art teacher	y
23	m	Shop assistant	n

m male f female   y yes   n no

2.2 The Ideology of Mass Culture

The respondents' answers display quite forcefully the effect that 'the ideology of mass culture' (Ang, I. 1985) has on the fans' ability to express themselves: none were able to express their enjoyment of comics without making at least some reference to the negative way that others viewed their interest. One interviewee made this problem quite clear:

> I think I've been absorbing everybody's... like you said, you get a lot of negative opinions on it by people who don't know. I do as well. I meet very few people who actually read comics...
>> (Pa.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 20th December, 1996, 1hour)

The same subject claimed that he would never read a comic book in public because he would be 'ashamed'; the other interviewee in that session claimed that if she were to read a comic in public, it would look 'very odd' (Ad.). The negative reaction which one of the subject's interest was held at home was discussed in the same interview:

> I hear about it on a daily basis: "what rubbish did you buy today?" That's usually what its referred to as - rubbish.
>> (Pa. B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 20th December, 1996, 1hour)

Another respondent was dissuaded from wasting his drawing ability on a 'dead medium' like comics (Pe. B.), while another attempted to both valorise and to denigrate comic books by positing two levels (both of which he enjoyed):

> I mean, there's two different levels: you've got the Vertigo level, where there's a lot of serious writing, and these guys are very serious intellects. There's thought that goes into the storylines, and you appreciate it at that level. Then there's the other level that's pure fuckin' trash like the X-Men, which is just pure excitement, you know, its good.
>> (Ma., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 13th December, 1996, 1 hour)

In the context of comic book fandom, it seems that the awareness of the negative view in which the objects of their attention are held shapes the answers of all the respondents of this study.

2.3 The Language of Official Culture

This view leaves the fans in an awkward situation because, as a popular form, comics must constantly justify themselves and fans must also explain their tastes in the language of official culture; music can be described through its own terms such as cadence or tonality; wine may be defined through terms like bouquet and nose. Comics are unable to do this; if comics are reviewed in the press it is in occasional pieces in the literature sections; they do not have their own place; they are not judged on their own terms, but on those of different media. One interviewee claimed this inequity is reflected by the medium's lack of self-confidence:

> The *Classics Illustrated* approach to comics that's kind of killing them anyway. The whole thing of " Hey! Clive Barker writing a comic!" What was the comic you picked up in Forbidden Planet yesterday by Miguel Ferrer or something? Its like: "Comics need some credibility; get some people other than comics writers in to do them"
>
> (Pa. D., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94)

Another respondent spoke of people sniggering on the bus as he read a comic version of Anne Rice's *The Vampire Lestat*, while they would be quite willing to read the book (Pa.B.). The nature of the medium, mixing text and pictures, seems to have led to it being seen as a bastard medium, unable to attain the cache of either of its 'parents'. According to one participant, this stigma is weakening in some respects due to the increasingly visual nature of books and the realisation that images need not necessarily be merely illustrations, nor restricted to children's books (O., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 26-8-94).

It is clear from the above responses that the comic book fans interviewed were in no

doubt as to the lack of regard which is usually accorded to comics, and as a result, were

unwilling to defend comics unless pushed to do so:

> Most people would place me as yes, "I suppose he still reads his comics" so
> in that way when people start up on that, I like to try to educate them otherwise, and
> I do get other people I knock around with to read stuff that I read, to lend them
> stuff, who haven't read a comic in years, just to try to lend them stuff and see what
> they would like. That's about as far as it goes socially; I don't shove the fact that
> I'm a comics reader down people's throats and say look at these they're not just for
> kids   anymore. I don't do that, but if people raise the subject, I'm quite willing to
> fight the comics' corner, and try and educate people as best I can.
> (D.S., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 24-8-94)

Thus, it would appear that comic book fans view themselves as being in a disadvantaged

position within the cultural economy, having neither respect or a vocabulary of their own

with which to defend their tastes. However, as we shall see in subsequent sections, within

fandom there are problems with approaching fans as an homogenous grouping as, to the

uninitiated there are many similarities, but within the field, the differences are perceived as by

and large being greater than the shared interests and affinities.

2.4 Fandom as Pathology

The perception of fandom as pathology (ref. Jenson, J., in Lewis, L. (ed.), 1992) seems

to be extant amongst all of the subjects of this study, even though they admit to being fans

themselves, as may be seen in the reluctance to come forward and define oneself as a fan. The

high culture/low culture dichotomy which valorises buffs and experts in particular knowledges

conversely stigmatises fans, and this has led to a situation where the opportunities to display

knowledge of the object of adoration, and also to express this affective affinity, have been

severely curtailed. To a degree, one can also argue that comics fans further lack cultural capital as the widespread pigeon-holing of comics as juvenilia means that they are, or perceive themselves as, the lowest of the low.

An expression of this is the term 'fanboy', an American term which has been assimilated into the language of comics fans/readers in Ireland. Fanboy is a derogatory term, used to describe readers who are perceived to be overly enthusiastic in collecting comics and items associated with particular characters, or simply all comics. They are seen to be indiscriminate in their appetite and appreciation of comics. It is a term which is often, though not exclusively, used in connection with younger readers.

In this context, one of the most important and delicate questions in each of the interviews was: 'Are you a fan?'. While most respondents said that they were fans, most immediately qualified this by distancing themselves from what they saw as typical fans:

> I would and I wouldn't, because I don't... ...the picture of a comics fan is someone who buys twenty superhero magazines, or something like that. A much more - a bigger appetite for comics than I would.
> (M, private interview, 12-8-94, Rathmines, Dublin, 1 hour.)

Allied to this was a view of fans as being obsessive in relation to comics with one interviewee describing fandom as a form of train-spotting (S, private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94) as can be seen from the following:

> Eh, that would depend. I always look on a comics fan as someone who knows what happened in issue twenty-three of *Superman* back in 1950, you know, that kind of thing. I would call D. S. a comics fan. I wouldn't walk into Forbidden Planet to have discussions with them over the merits of the latest *Predator* comic or whether or not *Batman* was going to get involved with such and such a woman and that sort of thing.
> (O., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 26-8-94)

2.5 Fans/Non-Fans

This distancing of oneself from what is seen as being the usual actions of a comics fan was echoed by virtually all those interviewed, with one person in fact admitting to be coming out of the 'raging fanboy stage' (D.S.). A small number of other respondents admitted to having been fanboys (Pe.B.), while another admitted ruefully that he himself would probably fall into that category (Pa. B). The two youngest respondents had a markedly different view on the category of fan and whether or not they belonged to it. Elsewhere they had claimed that most people who were into comics were in fact older than them and so their answer may have been influenced by this:

> Well, I know that I am a definite comic book fan but I don't know what to say, because I haven't been collecting them for long enough, I think.
> (L., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 29-6-94)

A possible explanation for the difference is that the younger respondents have not been reading comics for as long as the other interviewees and thus have not had time to become disillusioned with the majority of comics, and hence fans, as the others have. At twelve and fourteen respectively, they are at the age that most comics readers are assumed to begin consuming. Thereby they would be less likely to describe themselves or other comics readers in disparaging terms. On the other hand, not all the subjects saw fandom or defining themselves thus as being tainted with unwanted associations. One of the older participants, while not seeing himself as being a member of the main comics target market, used a more general and less value-laden definition of fan to which he aligned himself:

> A fan is somebody who is predisposed to something and likes the whole medium a lot, like if you like Tom Waits, then you're a fan, so yeah, definitely yeah.
> (J., private interview, RTC Tallaght, Dublin, 1 hour, 20-3-95)

Of all the people interviewed, only one proclaimed himself to be being typical (to a certain extent - David B), despite the fact that he found there were few comics available that he thought were worth buying. This striving for distinction from other fans and defining oneself by what one is not agrees with Fiske's conception of the cultural economy of fandom (Fiske, J., in Lewis, L. (ed.),1992).

2.6 Becoming a Fan

Within the Irish context, entry into fandom is complicated by the availability of British as well as American comics, with two stages perceived by most Irish comics fans. While these stages are often partially contiguous, they are categorised separately. This is because the majority of British comics are aimed at a market of five to twelve year olds, while American comics usually assume ten to twelve years of age to be the age of entry into the market.

Most of the respondents remembered reading comics such as the *Beano*, the *Dandy* or the *Whizzer and Chips* at a very young age; very often these would be bought by parents, older siblings or relatives. These comics were mainly humour oriented, although most also read action/adventure comics such as the *Victor*, *Warlord* and the *Vulcan*. Most of these were printed on newspaper and were black and white apart from the covers. In contrast to this, the American comics had glossy covers and were in full colour and were thus considered very different from British publications. As such, the British comics were seen as being a precursor to the explosion of colour and excitement that came with the discovery of American comics:

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once you had seen *Spiderman, Alf Tupper*, with his fish and chips and monochrome world would never look the same.

For many, comics only really became important with this second American stage. In recent years, with increasing availability of American comics, British comics have struggled to maintain readers and have become increasingly dependent on film and television tie-ins and increasing amounts of colour to stay competitive. The specialist comics market is almost entirely based upon American comics and non-American comics must adopt the formats and approaches of American comics. To many comics fans British comics are 'kids stuff', while American comics are real comics:

> Well, I remember vaguely reading some *Beano* and *Sparkle* and stuff like that when I was a   kid, but the major sort of epiphany or whatever was when I was in my second year in school. I would have been about five and somebody gave me a dog-eared British republication of some Marvel comics, and it had the origin of the *Incredible Hulk*, with Bruce Banner driving across some radioactive wasteland while a bomb was going off and turning into the *Incredible Hulk*. I only remembered, actually, about a year ago, reading that. I had no recollection of my first experience with comics. That kind of struck me as kind of a revelation.
> (Pa. D., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94)

The terminology most used by the respondents to describe becoming involved with comics was 'getting into' them, as if one were entering a new world; one respondent actually talked about 'the comics world' in order to explain his dealings with fandom (John). This distinction beween reading and getting into comics seems to mark the difference between 'normal' consumption and fandom. While not all those interviewed expressed this change in terms of an 'epiphany' or a 'revelation', there was a discernable change which was based on occasions of discovery which were accompanied by great enthusiasm and excitement. This excitement led in most cases to an initial over-consumption where the respondents spent much

of their free money on comics and could be characterised as the 'fanboy' stage. While many of the subjects expressed their disdain for superheroes and felt that the market/the medium would be better off if it was not so bound up with superheroes, all had read and enjoyed these superheroes at an earlier stage. It could be argued that their continued involvement was based on these, as one commented: '... part of me will always love those old numbskull superheroes.' (S., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94)

Many respondents were introduced to comics by friends, as well as older siblings and relatives, as stated earlier. At this introductory stage, it seems that shared interest by one's peers was important, not least for borrowing and swapping purposes. The younger interviewees explained their gradual involvement through going into town, at first with their parents, and later with their friends. This involved 'hanging around', which led to hanging around in Forbidden Planet as a focus to their visits to the city centre. Thus, their experience was based on both the personal discovery of comics that excited them, and the social function of having something to do with one's friends (L. and Pe. A.).

2.7 Disaffection and Renewal of Fandom

While many of the participants described getting into comics, some also told of how they had stopped reading them for a number of years. Mainly this was explained by saying that the themes and characters had become boring or repetitive; others talked of how comics had come to seem childish and silly to them. Storylines were seen to be recycled endlessly, due to what some considered was the industry's expectation that the audience would 'turnover' every three to four years. This was in fact the traditional view of the industry, which has only recently

come to realise that many readers in fact stay committed to the medium or to particular characters over a longer period (it may be argued in some cases that this is a permanent orientation). In general, this desertion of comics occurred in the mid-teens and was accompanied by new enthusiasms for other media. This may be posited as being related to a restructuring of spending patterns due to developing social lives; one of the subjects described how this has continued to affect his consumption of comics:

> I go through phases of it, where I have to get almost like a fix of comics, but over the years I've got much more selective. There was a time when I was spending about thirty, forty quid a week on comics, and then about a year later, I started drinking. (laughs) It was cut massively.
>
> (Pe.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 20th December, 1996,1 hour)

Those who maintained their involvement with comics seem to have evolved in their tastes and sought out comics that would satisfy these new affinities. Of the participants who gave up comics, some describe their early experiences with comics in a matter of fact way which suggests that they were not fans of comics per se at that time; they seem to have been more something to do rather than an enthusiasm. For these readers, there were defining moments and comics that encouraged them to return to comics, and as in childhood, peers were very important in this process:

> It was a friend who draws cartoons, and he said: look at this. I was very wary and I said, okay, I'll read this, and it was superb: it was brilliantly drawn, drawn in colour, whereas the *Judge Dredd* up till that would have been in black and white. Also, its a very sophisticated storyline - the *Dark Knight* returning coming back with these issues like mortality, and so, there was a lot in it.
>
> (J., private interview, RTC Tallaght, Dublin, 1 hour, 20-3-95)

Among others, including those who had continued to read comics, there was a perceived revolution in content and style in the mid-eighties which made comics attractive to a wider

range of readers and which encouraged many to return to comics. This expansion of the pallette by comics writers and artists has led to an increased interest in comics with claims that comics have grown up, and that they may now be taken seriously; such claims are still quite problematic. Particular titles have been held up as examples of this new maturity and comics with the notice 'Recommended for Mature Readers' have proliferated, but the participants in this study, while welcoming this development, have found it to be limited in scale and often shallow.

2.8 Creating a Social Identity

In Fiske's conception of fan discrimination, a major impetus for fans selecting particular texts or types of texts is their perceived relevance to their lives. Texts are selected because they help the fans in their creation of social identities and may be used as aids towards 'self-empowerment' (Fiske, J., in Lewis, L. (ed.), 1992, p. 35). One example of this identification came from one of the female respondents, who, when the other interviewee commented that she spoke of the characters as if they were real people, answered: "(laughs) I know, but that's the way I think about it, when they're really strong women" (Ad.). The same person also described how she would tell the people she worked with about the lives of the characters in the comics she read:

> I just start telling them what's going on (laughs), "and such and such did this...", "shut up Ad., just shut up". I just say "oh yeah, wait till I tell you, and he used to be with them and they used to do...
> (Ad., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 20-12-96)

Another felt that he most identified with *Batman,* because he felt that "everybody has masks" (A.), adding that he'd been "collecting them so long now, some of it has to be rubbing off". However, these responses were not typical, which may be due to the negative attitudes which many of the subjects showed towards the category of fan: they did not wish to be seen as a 'fanboy'.

The more usual stance adopted was to ascribe such identification to others. One spoke about how, though it wasn't the attraction for him, he could understand how comics and their characters could "appeal to people who are isolated or lonely" (Pe.B.). Another asserted that an important facet of the comics field was its anti-heroic stance which betrayed a strain of

> liberationist politics of everything should just be okay and people should just be able to do what they want - any kind of authority is restrictive and bad and autonomy on the level of the individual is cool, desireable, people should explore the frontiers of sex or drugs or space or whatever.
>
> (M.W., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 1-9-94)

The same respondent also wondered whether comics readers were involved in body fantasies with the large number of superhero comics (a topic which is surely the topic of numerous articles and essays, but will not be expanded upon here). As a counter to this one might state that a large number of those interviewed no longer read superhero comic books regularly, if at all. The tendency to ascribe paricular traits to other fans, rather than admitting to indentifying with characters or comics may be a result of a number of factors identified by Fiske in relation to fan discrimination.

2.9 Evoking Legitimate Culture

In The *Cultural Economy of Fandom*, Fiske describes how fans will very often invoke official culture in order to legitimate their tastes by association. Furthermore, fans often use 'official' and 'aesthetic' criteria to explain themselves, and how this tendency becomes more pronounced amongst older male fans (p. 36). Because the majority of the subjects of this study were over twenty years of age and had experience of third level education, these tendencies were expected and did in fact become apparent. One respondent defended comics by asserting that " A really good comic is as good as a really good book or film, or a song" (O.). Another respondent described the experience of reading a comic book like going to see a film or having one's own theatre, and describing their potential in a similar fashion:

> I think they have a great ability to - for this writer to put all these emotions and everything on the page, like Shakespeare writing his plays - now this century, its like a more modern version, that people can have themselves - its an art related to you - I like this, you know.
>
> (D.D., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1hour, 26-8-94)

However, others responded angrily to what they felt was the unjust stigmatization of comics compared to other media:

> I dislike the idea though, that its a separate medium, or its, you know, if you're into comics its kinda seen as "ooh, you're into comics", its not like "ooh, you're into books".
>
> (Pe.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1hour, 20-12-96)

Another defended comics similarly by claiming he considered comics as much as the works one could see in the National Gallery (Pa.B.), despite the fact that he was the respondent who most felt the negative view of comics held by non-readers. The use of aesthetic criteria to explain fans tastes will be explored in the section on form which is to follow; however, first,

we shall describe how the respondents distinguished between particular creators by reference to 'authenticity'.

2.10 Authenticity

Every person interviewed displayed strongly held opinions on artists they either praised or denigrated. Very often, the language used to describe the comics or artists which they held in scant regard was quite strong and dismissive, with one person claiming to have a "grudge against superhero comics" (O.) because he felt they precluded other types of comics from being produced and comics as a medium from being taken seriously. Many also complained about marketing ploys such as 'glossy' and 'illuminous' covers were damaging the medium by distracting attention from the production of comic books with good stories and art (O., M., M.A., & S.). Another trend that emerged was the categorizing of some titles as company work (eg. talking about Marvel and Image as 'types' of work, rather than as a series of distinct titles), and of others as the work of individuals, even though these works were produced for the same companies. In this situation, creators such as Frank Miller and Alan Moore were seen as auteurs despite the contexts in which they produced.

With many of the interviewees, this distinction could go both ways: Marvel comics were mentioned by many as being crucial to the subjects' entree into comics fandom, but were now disparaged as being to blame for many of the problems which they saw besetting comics (S., Pa.D., M.W.). Similarly, some respondents approached company imprints as signs of quality: Image comics would by and large deliver good superhero comics (Ad., Pa.B., L. & Pe.A.), while others viewed the Vertigo range as a source of well-written thought-provoking

adult comics (Pe.B., Ma., D.B.). However, these were rules of thumb based upon a knowledge of editorial bias and of the creators published by different companies, and did not lead to unquestioning purchasing of the company's titles. They might 'check them out' more readily than other companies' titles which did not have the same positive associations for them.

The development of a canon of titles, writers and artists will be discussed fully in the section on capital accumulation in the following chapter, but it will suffice to say at this point that the most important criterion for judging a creator's authenticity was their perceived individuality of line, vision or approach to comic books, and hence their irreducibility to company styles, to being categorised as hacks. One subject felt that 'heavy personality' was crucial to his enjoyment of comics and that the production line nature of some comics damaged their integrity:

> since the American comics are just dilutions of other people's styles, there are so many people involved in them on a page it just happens like that. And you've also got editors - I don't know what the involvement is, but editors would come down and say: "No, you can't do this". That sort of thing hampers the creative effort. We were up at Glasgow in March and we met two French comics guys and they were talking about the continental way of doing things, and over there, its all down to the lettering. The artist who doesn't letter his own stuff is the exception. They've such a personal involvement from beginning, colouring and pencilling, right to the end. But its a purer product of that person, with their personality, and you may or may not like the product, but it makes it a purer representation of what the artist is about. That's what attracts me a lot more than superheroes and workshops with people working on the same page.
> (D.S., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 24-8-94)

This conception of the creation of comics books is based on the idea of the individual artist creating work with a personal style, rather than industrially produced texts. It also seems to suggest an aesthetic rather than functional approach to comics.

3 Form

3.1 Comics as a medium

One of the central questions in all the interviews was: whether or not the medium was being used to its full potential? This question is a difficult one, as it is vague and also because it betrays this researcher's bias. By asking the question, one is almost certain to receive a negative answer, but in so doing, hopefully to glean some knowledge as to the subjects' attitudes to the medium. This helped make explicit the assumptions and ideals of the interviewees in relation to comic books.

Any discussion of potential is inherently ideological but, as previously stated, there is little theory to inform critical evaluations of comic books and any such evaluation must use terms imported from other media, with one respondent describing how the term graphic novel has been used in an attempt to attain the status of literary product for comic books, which he finds ironic at a time when the novel is as he sees it is being 'dismantled' by literary criticism (M.W., 1-9-94). Another is scornful of the importation of novelists to write comic books in what he sees as an attempt to convince non-readers of the worth of comic books (eg. Clive Barker, Miguel Ferrer), believing that this merely places comics in a subservient position (Pa. D., 10-8-94). The distinction between official and popular cultural capital is also one that has shaped the debate on comic books, with alternative publishers promoting a view of comic books as art and mainstream publishers promoting that of entertainment, with the dialectic being approached from a 'nineteenth century' 'model of creativity' of the artist as a 'romantic expressivist':

> its funny, we see that high culture/low culture distinction being imported into comics, except working across the field of comics, so that some comics that are difficult to come by, and rare and special and extra valuable are then known by the artists, rather than by the story. So, *Yummy Fur* is a classic example, where the storylines change and so forth, but its readily identifiable as the work of Chester Brown, and Chester Brown is the auteur.
> (M.W., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 2 hours, 1-9-94)

A number of those interviewed mentioned the similarities between comic books and film, asserting that many of the techniques were identical and positing that the range of subject-matter for comics could be equally broad (S. & O.). However, all the respondents talked of comics as comics, displaying an appreciation of form and stylistic experiments more expressive of the 'aesthetic disposition' than the popular aesthetic.

3.2 Style and the Line

Traditional comic book art is based on drawing and hence on lines. Because a number of the interviewees were themselves artists, they were extremely interested in the quality of drawing and the increased use of different styles and methods of expression. A number of the respondents felt that many comics were compromised by the preponderance of fans drawing comic books and hence being too slavish in aping the styles of the artists they admired:

> You can see artists that have copied their anatomy from other artists and copied that other artist's mistakes, and they've no actual conception of what things are supposed to do. It just looks awful for me, but then a lot of people don't know that this muscle is in the wrong place, or don't know that heads aren't quite that boxy, they just don't notice.
> (D.S., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 24-8-94)

Conversely, artists who had distinctive styles, even if their rendering was not good were seen as being of more worth than more generic artists:

> In particular Hate. I know you can buy the books, and I buy the books when they come out, but just the covers, all the covers he's done. I don't know what it is about him, because I think he has a strange line and some of the covers are photo-montage. They're not particularly skillful but I love the look of them.
> (M.A., private interview, Rathmines, 1 hour, 12-8-94)

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Artists were often accused of being 'sloppy' or having 'weak' drawing skills (A.) and of drawing characters with ridiculous proportions (O.), particularly in superhero comics. Other artists such as Dave McKean, Bill Sienkiewicz and Frank Miller were repeatedly referred to for their use of different materials in creating their images and in their approaches to page layout. One subject made an approving description of the expressiveness of one particular artist:

> Bill Sienkwvics was shocking, all his drawings were a sort of violent movement, no one was static, wherever they went, they left traces, and they came along behind them. Even the colours and the lines.
> (J.C., private interview, city centre, 1 hour, 14-12-96)

Many others used similar language to describe the vibrancy and originality of work that they liked, and the excitement felt by fans when finding something new and worthwhile was repeatedly stressed.

3.3 Finish and Narrativity

The narrative effectiveness of the art in comic books was also a major concern of a number of the respondents, with many concerned with questions of finish and clarity. If one considers Gombrich's conception of the uses of iconic images, one may say that the simplicity of comic book images, their 'everyman' quality is the source of their communicative power. This implies that any particular image that draws attention to itself as a piece of artwork is guilty of undercutting the narrative thrust of the comic book and of harming it. The irony is that these images are the very images that excite fans and inspire artists most and are the images used to display the good points of the medium either in

exhibitions or in articles. Thus, the most visually striking artwork may cause a comic book to be a very stilted read. A number of the interviewees felt that the shift towards arresting images was having an adverse effect on the narrative clarity in many comic books:

> In terms of art, the art has changed as well: 2000AD would be the classic example; everything in 2000AD is now fully painted, and they're paying less attention to the storytelling, the storytelling is left a bit too much, its something we're all very conscious of: like when you're telling a story make sure that everything is clear, but the priority now has gone towards the finish and: "is that dress beautifully painted, does that gun have all the nice airgun glints on it?"
> (O., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 26-8-94)

Another respondent, a comics artist, described the myriad elements which had to be remembered in order to create a coherent comic: "You've got to design environments; you've got to make them believable; you've got to have costumes right, pacing, timing, you know, there's just so much in it" (E.). One may conjecture that, because many of the people interviewed were attempting to produce their own work, their knowledge of form in relation to comics did not allow them to 'see through' comics, but rather to enrich their appreciation.

3.4 Narrativity, Text and Subject Matter

Comics are essentially narrative because they must move the reader from image to image if they are to succeed, and complicating this is the use of text in comics. Artwork has always been the dominant partner in comic books; the immediateness and expressive qualities of images have consistently meant that the literary element has been subservient. Marvel comics have been created since the 1960's through a process of firstly agreeing a general plot, then, when the artist has finished laying out the pages and is in the final stages of completing the artwork, captions are placed over the images. This has led to words often being treated as an afterthought in comics. Similarly, many of the sound effects and lettering styles are approached as further opportunities for the art department. Plot and

narrative have been less thought out and, in many cases, have been altered to accommodate dramatic vistas and kinetic splash pages. While many people dabble in drawing comics characters, there are few amusing themselves in their bedrooms writing scripts for comics. Nonetheless, the respondents constantly reiterated their desire to have this art combined with good story-telling:

> The sign of a good comic is when you pick it up and read the first page and you forget about the artwork, and you're checking out the story and it gets you to the last page, and then you cop it: oh, I only meant to read the first couple of pages, and you've enjoyed the story - that's the sign of a good comic - you stop; it all becomes one; you just read it through. Its just a story to you, and you don't think of it in terms of a comic, or in terms of art and story, its just - it is a story.
> (O., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 26-8-94)

While terms like graphic novel try to stress the literary potential of the medium, one subject talked at length about the potential of the medium for story-telling, stressing that the writerly tendencies of some renowned creators was in fact, despite the depth their stories had, not developing the medium:

> I suppose I'm a purist: if you're doing a comic strip, its a comic strip. It shouldn't really be a combination of novel cum comic strip. Because a novel cum film would never work. You could not show text on screen. I suppose the internet might be considered like that, but its not really for me.
> (Pe.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 20-12-96)

Others described the potential of comic books to address adult themes and how this had been achieved to some extent in recent years with more sophisticated subject-matter and a broader range of themes and approaches now accepted within the comics market. This however, was qualified by the realisation that much more could and should be done, the problem being that the examples of progress were often isolated and were often merely imitated by other creators, taking the surface elements and not the deeper innovations. Entrenched ideas were still constraining the medium:

In the comics world, the one they always bring you against is Maus which is an absolutely incredibly serious issue which was dealt with very well. But there's never been a comic like that since: that was meant to be the first one; there was this comic; this was meant to show the way. But there hasn't been one since.

(D.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 16-8-94)

The lack of recognition for writing in comic books has meant that superior writers do not concern themselves with comic books and hence a low quality level is maintained. This has its roots in the earliest comic books: while the idea of *Superman* was in itself exciting, the shock of seeing a man jump large buildings and toss buses about was far more exciting. The lack of regard for quality shown by many publishers also meant that, in a rush to make money from the new medium, any story would do, so why waste effort on writing an innovative one? The nature of most comic book characters also precluded much development; like television sit-coms, everything had to be unchanged at the end of each story. *Richie Rich* didn't age; *Batman* didn't marry; *Casper* was never exorcised. Furthermore, because most comics are now written by and aimed at fans, comic book writing is often more about comics than the real world.

Conclusion

Comic book fans use discrimination and distinction both between fans and non-fans and within the field of comic book fandom. At the same time, they use many different strategies to discriminate between different cultural works and to associate themselves with more accepted media. The majority of the people interviewed used aesthetic criteria to defend/explain their tastes, which may be as a result of the age of the majority of the respondents, plus the fact that a significant number were producers themselves (to some degree). The next chapter will deal with the pleasure fans receive from reading comic books, with fan productivity, with fan capital accumulation and with seriality and alienation amongst fans.

CHAPTER SIX

Productivity, Capital & Pleasure

Productivity, Capital & Pleasure

1 Introduction

Distinction and discrimination are essential to the creation of habituses and comic book fans may be seen to work assiduously via numerous strategies towards developing social identities for themselves. The interviews showed them to be quite able to express themselves in relation to their likes and dislikes, while at the same time, to display a reluctance to be associated with other fans. There was a general preoccupation with form amongst the respondents, which as was commented upon in the last chapter, may well be because many were themselves producers. In this chapter, we will examine the urges which prompt the fans to create their own comics, plus other types of fan productivity. We will also discuss how the fans interviewed created cultural capital and how they used knowledge of comics amongst other media to do this. We will begin, however, with a brief description of how fans read comic books and the pleasure they derive from them.

2 Pleasure

2.1 The Art of Reading

This study is centred on comic book fans, their activities and their attitudes, but until now, the act of reading, and the contexts in which this happens, has not been discussed. All media have different characteristics, and have more favoured or conventional modes of consumption; this may be more or less social, ie. pantomime compared to serious theatre. It

may also vary greatly between a cinema full of people singing along with *The Jungle Book* to solitary viewers in an adult cinema. In this context, reading comics is a predominantly, but not exclusively solitary pleasure rather than a shared one. The reasons for this are varied: one may be that, in order to 'fall into' the story the reader must secret themselves away somewhere where their concentration will not be broken. Another may be the generally negative view of comics, which leads the reader to avoid derogatory comments or being discovered (Pa. B. & Ad., 20th December, 1996).

Ritual also plays an important part of the reading process, whereby the consumer creates their own special environment, often evoking memories of previous enjoyable reading experiences:

> Generally what I do is wait till late at night - its always nice when its raining outside, and I just have a lamp on, and something small to eat. I have a nice time, its late night, read your comic, really get into the story, you've no other distractions, I love just reading a comic without any distractions, and that's why I like the book form because you can sit down for an hour or two and enjoy it.
> (O., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 26-8-94)

The two youngest respondents, while saying that reading comics was something they would normally do alone, claiming it was 'a bit gay' to call around to friends and say 'lets read some comics', also described how they would often go to a friend's house after they had been in town buying comics and read some of their purchases in a group setting (L. & Pe. A., 29th June, 1994). Another subject said that he usually read comics at tea-time with something to eat (M., 26-8-94), but in general it was seen as something to be savoured:

> I like it, like, when you go to see a film or something; its like having your own little theatre. Its really brilliant, cause you never know what's going to happen on the next page. You spend hours of entertainment in one book; you can read it about five times and its still good.
> (D.D., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 26-8-94)

This is an important point to remember: comics are rarely read once, one of the main reasons for collecting. One of the interviewees described reading comics as a form of escape, claiming that you don't want to escape for a few seconds and then get distracted, that it was important to be able to forget everything for a while (O., 26th August, 1994). Thus, if a comic worked once, it will work again, and one can escape to the same place repeatedly, until eventually it is internalised to such an extent that it is no longer necessary to read the comic itself:

> There are certain things - I can't remember the last time I picked up an old issue of 2000AD and reread it , its probably about seven or eight years ago, but it doesn't matter - its all there. If they cut me open and printed me out as a computer printout it'd all be there.
>
> (Pa.D., private interview,Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94)

This process is an extremely personal one and may be used in different ways. One respondent described how he uses his favourite comic when he is 'pissed off' to have 'a bit of a laugh' and become positive again (J., March, 95). Comics are thus used as a resource to be dipped into in times of need, or just for pleasure as an escape from reality or as a 'skewed glance at things' (ibid.).

2.2 Pleasure & Dissatisfaction

While the respondents interviewed in this study displayed a committment to comics as a medium, they certainly did not show a slavish pleasure in, or even much satisfaction with the majority of comic books produced. Nearly all the respondents talked about how their tastes had changed and also how the subject-matter and production-values of comics had altered. While some of the respondents still mainly bought superhero comics, they also bought a range of

other types of comics (A. and Ma.). At the same time, most had many pleasant memories of reading comics and felt that comics weren't as good as they had once been.

This was expressed in two main ways: some missed the excitement they had once got from comics and felt that they had lost an essential thrill which they used to impart, while others felt that comics were not being made as well or with as much originality as paradigmatic texts such as *Watchmen* or *The Dark Knight Returns*. One could argue that it is precisely these memories, a history of comics, that were the cause of the feeling of lack that most of the respondents experienced: the two youngest interviewees were the only subjects not to express dissatisfaction with the majority of comics; they did not know enough great comics (or comics perceived as great to be as critical as the others).

This nostalgia was most noticeable in one interview, where the two subjects seemed to enjoy themselves trawling through memories of comics all through their reading lives. Particular stories or moments were preserved vividly for both and still gave great pleasure to them, as one especially unusual example should show:

> *The Victor*, they had a story that, you know, I'm sure if I saw it today I'd be very embarassed. It was a story about a dispatch- rider in the first world war, he had this snazzy, vaguely futuristic bike in the first world war and his thing was: he was the only person who knew about these giant armadillos who lived in between the British and the German trenches, and his worry was that the war would somehow affect these armadillos, or they would be seen and they would be destroyed or they would be exploited. So, in between all his missions, he would sort of go and take care of these giant armadillos. Although, I seem to remember that at once stage, they seem to have developed the ability to shrink to normal size if they were discovered. I don't remember how it ended, but it was one of the great experiences of my life.
> (S., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours 10-8-94)

The other interviewee later described how comics would randomly appear or he would find them in odd places like "messages in bottles from some sort of weird civilisation" and how he would read them like

> a scholar looking at hieroglyphics, trying to discover, to find more out from the weird kind of cryptic references to stories you never read.
> (Pa.D., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94)

It is important to remember that until recently there were no proper comics shops in Ireland and that fans were forced to search for titles, or to accept that they would probably not be able to find a follow up to a particular issue, or maybe never see a less successful character again. Thus, comics did seem random and alien and, as some respondents claimed, were more interesting because of this. Comic shops themselves, when they began to open, were also as one interviewee put it 'like a little Aladdin's cave'. This particular respondent described his first visit to the Alchemist's Head comic shop thus:

> This was very much like a pilgrimage. I mean, I was only fifteen or sixteen when I discovered this and I'd never gone to Dublin on a bus before, so I went up with my friend one day, and I found it on a map, and just went for it - it was just magic. But that's all gone; I don't get the same buzz out of things anymore.
> (D.S., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 24-8-94)

He also used terms such as 'a sense of wonder' and 'little wonderful things' which, as far as he was concerned, had become less frequent, if not extinct in comics for him. Not all those interviewed used such colourful language to explain what comics meant to them, or the excitement they had once got from comics, but, it reflects the difficulties fans have in discussing their pleasure and excitement. In reply to the question 'why keep reading comics if they're so bad now?', one subject replied thus:

Because the stuff that is good is worth it. When you get stuff like the absolute classics like the *Watchmen*, the *Dark Knight* or the *Sin Cities*, you get a book every now and again and its so special it makes an impression on you.

(O., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 26-8-94)

This statement is typical of most of the interviewees, both in the attitude that the few good comics make it worth sifting through all the dross, that they maintain the reader's faith in the medium, and also in the type of language used (ie. that some comics are 'special' or are 'classics'). Even when talking about the past, most of the subjects name-checked a recurring list of names, either of stories or creators, mirroring the notion of a canon of literary works. Thus, while at first it may seem as if nostalgia is the preeminent drive, one can argue that this is the manifestation of the personal selective and critical decisions of the readers.

3 Fan Productivity

3.1 Enunciative Productivity

3.1.1 Creating a Canon

One of the most striking patterns to emerge from a study of the interviews in this study is the repeated use of characters' or creators' names to explain the respondents' points and attitudes. If one compares this to discussions of paintings, which would probably revolve around movements or schools, one can see an absence of theory or of a framework within which one can place particular comics. While there are periodicals and a growing number of books on the subject of comics, this study did not find a high level of theoretical back-up to the critical process of the interviewees. While all excercise discernment, the autodidactic nature of their knowledge means that any theories are *ad hoc*, borrowed from other media and different

discourses: the fans were forced to use enunciation (Fiske, J., 1989, p. 37) because their is no theory relating to comics agreed by fans or by the cultural economy in general.

Within this study, creators like Frank Miller, Alan Moore and Peter Bagge came up quite regularly and were used as paradigms, dependent on a knowledge of their work and their dealings with the industry. As such, they are invested with meaning which excludes those who do not have the background information to place them in their proper context. These and other creators are meaningful as much for what they are not as what they are seen to stand for. This study would be significantly different if the researcher did not have a store of knowledge which enabled leads to be followed which may not have been recognised by an 'outsider'. Further, their discernment is meaningless chatter to those lacking knowledge of comic books and appears to operate on the level of 'who's your favourite Beatle?' To fans however, situating themselves in this manner is important and necessary.

Titles like *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen* and, to a lesser extent, *Maus* (which is seen more as an example of a comic which would appeal more to people who don't usually read comics) are referred to as comics which shifted the way that the interviewees saw the medium. At the same time, they are seen as being partly to blame for the many insipid imitations which have swamped comics shops since. Not one of the subjects expressed negative feelings towards these titles; they seem to have been elevated to a level similar to that of Leonardo Da Vinci, where they are beyond reproach.

2000AD is another title which has been very important to most of the respondents, and one that has had a great impact on both British and American comics over the last fifteen years. Many of the people interviewed in this study described 2000AD as the comic that got them 'into' the medium initially; all considered it to be different from other British comics (some

commentators have claimed 2000AD to be the first British comic to be made like an American comic, and its creators were all fans of American comics and films, Sabin, R., 1993). The most significant difference between 2000AD and other British comics which emerged was that it was the only British title that was deemed worthy of collecting, and was thus more closely associated with American comics.

3.1.2 Fan Talk & Conferences

In Fiske's view, it would appear that talking about the objects of one's adoration is an important part of being a fan, but the respondents in this study in general showed an aversion to talking about comics, except under special circumstances (like these interviews). On a social level, outside comics shops, few of the respondents felt that comics were something that they could or would talk about or enjoyed discussing, though one was particularly keen to do so:

> I have no one, absolutely no one to talk to, other than Rob and Brian, they're sick of me (laughs). Its probably the worst part for me, I hate it so much, because the stuff that I figure out is on my own, or reading *Wizard* (a fan magazine). And then again, I'd love to read more titles but I haven't got the money yet. A friend of mine could be reading them and I could be taking them of him, I miss those sort of things.
>
> (A., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 13th December, 1996)

Most of the other subjects felt that it was essentially a private enthusiasm; most were aware that comic books were not generally highly regarded and had given up trying to defend them; the most that any would do was to occasionally lend certain comics to friends they thought would enjoy them (D.S.).

A number of those interviewed had been to comics conferences, which, being the most visible forms of fan activity may be seen as significant. Only one of the interviewees liked them, despite describing a preponderance of 'fanboys' (a category he admitted to being a member of when he was younger) and overly obsessive behaviour. For him however, conventions were a way to meet other creators and had led to some enduring friendships (Pe. B., December 20th, 1996). In contrast, for others their views on conventions were coloured by their experiences of in-fighting amongst fans in general and particularly at conventions:

> Like any other form of trainspotting its completely full up of viciousness and backbiting. I've been to a couple of conventions and I talked to a couple of people, and literally, as nice as they are, they stand there telling you what idiots the people who've just left the company are...
> (S., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94)

The overall impression gained from the majority of respondents was that, although comic books were important to them personally, there was little or no social interaction for them connected to being a comic book fan. What little interaction there was occurred in specialist shops and beyond that such contact was deemed unpleasant.

3.1.3 Creating a Space For Fans

One of the constants in every interview in this study was the mention of Forbidden Planet, a specialist comics shop situated on Dawson Street, Dublin 2. Forbidden Planet is a British-owned chain of specialist comic book and science-fiction/fantasy book shops. The Dublin shop is the largest comic shop in Ireland with the most extensive and varied range of comic books, selling both new and second-hand comics. While there are other comics shops in Dublin, Forbidden Planet appears to be the most used and popular specialist shop

in the city. While some of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the shop, all acknowledged it as a focus of their interest in and consumption of comic books.

As was discussed earlier, specialist shops are crucial to fans. Beyond the obvious excitement of having access to a wide range of titles, shops perform a number of social functions, from giving fans their own 'space' which is in opposition to the 'places' given to them otherwise. One of the recurring problems specified as restricting the expansion of comics into wider markets is the off-putting natue of most comic book shops. Conversely, it is this distinct atmosphere which both attracts and reassures fans. It is the very fact that the shops are exclusive and different that makes them appealing. By making the distinction between fans and not-fans, a sense of identity is formed. One respondent displayed his pride in the fear his work-mates had of Forbidden Planet:

> I think its just by the fact that you go in and they're playing really loud reggae music, and there are dreadlocked people on the counter, they say: "I'm not going in there'. I think that's funny; you come across it. I think they have this very strange opinion of what goes on in there. Its worse than that of course in reality. (laughs)
>
> (D.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 16-8-94)

Similarly, many comics shops evolved out of stalls and were often poorly kept, tatty and in run-down areas. Many sell new-age paraphenalia and literature or science-fiction books and videos, other less valued artefacts which hardly confer respectability by association. Again, part of the attraction for many fans is the fleamarket atmosphere - being forced to rummage to find what they want, or simply something interesting. To a certain extent, older readers, while welcoming the greater availability of comic books, miss the excitement of searching in hope rather than expectation and the concomitant pleasure of discovery:

> Maybe its kind of like a snobbery thing that you can now go into Forbidden Planet and its all alphabetical and you can go straight to the thing that you want, but I love that sort of weird serendipity of: there'll be boxes full of comics, and

> discovering something like *Love and Rockets* or discovering something like, I don't
> know, bizarre weird stuff underneath a pile of trash.
> (Pa.D., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94)

Another attraction of comic book shops and shopping is the social element, which may be

both a reason for becoming interested or more committed to the medium, or may be a way

of discussing ones likes and dislikes with similarly-minded others:

> I think I've known every comic shop owner in this town fairly well on a one-
> to-one basis. Because I was the fanboy of the first order between the ages of
> fourteen and eighteen...
> (Pe.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 20-12-1996)

Because of the autodidactic nature of fandom, fans find shops useful for meeting others

who may be able to direct them to titles that would be to their taste, or in helping them

avoid wasting money and time on poor titles. Information is very important as it confers

cultural capital on the owner; however, this information is worthless unless communicated

and kept up to date. All of the respondents in this study described how they visited shops to

find out what was new and what would be released in the near future (even if they had no

desire to buy the articles about which they were enquiring).

For the two youngest subjects the social nature of shopping was the impetus for

them to become fans. While both had bought comics previously, the availability of shops as

a place to stay and feel welcome was important:

> I'd go into town with my parents and I'd go into Forbidden Planet and look
> around and buy a few Batman, for a year or so. Then all my friends, we started
> going into town a lot and just hanging around, and then going to Forbidden Planet
> and just staying there for ages, and just got mad into them.
> (Pe.A., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 29-6-94)

'Hanging around' is important because it allows fans to see and be seen; also, obviously,

financial restrictions limit the purchasing abilities of all fans. Comic shops in general have

a policy of allowing customers to browse and read comics without impediment: the

assumption being that most fans will want to add to their collections and will still buy a

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comic they like even if they have read it. They may also become interested in a title and hence expand the potential market for that and similar titles. Because of this laissez-faire approach, comic book shops allow younger fans a space to interact without necessarily spending money. The lack of similar spaces may partly explain why comic books are popular amongst many pre-teens and adolescents.

One can distinguish a difference in the ways younger and older fans use comic shops: younger fans use shops to meet while also becoming involved with and interested in comics, while older fans use shops to talk about comics because they have few other opportunities to discuss their enthusiasm:

> The buying of comics is quite social, in that, in Dublin now - there were a few years ago a number of shops, whereas now its basically Forbidden Planet. You quickly get to know everyone in Forbidden Planet; you know everyone who's there. You do tend to go in and chat about what's new and what's on. Forbidden Planet itself is very social; its a clique. There are a lot of people who you get to recognise through that. Outside of that, I don't think I've ever talked comics, about comics with people. But, in the shop you certainly would; you go in and discuss what's new out and what isn't.
> (D.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 16-8-94)

Similarly, there are differences in the reasons why fans do not buy comic books: for the younger interviewees, what they bought and what they didn't buy was based on pecuniary limitations as much as choice. The older respondents in this study, however, uniformly described the dearth of titles which the felt were worth buying, even though in general they had more real income to spend on comics.

3.2 Textual Productivity

The creative urges which prompt a person to devote themselves to a particular medium are very hard to define and may often be based on a mixture of chance and context. As has been discussed most recently, comic book fans tend to place art before story in their estimations. Thus, one may assume that it is comic book art which inspires

them more than the stories. Having said that, the preeminence of characters in the comics industry tends to counter this assumption; many respondents claimed that the medium excited them, even though on an ongoing basis most comic books they encountered disappointed them. Almost all the interviewees had at least dabbled in producing comics themselves, with some attempting to follow careers in the comic book industry. One might suggest that these attempts to create their own comics were attempts at recreating the excitement and sense of wonder which infused their initial exposure to comic books and to further it and enhance this excitement. Whatever the motives, the widespread involvement in production must be considered significant.

That the subjects were active in this way must further undermine the assumption that fans are uncritical and unthinking in their consumption of comic books. One may look to other media and note how fans are similarly active: the oft-repeated stories of Steven Spielberg's home movies, or the apocryphal assertion by Brian Eno that every person who bought The Velvet Underground's first album on its release (which was not very many) formed a band as a result. Fans of *Star Trek* have come to be particularly noted for their active relationship with the objects of their affection, writing novels based on the untold stories of characters from the various series (some of these fan writers are now script-writers for the series), writing Klingon operas, creating costumes and indulging in a popular sub-genre of *Star Trek* erotica. Ien Ang has investigated fans' relationship to television (with reference to *Dallas*), while organisations like Viewers for Quality Television have excercised their power on a number of occasions to save programs from being discontinued. This channeling of fan enthusiasm has led to the 'targeting' of audiences by US networks and has to an extent changed the assumptions of broadcasters, particularly in relation to female consumers (ref. Brower, S., in Lewis, L., (ed.), 1992).

For some of the respondents in this study, the consumption and production of comics were inseparable, claiming that for them there was 'no real difference between reading them and wanting to do them' and as a result:

> I think I drew my first comic when I was about eight - I was after seeing the Incredible Hulk on tv, so I just put something together, I think I was in second class - that was the first comic I actually drew, but I've been into them as long as I can remember
>
> (E., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 26-8-94)

This may partly explain why many fans continue to be interested in comic books despite their dissatisfaction with most comics and also account for some of their dissatisfaction. Other fans described how they use comics for inspiration, cannibalising ideas and styles for use in other media (M.A., 12-8-94 and M.W., 1-9-94). Another fan recognised this function of comic books as a source of ideas, quoting how a particular film director has based much of his work on comics that have inspired him:

> That's what Charles Band does: he makes these straight to video films. He says he wants to be Marvel Comics 1963, so he makes these straight to video cheapo films that are done, at their done with a fair old degree of love and affection and wit and silliness. You can tell all the time that he's big into the memory of comics.
>
> (S., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94)

The activities associated with comics fandom are in many cases more important to the fans than the consumption of comics, as they prompt greater personal involvement and may affect lifestyle choices: one fan described how a series of correspondence with a renowned comic book artist encouraged him to pursue his interest in drawing comics and led to his going to art college (Pa.D., 10-8-94). Although the subject mentioned has since concentrated on film-making, his decision and subsequent work was influenced by his interest in comics. Similarly, another interviewee felt that although he considered himself a fan of comic books, consuming them was not as important to him as producing them:

> A really good comic is as good as a really good book or film, or a song. I enjoy the process; I love doing them, rather than reading them. You can read a comic in an hour; its only a short thing, but its easy to do; its very relaxing. Whereas, you get more, you get adrenalin from drawing.
>
> (O., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 26-8-94)

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On another level, producing comic books can be a hobby and give fans something inexpensive to do; the two youngest respondents claimed that though they didn't particularly enjoy the process of creating a comic, the pride imbued by finishing one, plus the social nature of its production made it a preferred pastime:

> On an average school day you're finished about half-three and all you can do is go home and call over to Lewis here cause he's the only person who really lives close to me. There's not much to do. We can just talk to each other, but then, when we do the comic, we can talk to each other and do it at the same time.
> (Pe.A., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 29-6-94)

It appears obvious that, if comics fandom is bound up with creative activity to the extent which became evident in this study, then most comics fans could be viewed as belonging to the de-limited field of production and as such their involvement with comic books was an important factor in the creation of their habituses.

3.3 Semiotic Productivity

Semiotic productivity is the meanings which consumers make of cultural commodities, and as such is essentially internal (Fiske, J., in Lewis, L. (ed.), 1992, p. 37), and may be implied from the enunciative and textual products of fans and consumers. Much of the last chapter was concentrated on this productivity, as it is the basis of distinction and discrimination: the meanings fans make of texts shapes their habitus and are shaped by it. Interestingly, Fiske describes semiotic productivity as being 'characteristic of popular culture as a whole rather than of fan culture specifically' (ibid., p. 37), but surely one must say that it is characteristic of official culture also? If not, then how is official culture used as a means of creating a habitus?

4 Capital Accumulation

4.1 Education vs. Autodidacticism

As has been previously discussed, fans are autodidacts and must, because of their exclusion from the educational system and the lack of respect which comics receive, must use enunciation to explain their tastes and to dispaly their knowledge (eg. name-checking and the creation of an *ad hoc* canon). Thus, in explaining the creation of distinction and discrimination by fans, one is also describing strategies of capital accumulation. Furthermore, fans gain cultural capital through productivity and participation. This section will therefore concentrate on the strategies fans use to accumulate cultural capital via the actual consumption of comic books and developing collections. It will also examine two struggles in which the respondents may be seen to be involved: the struggle within the field of comics fandom between superhero comics and the alternatives and the struggle to have comics considered more than mere juvenilia. Finally, it will briefly discuss the respondents' consumption of other media.

4.2 Choice, Cliche & Parody

Although there are approximately five hundred titles released per month by American publishers alone, most respondents did not feel their tastes were catered to satisfactorily. One may compare the situation to television, where there are innumerable stations broadcasting, often twenty-four hours daily and yet *Star Trek* seems to be on all day. In *A Look Back*, (in Lindsay, P., (ed.), 1993) Des Cranston distinguishes 'choice' from

'selection': choice is having real alternatives, different types of programming or products, while selection involves a range of similar artifacts - pick a gameshow, any gameshow. While there is a large selection of comic books, there is a restricted choice; to many non-fans, comics are defined by their dominant genres and the market is certainly concentrated on a small number of themes and conventions. One may argue that this results from fans demanding more of the same, and as has been argued earlier, fans do indeed shape the market and what is produced for its consumption:

> I figure I see the same themes emerging that sell lots of them to adolescents, lots of vampiresses and musclemen and stuff like that. You can look at most of the covers and say: 'no, forget about that'. The same things come up again and again; but they're writing for a market, so that's the bottom line; it does so well...
> (J., private interview, RTC Tallaght, Dublin, 1 hour March, 1995)

The problem, as perceived by the subjects in this study, is that the majority of comic books simply repeat storylines and cliches without developing the genres by playing with the 'genericity' of the material. That this playfulness with the 'meta-syntax' (Collins, J., in Pearson & Uricchio, (eds.), 1991, p. 178/9) of genres pleases fans if accomplished successfully may be seen by the repeated favourable references to *The Dark Knight Returns* and other similar titles:

> That was deconstruction before I knew what deconstruction was, and I knew it was fantastic. It was sincere parody in a strange way. It was wonderful and it made it... even though it was undermining everything about the Batman myth it had a grudging, not a grudging, an ungrudging respect for it. It was something that would make you come back to it again and again...
> (J.C. , private interview, city centre, Dublin, 14th December, 1996, 1hour)

The genericity of comic books means that they are ripe for parody because they **do** have rules which may be broken and that style 'which is as unique and unmistakable as your own fingerprints' (Jameson, F., 1991, p. 17) is still crucial to comic books and to fans.

Unfortunately, this approach itself developed into a cliche as publishers strove to repeat a successful 'formula' with diminishing success. The comic book industry still appears to be characterised by a tendency to follow whatever craze is popular and to exploit it mercilessly. As a result, older fans who have seen other fads come and go (and often return) are left dissatisfied by the majority of comic books. Their sense of history impedes their enjoyment of the medium to varying degrees:

> In a way, a lot of the time my heart just plummets. When you see something you really want, your hand gets it before your brain does. If I was to see an old issue, it'd be in my hands before my brain recognised it. In Forbidden Planet, my hand rarely flies up. I'm not trying to make some carpet put-down of comics now, but, it makes me sad because I wish I could splash out, now that I have a little bit more money, now there are shops like Forbidden Planet, part of me wishes there was this strand that I could plug back into, and let it wash over me.
> (S., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94)

Although the lack of choice was repeatedly stressed by fans, the range of comic books available in Ireland and Britain remains more extensive than is the norm in America, which is more committed to superheroes. Constraining all choices, however, is the question of money with which to buy comics. Financial considerations inform both attitudes to price and the amount of fans' disposable income spent on comic books.

4.3 Price, Format & The Perception of Quality

Because comic books were traditionally aimed at children, they were usually cheaply produced and inexpensive; with the development of direct sales and the fan market, more expensive comics began to appear. Graphic novels have become popular and hardback comic books have become less rare; high quality paper and full-colour printing (as opposed to the usual four-colour process) in 'deluxe' formats is increasingly normal. While the majority of comic books are still cheaply produced monthly comics, the variety

of formats appears set to continue and to increase. As was previously discussed, the flimsiness of comic books was part of the reason for their collectability, but the care put into recent editions shows that fans are also interested in the format in which comic books are presented. This may be attributed in part to fans associating the finish of the item with its cultural worth. An item given the same care as a novel for instance may more easily lay claim to serious consideration than a cheap-looking badly printed comic book.

Another related development in comic book publishing is the spread of fully-painted comics which again are more expensive. A number of those interviewed expressed their displeasure with this trend, discussed earlier (O., S., D.S). Many expensive comic books were seen to be poor value. Thus, while fans were willing to spend money on a Jeff Jones, a Jim Lee or a Frank Fazzetta (Da.S., 24-8-94 and Pa.B. & Ad., 20th December, 1996), because they felt the art was worth paying for, they were not inclined to spend large amounts for something they didn't feel was special. Other respondents claimed not to spend large sums on single items even if they felt they were exceptional, explaining their preference for cheap monthly comics:

> I tend to buy cheaper stuff. You can end up spending an awful lot - something like *Shade*, I've probably spent a hundred pounds getting forty issues together. If that was a one off purchase, if someone was to say: "here's this product, an anthology and you can have it for a hundred pounds" I'd be like: " No way!". Because you have to spend that money over a long time, you don't register it the same way.
> (M.W., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 2 hours, 1-9-94)

Most of the subjects felt that comic books had become more expensive in recent years and claimed that this had in part restricted their ability to purchase the comics they wanted, but if a comic was wanted strongly enough, price was not a major impediment. The two youngest respondents claimed to spend nearly all their money on comics and were very well acquainted with the prices of various titles as well as the value which their previous purchases had attained. They were the only interviewees to mention the worth of

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their collections. The other subjects were more vague about how much of their incomes they spent on comics, few admitted to spending as much as they had previously spent on comics and tended to stress how little they bought comics, while at the same time detailing both comics they bought regularly and in particular, more expensive purchases they had made. However, a few described how comics were their main expenditure, around which they budgeted:

> What I'm buying now, comics and I collect figures as well, if I had to live in the real world, I'm knackered because I'd never be able to afford both. So I'm basically at home till I'm forty or I win the Lotto (laughs).
> (Pa.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 20-12-96)

It seems that many fans browse more and buy less the longer they are involved with comics, while maintaining a small list of titles which they buy regularly. Allied to this was a generally held belief that quality was often to be found in inexpensive ways, often harking back to examples which had excited them when they were younger:

> I used to get *BattleAction* with the likes of *Charlie's War*, it was printed on newspaper, but I didn't give a damn: I loved the artwork; Johnny Red and those: they're classics and they'll always be classics, no matter what they're printed on. You could put them on tissue paper, toilet paper, they'd still be as good.
> (O., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 26-8-94)

Nostalgia may be accused of making comics seem both cheaper and better in the past, a tendency not restricted to comic book fans. Price and quality are also central issues in the creation and development of fan collections.

4.4 The Urge to Collect

It is ironic that their flimsiness and disposability has led to rare and old comics becoming very valuable commodities. Precisely because so many were thrown away, those still extant and in good or mint condition are immensely collectable. This has also occurred in the

baseball trading card market, which has many crossovers in America with the comics market. Both were considered children's things and were mass-produced, and both have been characterised by collectors who continued buying and enjoying their collections long after they had grown out of the assumed target-market of the producers.

At the same time, the collectability of the comics and cards has led to changes in the market structure. Investors and speculators have seen an opportunity to make easy money and have bought many copies of particular 'collectibles' and have thus boosted their sales, leading to a situation where more and more comics are produced to be collected, to be special, to entice collectors and speculators. In the baseball card market this led to some years of huge sales and profits followed by a serious collapse of the market as demand slowed down. This was due to the fact that the expected increase in value for cards did not occur; obviously, with massive numbers of 'collectibles' available or known to be stored, they were not as collectable as was assumed.

Similarly, comics have increased in price and in production values with many more 'special editions' and mini-series aimed at both the collector who 'must have' everything to do with a particular character or line. Alongside this is the trend towards crossover stories, where epic battles and happenings which will supposedly 'change everything' are played out in different issues of different comics. As was discussed in Chapter One, the serial nature of modern comics has both come from the development of organised fandom and has strengthened this fandom. In this study, all the respondents claimed to either actively collect particular titles or to have done so at an earlier stage. This urge to collect was sometimes described as a compulsion:

I completed my *Epic Illustrated* collection which is just fantastic. I completed it at enormous cost at the time. I just had to have it. Sometimes, I just have to have things.

(D. S., , private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 24-8-94)

All described how, when a new issue of one of their regular titles came in, they would go to buy it and the satisfaction and excitement this engendered:

I used to be absolutely obsessed with *Love and Rockets*, and used to beat the door down to get into Forbidden Planet to get an issue...
(Pa. D., private interview, Ranelagh, Dublin, 2 hours, 10-8-94)

This sensation does not seem to be a simple reflex of enjoyment of a preferred amusement, but rather something that gives sense to the reader's life and allows them to create their own identity, or to mark out a 'space' for themselves (De Certeau). One of the subjects, while distancing himself from it, described what he saw as the impetus towards collecting:

I do think the collecting ethos, there is... ... there's a certain amount of late adolescence, puberty to late adolescence, there is this attempt to construct a controlled world where you collect all the bits that fit into the bigger puzzle - you have control, you have system or structure, that impetus to collecting is quite interesting and I don't think its restricted to the comics thing, but it is a part.
(M.W., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 2 hours, 1-9-94)

While this may be true, this view may also be a result of the popular cultural nature of comics and the low regard they often incur, even from readers, as that respondent did himself keep his comics after reading them (albeit, not in any particular order).

Part of the enjoyment of collecting comics is in storing and rereading issues (often many times). Many of the respondents talked about where and how they store their comics, with some having very precise places and orders for each title or type of comic:

I've got several boxes, storage boxes. I built my own, wooden, like the blocks they have over there (Sub City).

This may be because of an awareness of the value of comics or certain issues: the two youngest respondents seemed very concerned with the increasing value of their comics and even claimed that if they stopped reading comics that they would make a lot of money by selling their collections. However, a number of interviewees explicitly stated that they would never sell even their least favoured comics (A. and Pa.B. & Ad.). All were aware of the practice of 'poly-bagging' whereby comics are kept (and sometimes sold) in polythene bags in order to protect them from moisture and becoming yellowed by age. In some cases, comics are bought in bags and never removed from them with the intention of being sold at a profit later on. None of the interviewees admitted doing this and most had negative views of people who bought comics for gain. Still nearly all the subjects kept and took good care of their comics, although some were less precious about their upkeep:

> I have a friend Liam that's very into it and he talks about the value of comics and what they'll be worth in a couple of years. I have all my comics stacked in piles in my bathroom, and they're all going mouldy. It upsets him greatly; it really does upset him. Like you know: "You have to get those into bags". I don't throw them out, but I don't prize them, but then I don't throw anything out. I'm a hoarder.
> (D.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 16-8-94)

One might claim that fans' collections contain both economic and cultural worth because they allow the collector to applaud herself on the quality and value of her collection and because she can reread titles at her leisure.

4.5 Struggles within and Without

The struggle between comic fans concerning the worth of superhero and fantasy comics in opposition to the mainly black and white and adult-oriented alternative comics may be seen

from many of the responses already detailed in this study. This is tied to the struggle of comic book fans to gain respect for comics and to disassociate from its stereotypical representation as a medium for children. One might also characterise these struggles as the attempt to show that comic books were not defined by superheroes, that they were in fact a distinct medium, rather than a genre. Thus, the discussion of form in the previous chapter is heavily influenced by this struggle. The matter is problematised by the fact that most fans were originally drawn to comics by the very superheroes they now feel are harmful to the perception of comics by non-fans. Furthermore, a number still enjoyed those 'numbskulled' superheroes and the trashiness of many comics (S., Ma., Pa.D.).

The answers to the question of whether or not comics were for kids were uniformly negative, with most agreeing that many comics were aimed at children or adolescents, but that this did not mean the medium was inherently juvenile. These reactions may be summed up by the following quote:

> John McCrea (a comics creator) said that saying comics are for kids is like saying all books are for kids because Enid Blyton wrote books for kids. Its definitely something that just doesn't follow.
> (Pe. B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 20-12-96,1 hour)

Most respondents used strong language to refute the juvenile perception of comic books as it was an emotive point. That it is an on-going struggle is also shown by the fact that *none* of the interviewees read only superhero comics or non-superhero comics (apart from the two youngest respondents, who may have been too young to appreciate adult-oriented material). The matter has yet to be resolved, and while the subjects expressed preferences, comics must still develop further:

> the one they always bring you against is *Maus* which is an absolutely incredibly serious issue which was dealt with very well. But there's never been a comic like that

since: that was meant to be the first one; there was this comic; this was meant to show the way. But there hasn't been one since.

<div align="right">(D.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 16-8-94)</div>

This need for comics to develop (allied to the knowledge that they could and already had elsewhere was expressed as a disappointment with the comparative homogeneity and lack of innovation in British and American comics as distinct from comics produced in other parts of the world and the greater regard in which comics and comic book creators were held:

> In England you've had 2000AD and a couple of war comics; all the war comics are gone now. And in America you've always had the superhero shite and a few other ones. Places like Japan and Europe, they've just "Oh, I think I'll write a strip about the 1860's in America...". there's no limitations to your story that there would be here.
>
> <div align="right">(Pe.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 20-12-96)</div>

It is important to realise that this struggle is concerned with form rather than with the oppositional stance by which popular culture is often defined. Furthermore, the struggle is usually expressed in terms of others: the fans described how others acted and how others thought, creating distinctions between themselves and the negative characteristics of a generalised 'other' (M.W, E., O., J.C., etc.).

4.6 Other Media

Throughout every interview the subjects made reference to other media either to explain points by example or to justify comics by making analogies to other media. Most of the respondents claimed to read widely, while many displayed a wide range of knowledge

about film. Although most references were to popular culture, references to high art were not uncommon. Overall, the replies given seemed to indicate catholic tastes:

> I'm just a huge consumer: I buy so many books; I buy loads of books and I read loads of books and I buy lots of records, far too many records, I just buy everything, and I tend to buy comics. I'm just this media and culture junkie.
> (D.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 16-8-94)

Another respondent described his interest in a variety of media, explaining that he absorbs information 'like a sponge' and that he never rated by medium:

> Television, books, comics, film are all as important, and within those there's always absolute shit and your absolute masterpieces.
> (Pe.B., private interview, city centre, Dublin, 1 hour, 20-12-96)

Others described themselves as fans of other media such as film and music (Pa.B., 20th December, 1996 and Ma., 13th December, 1996). The media consumption habits of the interviewees appear similar to those shown in the MRI *Upwardly Mobile Young Men* survey, with many of the subjects expressing an interest in science-fiction. Overall, the respondents appeared to be avid consumers of a variety of media and to be interested in a wide range of cultural products, not confining themselves to comic books or to popular cultural artefacts alone.

5 Conclusion

The variety of approaches towards productivity and capital accumulation shown by the fans studied must be viewed in relation to their striving for distinction and for the acceptance of comics by non-fans. One may contrast the willingness of the interviewees to explain their taste with the difficulty they experienced explaining the pleasure which comic books gave them. In order to do this, they had to evoke magic or wonder, rather than how comic books allowed them to express their social experiences or how they were relevant to their lives. While they could rationalise their fandom after the fact, these rationalisations

may be seen as 'second order strategies': their tastes may be shaped socially, but their pleasure was personal.

CONCLUSION

The Problem with Popular Culture

The problem with popular culture is that it cannot avoid its history: it refuses to lose its associations with the great unwashed and the perils of democracy that worried commentators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The dichotomy between Culture and Anarchy has continued to confuse the nature of creativity and enjoyment in relation to popular culture. Similarly, the Frankfurt School, Lefebvre and marxism as a whole, with their concentration on false consciousness have characterised popular culture as pernicious and politically tainted for entirely different reasons. The one constant between these very different ideological approaches has been their paternalism, which has consistently lamented that popular culture will neither reform itself into fine art/official culture, nor into authentic/affirmative culture.

The British Culturalists correctly reacted against this paternalism and, instead, explain how popular culture may be used for oppositional purposes and hence why these oppositional stances are important areas for study. Popular culture is people making do, fighting a semiotic guerrilla warfare with the capitalist system, making their own meanings of mass produced commodities. As such it is good, despite the lack of worth of many of its texts. In fact, the text is virtually redundant: if not one text, then another will do. Thus, the commentator can defend or eulogise popular culture in two separate ways which merge seamlessly into each other: the 'rubbish' is excused because of its oppositional stance and the texts the commentator likes are examples of how popular culture may approach the quality and aesthetic criteria of high art/official culture. However, discrimination and

distinction are central to popular culture, just as they are to high culture. This study has

attempted to show how comic book fans discriminate and the various criteria that they use.

The Problem with Official Culture

Bourdieu's theory of fields and its adaptation to incorporate fans has been central to

my research, but my findings appear to contradict both Fiske and Bourdieu on a number of

important points. On the level of motivation, one must refute the view that the starting

points of the popular aesthetic and the aesthetic disposition are different. By claiming that

popular culture must be 'for something', or that the popular aesthetic is anti-Kantian

(Bourdieu, P., 1984, p. 41), they undercut the notions of fields and a cultural economy. By

this I mean, that if distinction is based upon the accumulation of cultural capital and that

this allows individuals and groups to position themselves within fields, then by claiming

different motivations for the culturally impoverished or subordinated, how may the

impoverished shift their habituses within a given field? If one were to talk about how poor

people used different money than wealthy people in day to day life, one would seem

ridiculous. Surely it makes more sense to say that individuals and groups may accumulate

more cultural capital in some ways (through knowledge and actual acquisition of artefacts)

than others (eg. less-respected/valued media).

Someone who buys a cheap framed print of *The Blue Boy* makes the purchase

because they find it appealing (or as an ironic statement); comic book fans collect posters

or cut out images from specific comics and stick them to their walls because they are

aesthetically pleasing to them. They do not buy them as statements of opposition against

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the media industries. The importance placed on aesthetic worth by most of the fans interviewed in this study showed that, to them, comics were artistically valid and could and should be criticised according to the criteria of official culture. These criteria included the correctness of anatomy and perspective, the innovation of the artists, their use of the page and of the line, and their purity as comics (as opposed to a mixture of literature and art). While Fiske states that older, better educated adult fans will tend towards using the criteria of official culture (and most of the respondents of this study fitted that category), he merely leaves this statement to hang and does not follow it up. Fans use the *same* criteria to assess and explain popular cultural artefacts as official culture *when they have the means* to do so. If some fans do not use these criteria, could it be because they have not accumulated enough cultural capital, enough knowledge or education, to invoke them? If someone describes a comic as 'cool', is that because they see it as a site of resistance, a text which is relevant to the creation of their social identity, their habitus, or is it because they have little knowledge of art history or literary criticism? Or is it because 'cool' is a more natural expression of approval for younger readers (when they are not trying to appear learned)?

As can be seen from above, my main disagreements with Bourdieu stem from his continuance of the dichotomy between popular culture and official culture. By distinguishing the two, Bourdieu (and Fiske for his own reasons) is forced to create differences in motivation and type between the consumption of popular culture and official culture which are not borne out by the findings of this study. My point is not that everything is good and everything is equal, but rather, that there are differences in context in cultural consumption and that people inhabit different habituses within fields (and within the de-limited field of production) but that all exchanges, strategies or struggles are

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basically alike. In fact, two of the major findings of this study are: 1) that as far as fans are concerned, most comics are mediocre, and 2) that despite being fully aware that comic books are in a position of inequality with other media, fans continue discriminating and continue accruing cultural capital via various strategies and struggles.

The Star System

Fiske claims that fans use their knowledge of popular culture to 'see through' the text, so that they may excorporate the industrially produced commodified text to their own purposes. However, one may attack this notion in a number of different ways.

Firstly, the star system that is so prevalent in popular culture is surely based upon the distancing of the 'star' from the relations of production, on the specialness of the star. In relation to the comic book fans interviewed, a number of comic book creators were lionised and used as examples of the possibilities of the medium, or merely as exciting, novel and successful. Secondly, figures such as Hirst or Schnabel can hardly be approached without a knowledge of their work being created within a very explicitly economically driven art world, where many canonical works are best known for their value (or for being 'priceless'). With stars of the cinema, pop music and comic books, their wealth and conspicuous consumption is important as a way of objectifying their success to fans and as a carrot to dangle in front of fans. Many of the respondents in this study were involved in making their own comics and were driven by the hope that maybe some day, they too could make a living from comic books. Their knowledge of market forces and possible remuneration did not undercut their admiration for stars or for artisans in the industry. They

were aware that, like the fine art world, it success can be based on a mixture of ability and hype. Thirdly, all capital accumulation is about associating oneself with particular artefacts or movements in order to distinguish oneself from others, and is thus diminishing the distance between the text and one's everyday life (Fiske J., in Lewis, L., (ed.) 1992, p. 43). Thus the opera buff and the wine connoisseur explicitly mix their cultural tastes with their everyday lives.

It Must Be *For* Something

The crux of the problem with Fiske's analysis is his acceptance of Bourdieu's contention that popular culture must be *for* something, which forces him to search for ways in which popular culture is different from official culture. My point is that, if Bourdieu and Fiske are to be consistent, official culture should be considered to be *for* something (eg. social prestige) as much as popular culture. If taste is socially constructed, and cultural consumption bound up with the creation of habituses and thus distinction, it follows that all cultural consumption is functional. By concentrating on form, one is distancing oneself from others with more 'natural' tastes. One is expressing one's level of knowledge and referrents. The respondents in this study were, in general, in a position whereby they had the cultural capital to 'know better' than read comic books, and yet they still read and collected them. Surely their choice to indulge in the consumption of artefacts which they know lack the respect of the majority requires more justification than the consumption of more valued cultural commodities. Their decision must be as a result of a perceived gain, of pleasure or of cultural capital. The 'complexity' of postmodern culture may be based upon

the willingness of individuals to assert the worth of a variety cultural forms excluded from official culture. However, this apparent complexity stems from the increasing unwillingness of consumers to have the objects of their adoration disregarded alongside an expanding ability to use the criteria of official culture to divergent uses. In other words, the embourgeoisement of much of society through education has empowered popular culture with the language and the confidence in its own worth to defend itself, rather than the perceived 'dumbing down' of culture.

The use of the language and criteria of official culture to explain popular culture need not necessarily be taken to show the subordinate position of popular culture, but rather, it may be seen as the result of the willingness of people with access to official cultural capital to consume popular cultural objects and to strive for cultural capital through their consumption. Furthermore, if fans were using comic books for oppositional reasons, then surely they would reject the language of official culture, rather than use it to explain their tastes. Fiske and Bourdieu claim that this shows the inherently contradictory nature of popular culture, that it must 'make do', but it is only contradictory if one approaches popular culture as 'anti-Kantian' or oppositional, as separate from official culture. How then, does one approach Chandler, Chaplin or The Velvet Underground? There are so many examples of popular artefacts and creators which have either been co-opted by official culture or have been created using the same criteria/aesthetic as popular culture, that it is impossible to support the notion of an 'anti-Kantian' aesthetic driving popular culture. Similarly, the proposition that popular culture is oppositional, cannot be supported by the evidence collected in this study: to be in opposition, one must choose one stance or

approach rather than another rather than the heterogeny of the subjects' decisions and strategies.

This bricolage is the most profound commonality shared by the subjects of this study: all the fans were actively involved in creating their distinctive habituses, through different strategies and involving themselves in different struggles, but all used their consumption creatively. By making collections, by writing or drawing comics or using comics as reference materials or by the simple knowledge that they were unusual in reading comic books, the fans asserted their difference, they created distinction. By applying Bourdieu's notions to a decentred culture, one can see postmodern culture as having a very clear logic, based precisely upon distinction, upon local solutions rather than global theory. The fans in this study used whatever theory or approach suited them best in order to explain themselves. Bourdieu's (and Fiske's) mistake is to assume that they would confine themselves to one approach (or that they could).

Postmodernism as Niche Marketing

In the case of the comic book industry, with the close interrelationship between fandom and production, the postmodern trends of narrow-casting and niche marketing have become very marked. This has led to a situation where comics are made almost entirely for and by fans, whereby a mass medium has mutated into a narrow-cast medium, which can survive and prosper without pandering to the casual consumer. It appears from the respondents in this study that this has led to an aestheticization of comics, where the look, form, style and art work of is considered by many to be more important than the content of

a comic book. Allied to this is the self-referential nature of many comics, where the stories and the artwork cannot be properly appreciated without a knowledge of the history of comic books. This preponderance of cliché, parody and quotation (the constant retelling of origin stories) has meant that the range of acceptable subject matter for comic books has atrophied (although this trend seems to be reversing somewhat in recent years).

This abstraction, where little is signified except other signifiers, displays an aestheticization that runs utterly counter to both Fiske and Bourdieu's conception of popular culture and of fandom. The concentration on the formal qualities of comic books displayed by the subjects was exactly the same as that shown by consumers of official culture whom Bourdieu discusses in *Distinction*. The assertion that popular culture is anti-Kantian does not hold in relation to comic book fans. Again, Bourdieu's acceptance of the official culture/popular culture dichotomy forces him to misrepresent the nature of popular culture.

The flimsy disposable nature of comic books also throws up another interesting feature. Because comic books are so fragile, they can gain in value due to their rarity and age, much as first editions of books can or fine wines. Thus, collections were often seen as investments in the future by the interviewees, with some individuals buying issues they neither liked or read, or buying multiple copies of particular titles. This seems to be an increasingly prevalent facet of contemporary culture where toys and other previously discarded objects have risen sharply in value. This once again muddies the distinction between high culture and popular culture: fans are quite self-conscious about their consumption. They approach their purchases like someone buying wine: is it to be kept carefully in the cellar or to accompany frozen pizza? Fiske states that the difference

between fan collections and art collections is "socio-economic" (Fiske, J., 1992, p. 45), but does not discuss what happens as the value of a collection increases. Again, it seems that Fiske is trying to impose a qualitative distinction when, in my opinion, the difference is quantitative.

The Problem With Postmodern Culture

The findings of this study seem to support Bourdieu's concept of fields and of cultural capital, while undercutting his view of popular culture. Similarly, Fiske's manipulation of Bourdieu's work to explain distinction and creativity amongst fans is let down by his approach to popular culture. Both are impelled to distinguish the motivations, uses and criteria of popular culture from those of official culture, the former seemingly to marginalise it, the latter to stress its vitality. For different reasons, they fail to adequately address postmodern culture.

By this I mean that I believe that, with postmodern culture at least, one cannot justify the dichotomy between official and popular culture (between high and low culture). While the distinction has always been politically charged and value-laden, it has lost much of its descriptive power. The subjects in this study, in their consumption and their creativity, ignore the distinction, or more correctly, refute the discreteness of the two. Thus, the notion of popular cultural capital operating alongside official cultural capital loses its usefulness and its meaning. Similarly, if all culture strives to create distinction, then all culture is oppositional in as much as it is used to create the individual's habitus via struggles and strategies. Likewise, all culture is functional, is 'for something', which was

always central to Bourdieu's thesis of distinction. Furthermore, the fans in this study valued an aestheticised abstraction which displayed the 'aesthetic disposition' rather than the refusal of the abstract that Bourdieu claims characterises the popular aesthetic. The fans used their knowledge of comic books in order to explain and increase their appreciation of the artefacts, rather than see through the industrially produced text. Finally, all culture is participative, even at the level of wearing a tuxedo to the opera, of buying a painting: through bricolage one both consumes and creates.

One must also take into account the unwillingness of the respondents to associate themselves with other fans, or even to be interviewed. Distinction and discrimination are informed by the seriality that Sartre describes. However, this seriality need not be seen in a negative light, and is in fact actively sought by fans. In a postmodern context, the subject's individuality, her discreteness, is increasingly shaped by her choices, by consumption. The fans interviewed in this study had many things in common but were concerted in their efforts to point out their individuality, to point out how they differed from other fans. Fan discrimination is praxis which ensures that they remain discrete. Fan collections are important because each one is different; even the mistakes and unloved additions are significant in this regard.

I believe that this unwillingness on the part of comic book fans to be associated with each other is an expression of a widespread strategy that is particular to postmodernism. This strategy may be described as a stance whereby the fan knowingly 'opts out', avoiding association with any organisations or groupings, willingly becoming an outsider. I would conjecture that this opting out serves two functions: firstly, it is a refusal of the resignation which Adorno and Horkheimer claim the culture industries promote (1979, p.142), and

secondly, it is a defence mechanism which allows fans to side-step the differences in social prestige between official culture and popular culture.

The fans consciously refuse the communal experience that sports fans enjoy because they use their interest in comic books not for escapism but to create a distinctive habitus for themselves. They use a strategy of absent interaction with mainstream culture in order to avoid becoming part of the herd. Through their actions as fans, they take control of their habituses. Thus, rather than being merely entertained or diverted by comics like the non-fan, they create a context in which they are active agents rather than passive consumers. Rather than their leisure being an escape from work, it becomes productive and has scope to become a source of income, and for some, a way of avoiding "real work" and the nine to five grind. Fans can use their interest in comic books to avoid becoming another drone in the system, using the income they receive from mundane jobs in order to subsidise their 'real' work: the productivity that satisfies their need to be creative (as described by Marx's notion of 'species being').

This ties into the fans' approach to the official culture/popular culture dichotomy. All the fans interviewed in this study were aware of this dichotomy and were fully cognisant of the comparative deficit of social prestige accorded to comic books. However, rather than try to take on the entire edifice that supports official culture, they instead created for themselves a context in which they could ignore the problem. Much like William Webb Ellis, frustrated by playing soccer, they simply pick up the ball and play a new game, one in which they create the rules, rules that give them a fair chance and that can be rewritten according to their needs. In this way, they strive to create a culture which is more 'authentic' (ref. Horkheimer) for them and their peers than official culture. Thus, while fans

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are deeply concerned with aesthetic considerations, it is on their own terms, appropriating official culture's terms in order to justify their actions.

One could even conjecture that part of the attraction of comic books for fans is the very fact that they can decide what is good or bad for themselves. The autodidactic nature of fandom allows fans to argue the value of texts in a way that is impossible in other media. It would be much easier for a fan to disparage *Watchmen* than it would be for them to question the worth of Michelangelo's David or the works of Charles Dickens. This openness may help explain why the respondents, many of whom had had third level education, are interested in comic books. To use an analogy from pop music, part of the fun is that your parents don't understand it. In postmodern culture, a variety of obscure and popular references can be used with good effect. However, fans use particular texts as touchstones, embodying principles (ref. Arnold) in order to explain the worth they see in comic books. With the gradual emergence of norms, of reflexivity and a concentration on formal excellence, fans are actively creating a canon which does not need to be recognised by official culture. By opting out, fans can account for the perceived cultural deficit of the objects of their adoration by claiming that official culture is irrelevant to their habitus (at least in relation to their fandom) while still positioning themselves in a wider cultural economy.

While this particular study concentrated on comic book fans, I would be quite confident that the criteria used by the respondents to explain their tastes are not more heterogeneous than those used by most agents in postmodern culture. Also, all the respondents showed a broad accumulation of cultural knowledge and the ability to

discriminate between texts within many media. While they were fans of comic books, they viewed their consumption of comic books as part of their overall cultural consumption.

If one considers the fans interviewed in this study in the context of cultural consumption as a whole, I believe that fans are unusual only in the amount of attention they pay to particular media or creators. Most people have some hobby or particular interest which requires uncommon knowledge or artefacts. While the comic book industry has developed in a manner that is unusual, I believe that its narrowcast nature will become increasingly common if recent trends continue. As a result, fans must be approached less as oddities, more as the norm in postmodern culture. Fans are operating in a decentred culture and refuse to accept official culture's hegemony while operating in a postmodern cultural economy in which it is increasingly necessary for the individual to consciously create their own distinctions through productivity, participation and creativity.

APPENDIX A

The Comics Code

The Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc.
(Adopted on October 26th, 1954)

Code for Editorial Matter

General Standards Part A

1) Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.
2) No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime.
3) Policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.
4) If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity.
5) Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates a desire for emulation.
6) In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal shall be punished for his misdeeds.
7) Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gun play, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated.
8) No unique or unusual methods of concealing weapons shall be shown.
9) Instances of law enforcement officers dying as a result of a criminal's activities should be discouraged.
10) The crime of kidnapping shall never be portrayed in any detail, nor shall ant profit accrue to the abductor or kidnapper. The criminal or the kidnapper must be punished in every case.
11) The letters of the word 'crime' on a comics magazine cover shall never be appreciably greater in dimension than the other words contained in the title. The word 'crime' shall never appear alone on a cover.
12) Restraint in the use of the word 'crime' in titles or sub-titles shall be excercised.

General Standards Part B

1) No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title.
2) All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted.
3) All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.

4) Inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly nor so as to injure the sensibilities of the reader.

5) Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism and werewolfism are prohibited.

General Standards Part C

All elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the Code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency shall be prohibited.

Dialogue
1) Profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, or words or symbols which have acquired undesireable meanings are forbidden.
2) Special precautions to avoid references to physical afflictions or deformities shall be taken.
3) Although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable, excessive use should be discouraged and wherever possible good grammar shall be employed.

Religion
1) Ridicule or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissable.

Costume
1) Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure.
2) Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable.
3) All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society.
4) Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities.

Note: It should be recognised that all prohibitions dealing with costume, dialogue or artwork applies as specifically to the cover of a comic magazine as they do to the contents.

Marriage and Sex
1) Divorce shall not be treated humorously nor represented as desireable.
2) Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at or portrayed. Violent love scenes as well as sexual abnormalities are unacceptable.
3) Respect for parents, the moral code and for honorable behaviour shall be fostered. A sympathetic understanding of the problems of love is not a license for morbid distortion.
4) The treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasise the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.
5) Passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions.
6) Seduction and rape shall never be shown or suggested.
7) Sex perversion or any reference to same is strictly forbidden.

Code for Advertising Matter

These regulations are applicable to all magazines published by members of the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc. Good taste shall be the guiding principle in the acceptance of advertising.

1) Liquor and tobacco advertising is not acceptable.

2) Advertisement of sex or sex instruction books are unacceptable.

3) The sale of picture postcards, 'pin-ups', 'art-studies', or any other reproduction of nude or semi-nude figures is prohibited.

4) Advertising for the sale of knives, concealable weapons, or realistic gun facsimiles is prohibited.

5) Advertising for the sale of fireworks is prohibited.

6) Advertising dealing with the sale of gambling equipment or printed matter dealing with gambling shall not be accepted.

7) Nudity with meretricious purpose and salacious postures shall not be permitted in the advertising of any product; clothed figures shall never be presented in such a way as to be offensive or contrary to good taste or morals.

8) To the best of his ability, each publisher shall ascertain that all statements made in advertisements conform to fact and avoid misrepresentation.

9) Advertisement of medical, health, or toiletry products of questionable nature are to be rejected. Advertisements for medical, health or toiletry products endorsed by the American Medical Association, or the American Dental Association, shall be deemed acceptable if they conform with all other conditions of the Advertising Code.

APPENDIX B

Flier

What Comics do mean to you?

A RESEARCHER IS LOOKING FOR PEOPLE WHO
READ COMICS FOR A BOOK ABOUT THE COMICS
INDUSTRY.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE?

WHAT DO YOU HATE?

DO YOU WANT TO MAKE YOUR OWN COMICS ?

' PLEASE RING DENIS AT 4530142 IF YOU
HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY AND WE CAN ARRANGE TO MEET.

DENIS: 4530142   DENIS: 4530142

APPENDIX C

Interview 12-8-1994

Denis How old are you?

Mick   Twenty-seven

D   What do you work at?

M   Graphic design and some cartoon work

D   How long have you been into comics?

M   Since as far as I can remember. An uncle of mine used to come up and stay with us when we lived in Dublin and any time he'd stay he'd bring three or four comics. They'd be like the Beano or stuff like that and I suppose that would be my first introduction, when I was about five or six. I have an older brother as well, and he would have brought up Eagle and a mixed bag of comics. That would have been the first introduction to it.

D   Was there any stage when you started buying comics on a more regular basis?

M   I'm not sure what age I was, but the first comic I remember getting on a regular basis was Cheeky; I think it was called Cheeky Weekly. I actually have some of it somewhere. I think it developed out of some other comic; I'm not sure what one. There was this character called Pongo Snodgrass.

D   Is that not Crazy?

M   It could have been Crazy... ... maybe the guy in it was called Cheeky then. He did a diary, and he did baby-sitting and he had these nursery stories which he told this precocious little baby, and they turned into horror stories. I used to buy that every week. I think you're right; that's what it was actually called: Crazy.

D   You'd be more interested in humour comics?

M   Yeah. I never really was into the Roy of The Rovers or any of that.

D   Or the American comics?

M   Not really, not till a later stage. That Crazy and then it would have gone on to 2000AD: it was that kind of progression from one to the other.

D   I actually went the other way: I started buying 2000AD and then went onto Crazy. I've always wondered why.

M   It was definitely Crazy first and all the similar ones like Whoopee and all those, but I think Crazy was the only one I got on a regular basis, whether it was

fortnightly or weekly. And then, when 2000AD was out, I probably started that later, in the mid of 2000AD, so then I'd get the specials, summer specials and all that stuff. They would be the first two.

D   Is reading comics important to you?

M   Yeah. I would regularly buy them. There'd be two reasons why I'd buy them. One would be for inspiration or ideas or style, the work I'm in, or purely for entertainment.

D   Would you consider yourself a comics fan?

M   I would and I wouldn't, because I don't... ...the picture of a comics fan is someone who buys twenty superhero magazines, or something like that. A much more - a bigger appetite for comics than I would. I would be more interested in collections of strips and things like that, or I would buy things like the Comics Journal which would have collections of a month's work of strips from America: Calvin and Hobbes and all that. I don't know what the reason is; I'm actually surprised looking back that I was into 2000AD, because its so - its kind of an adventure type of storyline, whereas the superhero stuff's never really held me. that type of story. While I'd be much more into a quick three caption routine or a clever one caption thing.

D   Most of the people I've talked to seem to have been into the superhero thing at one time, or adventure. Virtually everyone started off on the British humour comics and then one day discovered their first superhero comic.

M   I remember collecting - it would have been into stuff like Star Wars. That was very early on, I bought this big Star Wars comic, and it was the whole story of the film, and I really enjoyed that, but only because of the film. I collected the cards as well, I still have the full collection of the Star Wars cards, and the same with Superman, but then, I wouldn't have any interest in buying Superman comics. I don't know why; I think its just the way, the stuff I read - I'm more into a quick gag more than an in-depth story. I bought Cerebus the Aardvark: one of those graphic novels.

D   One of the big five hundred page ones

M   Yeah, because I thought this is going to be great because the art was great and you knew the guy took time, different styles and everything, but I never finished it, just simply because there was this vast story that didn't keep me interested. Strange.

D   I thought that you might like that because - I've only bought a couple of issues myself.

M   Maybe its just because I haven't got the time to sit down and really concentrate on reading it. I read very little; I don't read books at all, except for on my holidays. So the reading material for my eleven months of the year is comics, or you know, the odd magazine, like a movie magazine. So I'd be into movies and I'd buy the odd tie-in movie thing or tv. I'd buy Ren and Stimpy, the Marvel comic. I'd buy Beavis and Butthead, just to see the way they've translated them into comic books, but its not really so much the story in those cases: its because of the tv you're kind of interested in the characters.

D   And the style

M   Yeah. Its kind of a two-edged thing, because I'd be into the style in certain areas or how they've translated from tv, which isn't something that everyone would be into. They'd be more into a character and the development, like superheroes or whatever. I'd be more into the mechanics or how they've translated this character onto a page: is it still as good as it was on television or whatever...

D   Its interesting because I was talking to Kelly Strom and he was saying that its much easier to replicate the character if the mouth is drawn further down the chin, for different angles etc. The more that I learn, the harder it is to buy stuff that I like.

M   Yeah, there's such a vast amount of stuff out there and its very hard to decide. The diversity in style now, somewhere like Forbidden Planet, you've got every type of comic that is available. There are the very graphic ones that are like photo-realism and I still haven't fallen for any of that stuff yet. I liked, I went and bought the Batman stuff, the Dark Knight Returns because I thought that was quite exciting, the way he'd drawn it, and that was good, but, its a transient phase I go through. Its almost like a fad: I would buy that - " That looks really good " and there's a big buzz about it, so I go and see what it was all about. I also got Batman and Judge Dredd. It was an artist who worked in 2000AD.

D   Simon Bisley.

M   Yeah, Its interesting, I heard a story about him during the writing of that novel: because the work was so detailed, its very laborious, he works very very slowly - I was talking to a guy from Fleetway who we deal with - and he was saying that if you look at the book, at the end of this particular story, I think it was Judgement on Gotham, he started to use an awful lot of blue. The colour changes; there's a lot more colour at the beginning, and it starts getting quite blue. That's because he'd missed the deadline and they said " Just finish it " so it actually deteriorates in quality. There's art and then there's deadlines. Its something I wouldn't have noticed unless...

D   Unless you were told.

M   And then you go back and you can see that he's rushed it at the end. But he works very very slowly. Obviously the way he does his art is very different to other artists who would be able to knock it off much quicker.

D   Have you ever seen a chap called Bill Sienkvwics' stuff? He used to send in covers to the printers with batteries and bulbs etc. You were saying that you would kind of see yourself as a fan.

M   Yeah. The ones I would buy regularly now would be Hate, Pete Bagge's thing. I've been buying it from issue one because I'd seen Neat Stuff.

D   I think I prefer Neat Stuff to Hate.

M   The reason I started was because they had a compendium out of the Bradleys and Studs Kirby and all that. There're no real rules, but the fact that that's based on the dialogue rather than the drawings as such; its more of a little story, and there are no particular gags just appealed to me. So, I still get that regularly, and Rob Snart as well. I like the way they do the art in it - I have some here with me (takes out a few issues) - but that purely because the illustration appealed to me.

D   Have you ever read Gregory?

M   Yeah. You see, I tend to find that stuff a little bit pretentious - they seem to go off and get very surreal; I rather just a plain old bit of fun. They'd be the only ones I'd buy regularly and Ren and Stimpy books. I'd search through before I'd buy anything; I wouldn't just buy stuff because its new. I have to actually fall for the character. There are very few things that do that for me now: they'd literally be the only two.

D   Would you talk to many other people about comics?

M   Just people at work. Not really: my brother still reads and I would pass stuff on to him, or if we'd buy the books, we'd swap them. Not really. I've never really talked intellectually about comics, because I do love cartoon work and I just love doing it. For the fun of it and coming up with gags. I still haven't got out of the three caption, one caption thing. I do like the stories but I find them a lot more difficult. I think certain people have the gift to put in gags in every corner of - little hidden gags- which is quite a good skill. With three caption stuff, its much quicker, you don't have much time, so you just have to hit - tell the story and - over. That's the kind of work I've been doing; it interests me to see how other people do it. Garfield was really the key. I suppose its really uncool to like Garfield, but he really turned me on to that. I suppose he was one of the first to bring out compendiums of cartoons besides Peanuts. Peanuts never really appealed to me either; Garfield was very much a three caption gag whereas Peanuts was slightly different, and they may lead on to the next day, and they weren't self-contained. They were very American, very... ...I don't know.

D   Garfield was instant while Peanuts was very precious, especially after it became so successful. Is the form of the comic important to you?

M   Yeah. In particular Hate. I know you can buy the books, and I buy the books when they come out, but just the covers, all the covers he's done. I don't know what it is about him, because I think he has a strange line and some of the covers are photo-montage. They're not particularly skillful but I love the look of them. I would make sure I got each of the covers of those, whereas other ones I wouldn't be too bothered: I'd just buy the collection. But him in particular - I want to get all of his covers. I just like the way its packaged. That's probably the only regular one and Rob Snart Adventures, but they're a little bit scatty, they don't really get them all in, whereas Hate, I know it comes in monthly. But also, I like browsing; I love looking at covers and flicking through stuff, as everyone does, people into comics. Its quite exciting what's going on: the variation in styles, but I think there is a bit of an overkill in - there are so many superheroes and variations on superheroes and superhero spin-offs. I've bought a couple of skits, one-off issues, of superheroes and I kinda enjoy those. It is important; the cover art is a very important part of a comic, and that can instantly turn you on or off. A cover can either draw you in or turn you off. One thing that does annoy me is: you see a fantastic cover, really colourful, done with airbrush, and then you open it up and the inside is completely different - black and white, a very different style and that can turn you off it.

D   Do you remember Brian Bolland who did fantastic Judge Dredds

M   Its amazing that they've allowed so many people to treat Judge Dredd in so many different ways, its very interesting. Something I'd be interested in as well, through a Fleetway connection, Judge Dredd, because of the movie coming out - for the first time they're going to copy Judge Dredd but put him into a Japanese style. They're breaking a lot of new ground there.

D   I think the Japanese market is the biggest - 25% of all reading matter in Japan is made up by comics.

M   Its just that they committed to a western character, which I thought they would have done years ago, but apparently not. Even the fact that they're making a Judge Dredd movie is quite...

D   DC have started publishing a Judge Dredd comic done by Americans, now Japan...
Is it important to you where you get your comics?

M   The only place I get them is Forbidden Planet; I don't know anywhere else that really stock; there's a very limited... All the comics in the shops seem to be - there's the standard Beano, those ones that are still going - I'm not even sure if they are, and then there's just a barrage of tie-ins with Sonic the Hedgehog and stuff like that. That's obviously what sells; I don't know what the reasoning is; they obviously have shelf-space and they're going to go with things they know, or whoever's the best distribution, but you are limited to Forbidden Planet and that's it.

D   Do you like that as a shop?

M   Yeah, I do, I love it. If I'm in town I always go in and have a browse around, and generally pick up either a book or a comic. But I wouldn't - I see people in there who buy five or six comics from all different areas. I'm sure they buy every issue of particular comics, where I think I'd be pick and mix except for Hate. I'd pick one or two, then I would always buy Bloom County collections or Outlands because that guy... Outlands is really quite surreal. I really am a strip person; I would always go for strips. There aren't a lot of strip people in Ireland; it seems to be a lost... Its an American thing; there's Gary Larson and these other guys, and they're the kings and they keep just churning things out. Even in England there are no real strips. Maybe in magazines: in things like NME there'd be some guys, and then there's the Judge Dredd. I don't think there's anyone who matches Gary Larson or Jim Davis. You know, stuff like Calvin and Hobbes: they have that stuff sown up. I do like that stuff.

D   It is a separate art.

M   Its also the sheer amount of it: you're talking about a daily thing, but that isn't really why I like it; its because I like the gags. You can put the book down and you can pick it up. There's no reason why I like that kind of stuff more; maybe its because it's the kind of stuff I'm interested in doing. I think its just the way, the path through life, that I haven't just fallen into the Marvel end of things. I mean, I've dipped in and I know what's going on, I've read certain issues, but its never really hooked me. There's no real reason for it; its just my likes. But I love going in; I love looking round in Forbidden Planet. I'd very often buy a collection of this year's best comics, award-winning cartoons, you get a book full of who's the top guys and its great to have something like that to see what's going on. I bought stuff like A1, collections, some of that stuff interests me, but the art rather than the story.

D   With A1 it is really the art rather than the story that you're interested in most of the time...

APPENDIX D

Interview 1-9-1994

Denis First of all, when did you start reading comics?

Mick I suppose when I was about ten or eleven and then I wouldn't have read them from about fifteen on; then I started reading them again.

D Why did you start reading them again?

M In my twenties. Knowing a couple of people who were very heavy readers of comics and who would buy particular titles every month, and just having access to them regularly and being curious about what was internally very interesting.

D Then why did you continue after the curiosity stage?

M Well, there had been - in the gap between, the period when I'd stopped reading - there'd been this graphic novels revolution, so, in place of the normal superhero stuff the range of material available was quite extraordinary. You'd everything from a Raw fine arts tradition down to underground drug culture, S&M culture comics. So it was completely different, it was a different entity. There was a self-consciousness in the comics industry that was to do with - having a historical sense. There was a mythology about great comics artists of the thirties forties and fifties in the background. There was this layering of references and so forth in some of the narrative and then there was the whole - I suppose the - what's the name of the guy who did the Batman?

D Frank Miller.

M Yeah. Frank Miller's work and his type of interest in Japanese comics and talking about narrative form and how the devices for telling a story were being imported from Japanese comics. So that suddenly you got a comic book that maybe you could read one hundred and fifty to two hundred panels in a very short period of time because you don't need to stop, so its a kind of cinematic experience. I suppose, this was of interest to me, in terms of cheap production that could be very ambitious in terms of the narratives it set up. It didn't have to be kitchen sink; because it had such a low budget it could be quite capable of any stretch of the imagination. You could plot something out in deep space and your special effects were very cheap - black ink.

D Were you interested in producing your own comics or writing?

M No, I was interested in the storyboarding aspect. I was interested in comics as a prototype of a particular way of storyboarding material for video or film. My

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interest was as a material to clone for other types of work: low-budget video or low-budget super-eight film. The other element of interest was in terms of: the storylines were so - that you could come across such bizarre stuff. Its an older example - you know Neil the Horse - incredibly strange comics. The material and the imagery, the different drawing styles and so forth that you could draw on and pastiche or plagiarise, which was the thing to do in the eighties.

D   Are comics important to you?

M   Important, no, I wouldn't say important, significant in some sense: they are, they do mark particular forms of cultural forms which I am interested in, in knowing about, but they wouldn't be of central importance to me. I think that they are - by and large my impression is that the more experimental comics are dominated by a very sixties ethos of drugs and sex and rock and roll and a very... ... They're very much caught in a kind of anti-hero thing. I find that of limited interest. They are significant in some respects but I don't, no.
There's one particular series that I follow quite closely which is Shade the Changing Man. Shade is quite interesting to me because it has certain plot twists which are quite unusual for comics, and Shade wouldn't be that underground, or anything like that - DC publish it. They have plot changes where the central figure Shade ends up occupying a female body and having sex with a male partner while in a female body. Now that kind of gender-fucking, while its very common in other areas of fiction, music, theatre, in the fine arts tradition, you don't actually see it in the comics that often and I find its rule was to take those kind of risks, because they risk alienating quite a significant portion of its audience by asking them to consider or reflect on the experience of orgasm by this psyche and displace it to a female body. Also because the central figure, the Shade character is quite complex in as much as for about the last ten or fifteen issues he's been a very negative person, a very psychotic, aggressive, unpredictable and highly egotistical and violent, and, having been encouraged to identify with this character as the positive point.

D   The good guy

M   The good guy is transformed now into a very obviously ' bad guy ', but also, even more difficult is the fact that he is now in a position where he is neither bad nor good. He just ' is '. That sort of complexity of a character you don't often find in a lot of these comics. Having said that, I know that there would be other more complex psychological profiles of characters in others.

D   I did buy that for a while myself and then there were other things that I was more into. Would you be a collector?

M   I collect that type, and then I've picked up a few of the more obscure titles that would only last for about five or six issues. The likes that were being produced by Eclipse or some of the smaller companies. The one crowd that really interests me, and I don't, I think they're out of production now, I'm not sure, are Raw books and the Raw, read yourself raw series of comics. For me they're very interesting from

the fine art point of view. This is very knowing graphic work. Some of the drawing styles and some of the narrative are just so macabre and dark and distressing: really interesting that comics can generate that kind of complex stories.

D   Would you consider yourself a comics fan?

M   Well, I doubt I actually fit into the category of fan: I'm an interested consumer, but I don't have the diligence to be a fan.

D   Most people I've talked to have said that they're not like the normal fan. There's a view of comics fans amongst people who read them that fans are obsessed and must get every issue. I haven't really met many people like that; everybody has a couple of issues that they will follow and try to get every one.

M   That's funny - I do think the collecting ethos, there is... ... there's a certain amount of late adolescence, puberty to late adolescence, there is this attempt to construct a controlled world where you collect all the bits that fit into the bigger puzzle - you have control, you have system or structure, that impetus to collecting is quite interesting and I don't think its restricted to the comics thing, but it is a part. There's a very particular - I think the consumption of comics is very gendered. Its very much the... ... even figures like Tank Girl, their readership is gendered there, and its very strong, I mean, its produced by two males a writer and an image-maker. So, I do think that aspect is very interesting. When I was talking earlier about that sixties ethos, I think it is the liberationist sentiments of the sixties, pre-feminist, and its that liberationist politics of everything should just be okay and people should just be able to do what they want - any kind of authority is restrictive and bad and autonomy on the level of the individual is cool, desirable, people should explore the frontiers of sex or drugs or space or whatever. I think also, there is a certain fantasy of the body that was in Marvel comics: these fantastic bodies that were sexually very ambiguous but at the same time incredibly eroticised figures. The standards for these figures drawings; the ratio of head to body would be one to nine or something, rather than the standard one to six or one to five you find in people. That fantasy of the body is even more prevalent in comics - Shade's body is quite fantastic in the sense that it is a body that he occupies, and is subject to incredible metamorphoses. His body is also capable of being transported into these nebulous zones which are neither - do not reflect this kind of time-space. So, these kind of fantastic bodies, I do think there is a major investment in this fantasy of the body for a lot of readers. I'd say that is a major attraction and also, to a certain extent, its also to do with a certain embarrassment about being enlisted as a fan of comics. To have that much emotional investment you may be revealing things you don't wish to do, by exposing how bound up with these things you are.

D   Why are you interested in these things yourself?

M   I'm coming from a particular background: I'm coming from a visual arts background, so, I'm looking at these with a particular attention to things like narrative structure, to things like iconic styles, to things like the depiction of the body and the gendering of the audience. On a less intellectual level, I suppose the

interest would be because they were - the Marvel comics I was exposed to in my early teens were a dimension of my own fantasy development, so there is that - I do see them as a reservoir of ideas or images of fantasy.

D   Especially what you were saying earlier on: that it costs shag all to do these things

M   That's interesting that a huge number of people engaged in reading comics quite diligently have a desire to make comics as well, they want to generate and create that fiction, that fantasy world and have control over it. I think there must be a significant overlap between that kind of activity and the fantasy role-playing games. I think you would find a significant overlap in the audiences for both. People who wish to be involved in the constructing of fantastic worlds where they get to be elves or demons or magicians or whatever.

D   I haven't followed that up, but I wouldn't be surprised. People are involved in it in many different ways: some people are collectors and other people like the idea of finding things and probably never finding another one again.
Is price important to you?

M   Yeah. I mean I don't... I tend to buy cheaper stuff. You can end up spending an awful lot - something like Shade, I've probably spent a hundred pounds getting forty issues together. I f that was a one off purchase, if someone was to say: ' here's this product, an anthology and you can have it for a hundred pounds ' I'd be like: ' No way! '. Because you have to spend that money over a long time, you don't register it the same way. I would shop cheaply; there are lots of things which I've never got, like Watchmen which is like a classic and I've never got a copy of it. I have read quite a lot of really excellent large, lavish productions but never invested in them.

D   I the form of the comic important to you?

M   If you're reading something on a one off you prefer the large scale lavish production that has a certain amount of closure as well. The problem with the serial is: if you get one end of the serial you have this incredible open-ended thing. Although the plots move in instalments, those instalments tend to be stretched over four or five actual comics, four or five volumes. So, I would prefer the more lavish production if you're just going to encounter it.

D   Is there any social element to comics for you? Do you talk to other people about them, or would you become involved with other people.

M   No. I'd say I'm kind of reticent or wary of people who have a major investment in it because I would really only discuss them in the broader context of cultural production, either in terms of the notion of them as a popular cultural form to be likened to other forms, or as a visual culture to be related to the fine arts. And in terms of the different market structure and different, identifiably discrete audience. What I actually think is interesting as an emphasis for consideration is the marketing of comics in tandem with sci-fi novels. Because science fiction, while still having difficulties has proven itself much more readily acceptable into the

canons of culture. I'm sure there are post-grad lit-crit courses which take on board anything from Phillip K Dick to JG Ballard, but I'd say you'd be very hard pushed to find a consideration of graphic novels/comics outside of a graphic design course, and even there these graphic design courses tend to shy away from them because they have this taint of being vulgar. Illustration as an option in visual communications would still be much more directed towards the non-comics end of that.

D of   How would you react to people saying that comics were just for kids or the notion comics being vulgar?

M   Well, I would say that it all hinges on what your conception of a child is? If you think of childhood as a socially constructed experience, you would then see that comics or story-books have a certain part to play in the construction of that social formation of childhood, and then you position yourself in relation to that in one way or another. Whereas, if you think there is a fundamental, essential difference between the child and the adult and that difference does not proceed from social process, but proceeds from some inherent, natural growth process, then what you mean by saying they're just for kids is something very different. Clearly, the comics market is very complex. There are certain titles that would not be meaningful or valuable to a twelve year old. Similarly, there are some titles that aren't going to be valuable or meaningful to thirty year olds. The idea that there is something inherent in the comic book form that can only have limited interest to the adult engaged in serious cultural producing, I think is clearly bogus and is bound up with nineteenth century ideas of what cultural consumption is about. The whole high art/low art... ... which I think is fairly much exhausted.

D   Even still, if one is to have that divide, comics do come down on the wrong side.

M   Yeah, but I think that anybody operating with that distinction as meaning something other than how things are socially processed, if they think it reflects some essence, then I think they're just mistaken. They're working in a different discursive universe than I'd be willing to put myself in. The straightforward answer to this would be to select a few titles and go through them, break down and analyse what's going on, and see how that might correspond with film culture or with fine art culture. There are so many of fine art produced since the sixties - I'm not talking about the pop artists - I'm talking about the whole gamut of contemporary artforms that readily correspond to the concerns, to the format, to the ethos that informs comic production, or certain elements of comic production. I do think though, that comics are definitely marked by that pre-sixties liberationist sentiment and I think that may be a blocking to the development of it, developing its profile as serious culture as such.

D   I think in a lot of ways comics are trapped by their history; in many ways the medium is defined in people's eyes by a few genres.

M   What's interesting is those - Sherry Levine, an American artist, a New York appropriationist, in the early eighties was doing photographs, re-photographing the

works of celebrated modernist photographers and presenting this re-photographed work as her own, has moved on to taking images from Ignatz which is a thirties strip.

D   Oh, you mean Krazy Kat?

M   Yeah. Which is a very strange, very surreal strip and doesn't readily fit into your notion of what comics are. I think its interesting that there is somebody looking at a comic and reworking it and reusing it, not importing something new into it, but reworking it for things that were there in the thirties in those strips. And in that particular context of depression, yellow journalism and all that, that's interesting, or the recognition by a practitioner in the high art tradition of a discourse outside and taking it in, not trying to push new meanings into it but just playing with the existing product. The question of its history: I don't its so much... ... obviously the historical framework plays some kind of part, but I would say its the absence of a certain critical consciousness on the part of comics-makers, that they... Scott McCloud's book is very interesting because its got McCloud's very detailed theory of the comic, attempting to come up with a grand theory which will accommodate every comic style and every comic format. What's interesting is his retelling in one of the chapters, he retells the story of modernism in a fine art tradition, and in that retelling of that story, he tells it from a very traditional formalist historical model that would have been current in the thirties and forties and I suppose reached its peak of dominance in the fifties and sixties and would be associated with people like Clement Greenberg. That model has to a huge extent been superseded by a much more complex histories of culture and histories of modernity, developed by British social historians or French social historians or American deconstructionists. So, a whole range of new interpretations of, new narratives to explain visual culture and modernity and that debate is not really to be found in forming the production of comics - I think that's interesting. That means that comics are still rehearsing certain storylines and narratives constructed around technology which are not really... you know, they're not really informed by the really interesting work that has been done on the technological/social transformation implicating technological change, or the economics, the political economy of technology, of technological development, of technological research. The whole impact of space race technology on everyday culture, the explosion of the telecommunications industry. They play with scenarios that are set in the future, that are dystopian but they don't really get into the complex analysis, they don't mobilise or use that complex analysis that is available from various historians of culture, various historians of technology.

D   Along time ago I got an encyclopaedia of science fiction and they used the term 'space opera' which is what you're talking about and when you compare that to someone like JG Ballard... A comic like 2000AD through its satire was to a certain extent dealing with that.

M   Well, the 2000AD strip that I'm most familiar with is The Ballad of Halo Jones and I think that's quite a complex book, but at the same time, I still feel that its dystopian vision hasn't gone much further than Metropolis, it hasn't really gone beyond that sort of thing. There's so much more possibilities there - some comics do break out

of that mould to a certain degree but I still think they're not really... When these writers or artists talk about their work, they tend to work with a model of creativity with a very nineteenth century of the artist as a romantic expressivist, authentic repository of imagination. They tend not to think that more clearly or examine that, or think about the meanings, of the restrictions on the possible meanings they can produce in a comic book by the fact that they are comics and as comics they exist in tension with other categories like fine art. Even the whole thing of the ' graphic novel ', that's an attempt to attain the status of literary product. That kind of, that's happening at the same time as the novel is being dismantled by literary criticism; its position as the authentic document of a culture, that's being dismantled.

D   Why do you think there is this lag in critical self-awareness? Because you were talking earlier on about how comics did become self-conscious.

M   They became self-conscious of having a history, but they didn't really pursue that dialogue further and I think a lot of its to do with market constraints, because there is a very particular network of controls - Marvel, DC and the big companies tend to, seem to have comics production locked up in a very Hollywood system of production where executive production decisions are basically all important and individual agendas, in terms of experimental artists are getting stood on, they're limited in how far they can go. I think a comic like Yummy Fur: there seems to be serious problems on the production level with that because the artist seems to be outside those dominant structures of distribution. That reflects that in the kind of material - images of Ed the Happy Clown with the head of Ronald Reagan on the top of his penis - not an image that is going to get a lot of currency or exposure through DC. But, while he's capable of producing that image, he's not capable of maintaining the output. I think a lot of that has to do with distribution problems and so forth. Again, its funny, we see that high culture/low culture distinction being imported into comics, except working across the field of comics, so that some comics that are difficult to come by, and rare and special and extra valuable are then known by the artists, rather than by the story. So, Yummy Fur is a classic example, where the storylines change and so forth, but its readily identifiable as the work of Chester Brown, and Chester Brown is the...

D   Is the auteur

M   Yeah. Then Stan Lee would be an example of that from the older generation of comics, from Marvel comics and so forth. The question of... its something that permeates the whole area of visual culture; I think you find it in film culture; I think you find it in the visual arts; you find it in comics as well, that there is a certain reluctance to engage with theory, with philosophically grounded criticism, because of its difficulty. Because also, its seen somehow to conflict with the notion of the cultural producer as authentic voice, speaking from individual originary vision. If they're working with a theory or an idea, somehow that conflicts with them speaking truthfully or honestly from their imagination.

D   So you think that's prevalent in most visual culture?

M   Definitely the idea that the cultural product, as it gravitates towards the pole of art, culture with a capital c, the more that something gravitates towards that category, the more important it is that they be seen as being distant from intellectual sophistication and connected to notions of authentic expression.

D   But surely the whole modernist thing of proselytising and experimenting with technique rather than representation, surely there was a massive theoretical part to that?

M   I would say that every cultural product, every act of cultural production is informed by some critical sensibility, some understanding how things are and how things should be and what is meaningful. There are acts of faith; there are articles of belief, and there are types of analyses going down, but in terms of the willingness to bring the full consciousness, to have an analysis, to bring out: when I'm constructing such and such a scenario, what am I actually doing and how am I doing it - what are the assumptions I'm working with? And to start to question those assumptions and see how they fit in and where do they come from etc.. That is not an activity that is, by and large - there are complete contradictions to this, there is a general tendency to resist that type of activity. This sense of: if you start to analyse what you're doing, somehow, you're not going to be able to do it anymore, and particularly the notion that if you begin to analyse what you're doing, somehow you'll interrupt the proper flow of your creative juices. Every type of cultural production will always be informed by someone else, its a question of whether that analysis is going to be brought out into the open and whether the assumptions that inform that are going to be put up for debate or discussion. Generally they're not; generally people resist that.
I think you can see it in terms of the syllabus of a film course in Dun Laoghaire: the theoretical input is a very standard history of film which is kind of an impoverished education to give someone who's going out into the real world to do real production.

D   Talking about articles of faith, was it Susan Sontag who described an aesthetic of sensation? The example that occurs to me most readily is Mozart, somebody who had internalised so much technique that the theory was hidden and it seemed to flow more, whereas more often the theory hasn't been fully integrated and it sticks out a bit.

M   There's an awkwardness

D   Yeah

M   I would think that in a slightly different way: Picasso, something that needs to be explained is - how did the term Picasso come to be invested with so much... you know Picasso, Einstein, these terms, this great creative figure the mythological artist.   At this point in time, there is an ongoing debate about cultural "this is good/this is bad; this is a good painting/this is a bad painting; painting is better than comics illustration". This framework is a point of contestation, is a point of argument about value. And in that argument the word theory carries lots of different meanings and baggage. What I would identify myself with is that use of theory

which is concerned to show that any act of saying: 'this has value; this is good; that's not so good; that's crap', that any acts like that are very complex and implicated in the flow of power. That thare is something valuable - I'm already implicated - in attempting to explore, investigate, interrogate, conceptualise that relationship between acts of establishing hierarchies of value and the processes of social power. Now, that is not to say that no hierarchies should be constructed: I've already constructed mine by saying it is valuable to make this investigation, as opposed to avoiding it. I'm saying: "This is bad; this is good". I'm in there; I'm playing this game; I'm making my investments.

The reason that that analysis that I make is so contentious is because there is another school of thought which says that by and large the relationships between the value of something like the Cistene chapel ceiling, or a sculpture by Rodin or a really good comic by a really serious professional comics artist - that by and large, that recognition of value is not really too complicated by the process of social power. Michelangelo's ceiling is still good, despite the Pope's particular power-struggle out of which it emerged half subsided in our past history. The object survives and its value is re-recognised by 'x' subsequent generations. That's one school of thought, its not quite true, but power still operates in the allocation of 'this is valuable and meaningful'. That power operates in many complex ways. I keep using that word complex because I don't want to get into some vocal reduction of:"somebody who tells you to look at a good painting is somehow dominating you or oppressing you", that's not what I mean.

D   I've been reading all these novels that are supposedly part of the great canon of literature - because they're cheap and I enjoy them - I bought War and Peace for a pound, and if you're pricing it by word, that's quite a bargain (laughs), but to me it was very much a soap opera. That whole idea of placing value is so dangerous. Anyway, in that book The Vampire Lestat, one of the characters says that simple solutions are the most dangerous - things are complex and you must...

ENDS

APPENDIX E

Interview 24-8-1994

DAVID SMITH 24 AUG 94

Denis   How old are you?

Smith   Twenty-three

D   How long have you been reading comics?

S   Since I was twelve, about 305 of 2000AD or so. I just remember it as being the first comic that you had to catch up with the story the next week, and it was brilliant, because I'd grown up Beanos and things, and I just got hooked straight off, on Steve Dillon and Cam Kennedy especially. And so I acquired quite a taste for them, and I still have quite a soft spot for Steve Dillon's art, although most people hate it. But I just with that and when I found my first comic shop, I was totally hooked on all these other things like Watchmen.

D   Where was that?

S   The old Alchemist's Head. That was just magical; the hole in the floor and the manky smell and everything, it was like a little Aladdin's cave.

D   This was on Essex St.?

S   That was it. It was just a magical little spot, and every couple of months, with pennies literally, I'd go in and see what I could buy, basically. One or two back issues at a time.

D   And so for you because you weren't from Dublin

S   This was very much like a pilgrimage. I mean, I was only fifteen or sixteen when I discovered this and I'd never gone to Dublin on a bus before, so I went up with my friend one day, and I found it on a map, and just went for it - it was just magic. But that's all gone; I don't get the same buzz out of things anymore.

D   Why not?

S   I don't know. Whether its me growing up or whether its comics stagnating - they don't seem to have the same sense of wonder that 2000AD used to have, when Alan Moore did his future shocks and stuff. Little wonderful things for want of a better description. They don't happen as much anymore. That's why I like Cerebus and Bone so much: because they have some of that originality, if you like, that most things don't have. I just can't look at most comics anymore; they just don't have that.

D   There's personality in both of those

S   Um, heavy personality, that's what a lot of the things I was talking about, and diluting all the style: since the American comics are just dilutions of other people's styles, there are so many people involved in them on a page it just happens like that. And you've also got editors - I don't know what the involvement is, but editors would come down and say: " No, you can't do this ". That sort of thing hampers the creative effort. We were up at Glasgow in March and we met two French comics guys and they were talking about the continental way of doing things, and over there, its all down to the lettering. The artist who doesn't letter his own stuff is the exception. They've such a personal involvement from beginning, colouring and pencilling, right to the end. But its a purer product of that person, with their personality, and you may or may not like the product, but it makes it a purer representation of what the artist is about. That's what attracts me a lot more than superheroes and workshops with people working on the same page. It just seems to make a different product, although I'm not into superheroes anyway.

D   What kind of comics are you into?

S   I suppose anything that's done well. I love funny stuff like Bone; Cerebus is quite funny. Cerebus is just unlike anything else I like; its very political, but I still like it. I like fantasy and adventure, and I'm a great fan of Mother Nature, so I like anything with loads of trees and things which is why I like Charles Vess's artwork. Anything with good art I'm willing to take a look at; something with a fantastic story, but bad art, I'd find it very hard to pick up. That's the opposite of a lot of people I know.

D   What about fantastic art and a bad story?

S   If there's a fantastic artist you look past it because its like buying a poster or something.

D   I suppose. But I remember Black Orchid by Gaiman and McKean, where the art was fantastic but at the end it was a big let down because there was no story.

S   I never read it.

D   Would you consider yourself a comics fan?

S   Yeah. Definitely. I'm just not a fan of the comics that most people are. Although I'm coming out of the raging ' fanboy ' stage.

D   In what way?

S   Like when Forbidden Planet first opened I got to meet my first comics professional which I think was Grant Morrison or Brendan Mc Carthy and going: " My God! They're real people ! ", because it was just a shock of seeing these nameless little things being written about and hearing all this stuff and then actually meeting them

and seeing them as real people. And from talking to them about my work and going to places like Glasgow, and meeting a lot of them, I can just see them as people now.

D   Did you go to many conventions?

S   No, never. Glasgow was the first comics convention I'd ever gone to: that was as much economic as anything else. I got a free ride over there which was great.

D   And was it good?

S   Yeah. Very good. We met a lot of very interesting people. We managed to meet Michael Mc Mahon .

D   How old is he?

S   He looks like he's in his thirties or early forties.

D   I thought that he was much older.

S   He disappeared for a long time and he had ME or something.

D   He must have been very young when he started then.

S   As far as I know he started in DC Thompson and then with 2000AD Spikes Harvey Rotten really got him going. He got sick though for a couple of years and that's why he disappeared, which was a great pity, because he was starting to get into America - he was starting to do stuff for Epic Illustrated, which would have been a fantastic showcase for him. We met people like that, and so some people were afraid to give advice, in case it would help their rivals, if you like, and then some people had absolutely no axe to grind and they just sat down and talked openly about anything and everything. You just see them as people, you know. If you walked into any room with people, there'd be people willing to people and people not willing to talk.

D   And what about other people you met, other comic book fans: is the social part of comics important to you?

S   To be honest, no. I used to have... ... I know people that read 2000AD - I met some in school. It was never a big thing at all, and I don't tend to talk to people in Forbidden Planet about it, or anything like that. Its not a big social thing for me at all.

D   Do you like going to Forbidden Planet? Or to shops - you mentioned The Alchemist's Head...

S   I like going to see what's out and to see nice things. There are less and less of those

nice things coming out, but also I'm able to afford those nice things less and less as time goes on. So, those are the two factors that mean that Cerebus and Bone are the only two things I get anymore, and the odd other thing. Also, I have all the Fleetway things still on order with an other shop in Navan, and to be honest, I'm not sure why I get them. I've got practically all of them, so there's a collector still in there some place. That's the only thing I would be willing to pay money for back issues for, because I've got practically all of them, and I'd just like to complete the collection.After that, maybe it'll fizzle out completely.

Fleetway has I suppose really gone downhill, but they do have the odd good thing, like when they drag John Wagner back - he does quite an interesting story - but that's all I buy anymore.

D   Would you consider yourself a collector?

S   No, not anymore, because Fleetway stuff is the only thing I collect and that's just because I'm nearly, I've nearly got the full thing.

D   Is it important to you the shape the comic comes in? The actual feel of the comic...

S   Not really, but I do love a nice package. I love the package of this (lifts up a graphic novel) it just feels nice. Its got nice paper and stuff; its got a kinda quality feel. But you have to pay for quality. I love the way Love and Rockets books come. I picked up the Comics Price Guide recently and there's just a lovely package - a lovely thick weighty feel to it. I remember when I bought Watchmen and Dark Knight; they were the first graphic novels I ever bought and there was just a lovely chunky feel to them, different to anything I'd ever read before, and the originality of the stories inside them: I think it was the first Batman I'd ever read as well, the originality of the stories inside just added to it. I suppose yes, packaging is important, but not that - as I said its art that I go for rather than story.

D   Quite a few people say they prefer the flimsiness of the monthly comic.

S   Really?

D   Because, it almost makes it more collectible because of its flimsiness.

S   These would be people who were collectors?

D   No, quite a few different people. It depends, some people like really like good art and other people just like the fact of getting a monthly comic and looking through it. Everyone has different reasons for why they like it: some people want to have collections, while others love to just fall upon something and find it and to work out the gaps that they've missed.

Is price important to you in what you buy?

S   If its seriously good, no. I completed my Epic Illustrated collection which is just fantastic. I completed it at enormous cost at the time. I just had to have it. Sometimes, I just have to have things. The next thing that I will have to have is the

three Star Wars books, books on the art of each film, books that were out when I was in college and I didn't have two ha'pennies to rub together and I was so sick when they went out of print, but I think they're coming back into print, so I'm going to have to have ten at all costs. I wish things were more affordable. I bought a Jeff Jones thing recently, and that was ten or twelve pounds for this weeny little yoke. Gorgeous art, so I suppose it was worth it. Also a Frank Fazetta panel book: forty-eight pages for twelve pounds. Its very pricey, but I'm starting to appreciate with this (a graphic novel history of Ireland that David is working on) how much price does affect things. You can't just go on a flight of fantasy and go to a publisher and say : " sell this " . The publishers going to want to look at it and say : " How much money am I going to make on this? Will it be financially worth my while? " because he's a businessman; its his job if he doesn't make enough money for the company.

D   Are comics important to you?

S   (pause) Entertainment and art are important to me and they just come together in comics. There's ... ... I like the entertainment that comics give me. If that were somehow available in some other form; I'd probably go for that other form. For instance, pulp novels, if they were still around, if they had the same sense of wonder I'd go for them. The actual comics package, I think its a nice blend of words and imagery, but sometimes I prefer books because they allow me to make up more in my head, and comics do take a lot of that away.

D   Because most comics are superheroes and stuff, is it the genres or the medium?

S   I think the medium does excite me and then the genres are the types of books you'd read. The genres, its just like going to a film, choosing which film you would see or which book you would buy, or you'd borrow. When its done well, like the Dark Knight or Watchmen or most of Eisner's stuff, Bone or Cerebus, its a lovely combination. But then when you read superheroes that aren't done well at all, its terrible story-telling: I just can't read them.

D   Is it important to you in defining where you place yourself socially?

S   Most people would place me as yes, " I suppose he still reads his comics " so in that way when people start up on that, I like to try to educate them otherwise, and I do get other people I knock around with to read stuff that I read, to lend them stuff, who haven't read a comic in years, just to try to lend them stuff and see what they would like. That's about as far as it goes socially; I don't shove the fact that I'm a comics reader down people's throats and say look at these they're not just for kids anymore.
I don't do that, but if people raise the subject, I'm quite willing to fight the comics' corner, and try and educate people as best I can. That's one of the things that Eisner's pushing us towards: doing things that are more approachable on an adult level than on a kid's level. So that's one of my aspirations and I'm not there yet and it may take a long time before then; I may never rise to fore , but that's an aspiration I have and that he's had since the 'forties.

D   He's an amazing man, and he actually seems to ' walk it as he talks it '.

S   Exactly like Dave Sim really.

D   He has done these things that he's tried to do; he has changed things; how many
     people can actually say they've changed things?
     How do you feel about the whole fan thing? Do you think its difficult for someone
     who isn't a comic book fan to get into comics?

S   I think so, because of that attitude that grown up people don't read comics, there's
     just a lot of prejudice. People are telling me they know a lot of adults who just don't:
     if they actually considered, if they took a look at the right thing, they could repent.
     They do I think tend to pick it up. I don't know a lot about the sociology of comics
     really.

D   I'm just talking at a purely personal level.

S   I don't think it is difficult for them to approach the idea; if they're used to the idea,
     and they're open to it, open to the idea that they might enjoy these things, I think its
     not so difficult. Its like going back to the cinema.

D   What I meant really was that comics had become more aimed at fans and didn't
     reflect real life as much as other comics.

S   From an art level you can see artists don't do life drawing, they don't draw from real
     life; they just draw what they think people look like and to me it looks terrible. You
     can see boxes of heads and bad figures in action and also there's abysmal
     storytelling in all levels of comics, and it goes back to looking at real and drawing
     your comics with reference to real life. Even if its science fiction or is totally
     impossible, it still needs to be rooted back to reality so that people can relate to it
     properly. You can see artists that have copied their anatomy from other artists and
     copied that other artist's mistakes, and they've no actual conception of what things
     are supposed to do. It just looks awful for me, but then a lot of people don't know
     that this muscle is in the wrong place, or don't know that heads aren't quite that
     boxy, they just don't notice. That could just be me, as an artist, seeing bad things in
     other people's art, so I don't know how much that affects things, but that certainly
     affects me. The thing may be beautifully rendered but it may be seriously badly
     drawn.

ENDS

APPENDIX F

Interview 20-12-1996

Peter McCanney 20th December, 1996

D   First of all Peter, what's your name? (laughs)

P   Peter McCanney.

D   How old are you?

P   I'm twenty-four.

D   What do you do with yourself?

P   I'm a full-time contract computer graphic artist. That's from day to day.

D   How long have you been reading comics?

P   Since about six, I think. I started off on the Beano and the Dandy. At that stage there was a progression, I think, you could make from the Beano and the Dandy or whatever, to the English war comics of the seventies. From there I think I ended up, I started reading English war comics and then onto things like 2000AD, and then about whatever the time the Watchmen and the Dark Knight came out...

D   It would have been about 1986.

P   A good friend of mine actually introduced me to American comics; I hadn't really read them up until then. I would have been about thirteen or fourteen. But at that stage then, I started seeing them grow up...

D   Could you hold on a sec...

P   I just made the progression up the ladder, which I don't think you can do now really.

D   What do you mean by that?

P   I came into comics about four or five and I don't think there's as many children's comics out there that are, that would appeal to a wide audience in that respect. The Beano and theDandy are nearly dead as far as I know and there's not the step-off points... You could go into the war and sports comics, and that was from eight to twelve. Then you went on to 2000AD, or even at that time, 2000AD had a, you could read it if you were twelve and not be totally lost. The thing is, 2000AD then grew up with its readership and it just burnt the bridge behind it to new readers. So I think the people who are reading 2000AD now are the ones who've always read it, as opposed to a new readership. In the long-term that is a death for English comics. You can't sustain that...

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D   Because there's no progression.

P   You need the new readership. That's something that they knew a few years ago and they tried to remedy, but the things they brought out weren't particularly good enough. I think Sonic the Comic has been the most successful English-produced comic in years. Some of its not bad actually, there's a couple of good guys working on it. Its been out-selling 2000AD for about three years.

D   Really?

P   Yeah, because it tied in with the toy thing and the whole game-show.

D   What got you into comics?

p   Into doing it myself or...

D   Just into reading comics.

P   I've always read a lot, I've always had a book, I've always had a heavy interest in science-fiction. I think Battle of the Planets, remember way back, that was the first thing that I saw where I really went "wow". From then on I was into, it could have been the television, video, you know. The comics was just another medium then and I never really differentiated it from books and that, so that... If people ask me who my favourite authors are, I'm more likely to give a novelist than a comics writer although there's a couple of comics writers that I think are very very good as well. I don't know, I suppose in terms of actually why, just a lot of free time on my own and few things to do. I was drawing from an early age as well.

D   Really?

P   Yeah.

D   Are comics important to you?

P   I go through phases of it, where I have to get almost like a fix of comics, but over the years I've got much more selective. There was a time when I was spending about thirty, forty quid a week on comics, and then about a year later, I started drinking. (laughs) It was cut massively. I never was, I'm not a comics collector: I read the comics but I tend to throw them at my arse, and my bedroom was always a foot deep in comics. I never really took care of them. Rob's always giving out to me that I'm coming in trying to sell stuff that's really in bits, but would be worth a bit if I kept it, and that's never appealed to me, the whole idea of the collector sort of fanboy character.

D   So you keep them but you wouldn't be poly-bagging them?

P   No. I remember actually when I managed to get: was it five hundred issues of 2000AD from about 200... hold on, it was about two hundred issues from about 200 to about 400 for a tenner from a guy in my school and he had them in good nick, but I tore covers off them and stuck them onto a box, because the way 2000AD used to be printed, there was never a strip on the cover, and I thought: these covers look great, that'll do grand on this box. And I put all my comics into that; these two hundred comics were driving me mad, up the wall.

D   I was the same: I had every wall, the ceiling and every piece of furniture in my room covered. I sold most of my 2000ads a few years ago and the thing was I remembered all of the stories so well that I just didn't read them anymore. Are you a fan?

P   Of comics? Eh, yes. I dislike the idea though, that its a separate medium, or its, you know, if you're into comics its kinda seen as "ooh, you're into comics", its not like "ooh, you're into books". Although, it frightens my sometimes that people say to me "gosh you read a lot", and I go "fuck, I don't know, that's an encouraging sign". "Oh no, I never read books" I don't know, I think its an extension of that, it was something else that would go along with whatever... Yeah, I am. I think its like any other medium, each one has its own particular things that you can do with it that you can't in another.

D   What is it in comics?

P   There's a million and one things. I suppose it is the case that you've got literature and a strong visual sense meeting, and I think that appeals on a very basic level. Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, they go on about how the Egyptians were basically doing comic strips as writing and that Chinese script developed symbolically as well. So I think its a very natural progression, as a story-telling medium I think its excellent. You've so much control, you need no special-effects budget and its really down to your own talent how well it works, and there is enough room in it, it is a fully-fledged medium, in the sense that you have your completely avant-garde with no relation to you, right to your mainstream. I think that's more of an indication to you that its a full medium than the more artistic extremes, that you do have this broad spectrum of stuff. Unfortunately, the English-language comics don't anymore. Its always been a problem I think. In England you've had 2000AD and a couple of war comics; all the war comics are gone now. And in America you've always had the superhero shite and a few other ones. Places like Japan and Europe, they've just "Oh, I think I'll write a strip about the 1860's in America...". There's no limitations to your story that there would be here. I find myself , that the strip I'm trying to write is basically loads of ideas for, not so much short-stories, but just stories of indeterminate length, but that I wanted to create a sort of format, if you like, in computer terminology, that I could bring all of these together and tie them

all in together. In the end it will read as one story, that the incidents within it will be self-contained to a greater or lesser extent.

D   Sorry, I just want to say for the tape that you're in the process of developing your own comic.

P   Yeah.

D   And you'll be printing pretty soon.

P   Hopefully, that's the big thing. Every so often in English-language comics anyway, there's this big panic about "Oh, you know, readership blah blah, and that there isn't enough diversity" that that hasn't changed, and I can't see it changing. For myself in the long-term, I want to learn French and Spanish and maybe Japanese. That if I want to make a living out of this, I can go Europe, its probably the best way to go about it.

D   Well, one good thing about it is that getting stuff translated is straight-forward. You can just change the bubbles. Was there any point when you changed from just reading to being a fan?

P   I think during those... I'd always been drawing strange things, from the earliest. I have a four foot pile of drawings at home that I should clean out but there's some stuff there that dates back to when I first started drawing. I'm a hoarder but not a collector, if that makes sense. When I started reading American comics, do you remember The Twilight Zone? (a comics shop) That was my first comics shop and of course, I got sitting and chatting to the lads. I think I've known every comic shop owner in this town fairly well on a one-to-one basis. Because I was the fanboy of the first order between the ages of fourteen and eighteen and I suppose that a lot of that... Somebody was saying that the science-fiction area attracts people that are either the eldest or the only children. I'm the eldest and I think that's, there was a case...

D   I'm the youngest.

P   Hah! The exception there that proves the rule (laughs). Because of various things, we moved when I was about that age. We had a bookshop in one town when I was going to school there but we lived twelve miles away. So, as soon as I started going to secondary school, I was cut off from everyone I knew at primary school. And I didn't get back until after six or seven o'clock in the evening, so I was either reading in the bookshop or eating. Food and books were my two favourite hobbies at that time.

D   I share your tastes.

P   Exactly. Its only in the last few years that I've been weaning myself off the food, cutting down (laughs). It was very lonely at that time, and comics were a great way around that. I developed new circles of friends by just coming into town and going to the comic shops on a Saturday. It was a regular ritual: you'd come in and go to the Abbey Mall. I was doing that for about six months when I heard about the Alchemist's Head, so I'd two venues. Then I think a few years later the Twilight Zone closed down and Forbidden Planet opened up, that was seven years ago. What was the question again?

D   Was there any time when you changed from being a reader to being a fan?

P   Yeah. That would have been about it, at about that age. The thing about that: I remember, for some strange reason, deciding that I should collect all the DC Millennium comics, which was one of those horrendous cross-overs. Never did it again, thank God. It was more like a case of "Oh, everybody's doing this, I might as well do it", but it wasn't worth it in the end. What really got me in as a fan was that after my inter cert I went to one of the UKCACs (a British comic convention) and that I started meeting my heroes in the comics scene. Through involvement with science-fiction societies and a couple of other things, I managed to get a... I remember we organised an artshow up in Bewleys of all things, for a science-fiction society. This would have been about seven years ago, 1989 or so, and I'd just left secondary school. And I'd heard that Steve Dillon was living here, and he was, when I first started, he was the first comics artist that I looked at and said "I want to draw comics". Before that, it never really struck me. For years he would have been one of my biggest influences, and he was living in Raheny. So, phoned up Deadline (a comic/style magazine) I think and said "listen, we're organising an artshow, would he like to come along and do a signing? We'll get him dinner and a few drinks, blah blah blah". And it was grand: I met my hero and showed him my stuff. I meet him every now and again for a pint, and I started becoming a real fanboy in that respect. Over the period of a few conventions I started meeting more people in the industry: Will Simpson I know fairly well...

D   He lives here now doesn't he?

P   In Glenarm in Antrim. He's always lived there. A few other people, I've quite a few friends in the Scottish/Glasgow comic community, because there's quite a big one there. I was a member of the scottish cartoonist's association for a while, unfortunately I let my membership lapse. I intended moving there at the time. I suppose I really went for the full fanboy thing. I'm six-foot-eight, I think there's definitely something people who are slightly overweight and tall with specs, because you go to conventions and you see clones of yourself everywhere. Its frightening. (laughs) My dad went along on one and went up to Alan Davis (a respected comics artist) thinking it was me once, and stuff like that. Unfortunately, I started drinking at the same time, which was a few more embarrassments... I became very very fanboyish.

D   There seems to be a strong social element for you in comics.

P   Yeah. There was. At one stage, I think everyone I knew was either into science-fiction or comics and didn't have many interests outside that. I think again that comes from... my involvement in the science-fiction society and just going to these conventions. I have some very good friends I met at cons, and still every year we'll meet up and in fact, it builds up some very strong social ties because you're not in each other's faces continually. So when you do meet, its a solid weekend and its good craic.

D   You talk about comics obviously with these people...

P   Comics would be a very small part of the conversation. I think it is a case that the people you meet, at least at one stage, it was a case that I had one or two friends that I met on a day to day basis and that a social group developed for me in the cience-fiction society where people with similar interests... Also I think there is a thing that if you're into science-fiction or into comics its like "oh, really?" (dubious voice): you're either sad or... It can be true to a certain extent.

D   Part of the reason for this is to let comic book fans speak for themselves, because I always felt that there was a thing if you said you were into comics people would ask you "oh, does your finger get worn out if you read a proper book?" I wanted to actually let people show what they think, why they read them, what they get out of them...

P   Its been part of my life for so long, in terms of reading comics, I've never really looked for a reason. It was definitely that there was a great social thing developed. That was from being a fanboy basically. But since then I have moved on from that: in a lot of respects, while comics are still important, they wouldn't be my main social focus. Although some of my best friends are still people who are big into comics as well. A very good friend that you met at that Rathdrum thing (a cartoonist festival), we're thinking of starting a business together. So there were social ties there and it was a similar sort of mindset that you met and could relate to. The comics came first and all the social thing came after and I would differentiate the social thing. Because you meet them and you're going to be talking about the weather or the time you got really pissed and stuff like that. And then you'll talk a bit about comics, or you'll talk about how its done from a job sense of view: that you're getting on with this or you've got this contact or you've that contact, or your stuff's coming along nicely or its not...

D   Do you think that there's a creative element that goes along with fandom?

P   There is to some extent. There's also the collector bit. I really worry about the obsessive collector people. Its funny: you go to conventions and you get the same

hierarchies. The people who look down on all comics fans would fit into one group because they're into certain comics and they'll look down on that lot, and that lot will look down on *that* lot. Science-fiction fans and comic fans generally can be divided into two camps: those who drink and those who don't. (laughs) Its frightening. You get obviously, the ones caught in the middle, who drink but share characteristics with the non-drinkers. Because the non-drinkers tend to be fairly anal, compulsive collectors. My dad is actually a great person to talk to about this, because he went to one or two of the first cons I was at and he had great fun just watching the people at them. He saw this middle-aged couple there and the husband was *carefully* noting sealed bags of comics and the wife was there, bored out of her mind. You get this social thing, the hierarchies, its a little closed environment but there's the mirror of the other world in the sense of "Oh, he's sad, he's not". There's the cool set, there's the metaller set. Its funny, certain musical tastes will lead directly into comics...

D   Really?

P   Metallers, big time. All of the Simon Bisley kind of thing. There's a link there with 2000AD. 2000AD always had a musical link, in some respects: in the early days it was the punk scene and that developed on into the heavy metal.

D   Or even Love and Rockets...

P   Although Love and Rockets, I don't think many people would have come from music into Love and Rockets, or not that many.

D   Would you use comics as a way of distinguishing yourself from other people, of putting yourself in opposition to other people?

P   As a sort of social stand-point?

D   Yeah. Social or artistic.

P   I guess so, to a degree. I think a lot of it comes from the fact that I've been reasonably socially inept for a hell of a long time in my life.

D   You're hiding it well.

P   Up until the age of eighteen or twenty, social interaction outside my family or a small circle of friends was well beyond me. It developed hand in hand with the convention going, but that was nearly a case of "right, there is more to life than comics", and that's something... Where comics, or the people who read comics get their bad name is through the people who don't see anything more to life than comics.

D   Are there any comics that you get regularly?

P   Regularly... Eightball. I tend more to buy collected editions every so often. I don't buy Cerebus regularly but I would consider that one of my favourite comics. Every year or so, I'll buy the collected book. The last thing I actually bought regularly was the Kingdom Come, you know that Mark Wade, no, Alex Ross, fully painted... it was actually a superhero comic, probably the first superhero comic I've read in years. The 'end of the DC Universe' thing. It was just technically and story-wise brilliantly done. I don't try to limit myself as much as I might have used to. I would buy anything that was loosely connected to 2000AD, then it was a case of "oh, I wouldn't buy anything with superheroes at all". Although, I did go through a pretty big superhero stage. I still have a soft spot for old seventies Thing Two-in-Ones, and things like that. I had a complete set at one stage. They were cheap as well, which was another good reason for that.

D   Well, I think the Thing is one of those beasts that everybody... its almost unnatural not to be attracted. (laughs)

P   Its weird, comics are like that, comics do appeal, and I think even the characters within them do appeal to people who are isolated or lonely. Although for myself, that wasn't the attraction, I could see how that could be for other people.

D   What was the attraction?

P   I don't know if there was, it was, like I said, a natural progression. I never rated by medium, if you know what I mean? Television, books comics, film are all as important, and within those there's always absolute shit and your absolute masterpieces.

D   What about... comics are normally approached as popular culture, and the relationship between comic books and fine art, or what is known as fine art. How would you place them?

P   I like to think I read a fairly broad spectrum of stuff and there are one or two more off the wall things. The nearest to the fine art would be... you see, I worry when you get to the stage where it stops telling a story. Because it is a story-telling medium. You do have utterly abstract strips, they don't appeal to me because even though there can be an attempt to tell a story, even where it doesn't always work out... The fine art side of things, in terms of stories would be Jim Woodring and Chester Brown and stuff like that. There's a depth to them that's not literary but there's a visual element there and an abstractionism to, be it speech or thought or even on a purely visual level that is approaching a fine art. Its not approaching fine art, it is a fine art at that point. But if you go a couple of steps beyond that, you get into basically abstract painting as a comic-strip, and that doesn't work often. I think things like Beanworld, which I haven't read but I heard about...

D   I got one but I sold it.

P   It can be done. comics can accomplish so much if they're let. The Europeans, my
        sister was over a few times and brought me back a few of the European comics.
        The diversity in one magazine even, while here, 2000AD is all science-fiction. A
        Suivre: just the diversity in that one alone, where you had your, you know from
        fine art to...

D   I was living in Paris for five months and you'd have the Tintin shop, where it'd just
        be Tintin. You have one in London as well.

P   Yeah.

D   Near Covent Garden.

P   That's right.

D   Though in a way, a lot of the comics seemed to end up being quite similar. There
        still seems to be a preponderance of science-fiction and to an extent, there's more
        sex in them, people like Manara with Click, an awful lot of them were...

P   Sex comics.

D   Yeah.

P   I think that's more of an European attitude towards it. It'd be more seen as, it
        wouldn't be seen as porno comics, more as erotic comics, and there is a distinction,
        I think. Obviously, there are porno comics and they're stuff like, what is it? Biker
        Sluts from Hell. But I remember one particular issue of A Suivre which had a
        Moebius science-fiction story, it had a story about an old man living in a room,
        feeding chocolate to cats, remembering the first World War, and then it had a
        cartoon cat character that seemed to be doing television interviews. And then a
        historical strip set in the old west. That was a massive change. In my own stuff I
        want to do something similar in that, I don't know, its a philosophical thing as much
        as anything, in that I can draw in two or three different styles and that's going to be
        part of the script. That'll be a story-telling element as much as anything. I'll give
        you a brief rundown. In some respects, I've been thinking about the story for about
        seven years, there's elements in there that go back and there's character ideas and
        set-pieces that will all tie in. I basically wanted something that I could throw stuff
        into. A lot of it won't make sense and is not meant to; a lot of it is meaningless in
        the sense that there'll be a story about a bad joke told in the pub but the next page
        will be about the massacre of the indians during the 1868 Apache wars. The story's
        basically about how do you relate events separated by a hundred years in time, or by
        a totally different view on the world? In comics you've got that: where do cartoon

animals come from? Why is there such a preponderance of them? That's something I wanted to do as well, so I created a dog, a cat and a mouse...

D   Almost like a Krazy Kat thing?

P   Well no, I wrote this script with the idea that it was starting off as a very poor Reservoir Dogs piss-take. Its an off the wall story: they owe a favour to the biggest gangster Henry Half-face, who half his face was replaced with cream cheese by aliens and for the past five years, he's built up the biggest crime ring in the world to finance an inter-stellar mission to find the other half of his face. So he hires them to kill a guy on the day that he's about to fly off. He says "Make sure to tell him its very personal" and off they go. They arrive up and say "Henry Half-face told us to kill you" and he goes "who? I don't know anyone called Henry Half-face" so they shoot him anyway. They go back and your man goes "He didn't know me?! But he used to bully me all through school". The story goes on from there, and the big problem for the main characters is: why do they have to wear suits? And they're going "why do we have to wear suits?" and they never get an answer to it.

D   So is this existential angst for funny characters?

P   Something like that, but it will tie in with the main storyline which is set in Dublin today, and there's a supernatural element. I have Mother Earth as a character and Death, old Death as a character. There's a whole thing about the millennium coming up that different groups... One of the characters I have in mind, his father tells him he's a direct descendant of Jesus Christ, so your man thinks "my dad's gone mad", but in a previous issue he brought a friend back from the dead. One of the main characters gets hit by a car and your man pulls him back and he's a bear, and that this ties in... I do know I'm going to kill off most of the characters before the end of the strip, but that doesn't mean their involvement with the strip ends. There's a lot of... In terms of the story, its more influenced by Philip K. Dick and his science-fiction of reality stuff than by any comic book writer. I know how it ends and the rest of it...

D   Will come as you're doing it.

P   Well, a lot of it is there, a lot of the key points in it. The first year is plotted and I figure its going to take seven years, we'll see how it goes.

D   What would you say to people who say that comics are for kids?

P   That's arse. It's absolute arse. John McCrea said that saying comics are for kids is like saying all books are for kids because Enid Blyton wrote kids books. Its definitely something that just doesn't follow. Its something I've got all the time. I was in Ballyfermot doing animation. I was told "comics are for kids; why do you want to do something like that, its a dead medium. You're wasting your time with

it. Your life-drawing's wonderful blah blah blah." When I said there were comics out there that were very good, she said "oh well Crumb was very good but..." She'd read comics and appreciated them fully but couldn't see anything beyond this one... That's something which you encounter all the time. My dad can't read it. He sits down and says "I can appreciate your interested but why do you want to draw this?" I can sit down and try to explain I'm trying to make a living from it but, he's never going to give out to me for doing it but it a complete misunderstanding more than anything else.

D   I think as well, that people actually expect them to be very simple to read, but to a large extent, you need quite a history of them.

P   Yeah. There's a language to it that you need to have learned. Have you read Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud?

D   Yeah.

P   He does a great thing about Japanese comics, that they have visual symbols for crying and anger that would make no impression on a western reader. A red face for lust, or just blackened face for lust and things like this. There are all these iconic bits... The most interesting point he made in the book was about some more successful comics characters are always the simplest visually. And that's something I want to do as well... When it (his comic) comes out, everyone's going to say "this is Love and Rockets with a western" and there's elements of that because Love and Rockets was a big influence because he managed to keep a realistic level and to keep that iconic look to it. There's a level of simplicity, simplicity only in the visual sense. Tintin is another example. I used to read Tintin in the library when I first joined the library. They were great: you had utterly realistic scenarios and really cartoony characters. Every now and again I'm doing drawings and I'm going "ooh, Herge". My progression through comics was that I was reading all the cartoony stuff first, then I got into 2000AD so I started drawing realistically. I have drawings at home that are pure Steve Dillon and pure Judge Dredd, all science-fiction hokum. Its only in the last few years... Do you remember in that Big Comic there was a story called Peter and Irene get drunk?

D   Yeah.

P   That was the first real cartoon attempt I'd done. I was sitting there thinking 'fuck' everybody like it more than my other stuff. That's an important thing, you need that sort of feedback, but it was also... I was much happier with it because I was doing something that I hadn't done before and it was new to me. Even though I'd been reading all this stuff all the time and I must have been absorbing it on some level. I'd gone back a step, that I was trying to get a very realistic Bolland-style work, but now I'm trying to clean it and simplify it, just keep it very clean.

D   I think it is the crucial point of Understanding Comics that the more universal it becomes, the more iconic... The other main point for me in that book is the idea of closure, that really how it (comics) works is what goes on between the panels.

P   Yeah.

D   For example, when 2000AD went for this more finished artwork, full colour, and lost all the narrative...

P   It was nice Boris Valetdrome(?) painted covers for science-fiction novels, which is not what strips are about. I do think its a medium that there's still a lot that you can do with it, there's new ground to be breaking, just in terms of new visual quirks that you can bring in. One idea I want to use is that... in terms of narrative, I want to try and make it as real as possible, but in a very loose sense of the real. I think people's daydreams and nightmares, just on a basic level, sitting at a bus-stop having a quick daydream is as important psychologically to people and makes up people as much as anything else. And that is important to get across. But I want to be able to immediately differentiate in the strip how I'm going to do that. Things like, if a characters remembering something, I'm not going to have panel borders.   The main strip will be panels. One scene where a character flashes back will be done just as a backdrop. There's things like that, just ways of creating different...
Voice-baloons, if you do an inverted voice baloon it makes the character immediately dark. People forget how much lettering is important. Cerebus the Aardvark has unbelievably good lettering. You're getting visual transmission of tone of voice, which is unbelievable. Which is an amazing eye-opener. There's one panel I remember that stands out: Cerebus is being hunted by the Serunists, its one character saying "kill Cerebus" and its psychically done, but its coming off the page the lettering but it doesn't jar with the visuals. Because I think some lettering really does, its not sitting on the page. For myself, it really is a very important artistic work that I want to do, for myself, just to get my head together just as much as anything else.

D   I think that the lettering relates to the sound in films: everyone wants to have these groovy pictures and they forget about the sound, and the real sign of a cheap film is bad sound. Its so crucial for atmosphere, in the same way, lettering does an awful lot of things.

P   Well, it replaces the sound effects. Its a much more challenging thing than sound effects in some respects, because you are limited. You can't add a theme tune to a comic. You can't spell that on the page. The Japanese do it apparently, quite a lot. I don't think a western audience could appreciate it.

D   V for Vendetta had a thing where they just used sheet music. That was interesting.

P   I think it hung on the page though. It was more the way it was shown on the page that slowed it: they had it turned sideways. It was trying to do two things at the one time. The song was to relate to what was happening on the page. Its more like a verbal description of what's happening in the panel, or a multi-layered way of showing it. I think that jarred. They never used that technique again. Cerebus is ground-breaking I think, it still is. Every now and again you look at it and you're going "wow". He's come up with something new. He's also at a level where he can spend a year telling something that's taking ten minutes to happen. Comics are limited in some respects in the sense that you've time and that for every page you've got to show x amount of time passing. But he (Dave Sim) has it in such a way that you're reading forty pages and there's so much going on, but then you think back: that was an hour! In the character's time. He can do that because he has the foundation and he's got the strong readership that are going to hold on and aren't going to be disappointed. A twenty page comic is a very limited format, in that you have to keep the attention focussed, the hook to the next issue, otherwise you fail basically. I think that's where 2000AD fell down, that they were trying to do long stories. But the reason 2000AD became successful was because you had character-based stories but with short stories and then with the occasional epic.

D   Do you think that comics are art?

P   That's a good question. I think they can be art, but from my own point of view, I think they're more of a craft. Generally I have more time for craft than just art. There's a technical skill that you have to have that is literally sitting down and learning facts, whether it be how a body looks or how a story is constructed. When it becomes art it generally has a good foundation. I don't know if its art as much as... A good comic is going to be as much literature as art. The trouble is comics tend to fall into two camps: great art, bad story or great art and really heavy dialogue. For people who would prefer to read novels, Sandman is very text-heavy, and some of the Alan Moore early stuff was as well. You almost felt that they were failed novelists more than comics writers. The simplest stuff... I know Alan Moore went away from it and just went into dialogue and that's the way to approach it. When comics are art its when the script and the artwork and the lettering all just click.

D   Mentioning Alan Moore, I just got three issues of From Hell...

P   Now, that's amazing. I've been getting that as well.

D   I hadn't got it for a good while and I couldn't afford to get it but I did.

P   I do worry about that strip because there's a thing I've seen the more literary comic artists do, whether its Neil Gaiman or, even Dave Sim does it: text. Heavy amounts of text in a comic book. In Alan Moore's case its more explanatory notes, where he gets the reference materials to the murders, the Jack the Ripper case. I suppose I'm

a purist: if you're doing a comic strip, its a comic strip. It shouldn't really be a combination of novel cum comic strip. Because a novel cum film would never work. You could not show text on screen. I suppose the internet might be considered like that, but its not really for me. Even Dave Sim, his last book was called Reads, and that was as much text as comic strip and I skipped over a hell of a lot of the text. I do think he's a frustrated writer in some respects and that he wants to bring in the sense of the writer and the whole idea of Oscar Wilde is a big influence on his artistic struggle. But Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics is one of the best comics I've read in years and its also the best book on comics ever. You had...

D   Comic and Sequential art.

P   By Will Eisner, but he missed the point entirely. If you want to write a book on comics, the best way to do it is as a comic.

D   Its so forceful, Understanding Comics and its great fun. I read it again last week, and the wit and the perspicacity...

P   He breaks it down and does it wonderfully. What's more it is a great read; you enjoy reading that book. Its technically one of the best comics of the last twenty years, easily. Its just so good its scary. I have to say that that renewed my interest in doing a comic. Reading that was sitting down and going "wow", and it is a great handbook as well. He has analysed the whole medium and he's come up with such a body of work about comics that its hard to disagree with him about anything. There's one or two things I'm a bit wary of.

D   How do you think other people see you in relation to comics?

P   I do know a few people think of me as Peter who draws big shoulder-pads on everybody. My girlfriend keeps telling me why don't I sell a few of those, they're cluttering up the flat. I do have a few friends who know how important they are to me and a big part of who I am is to find my own in that. For me it is my main mode of expression and story-telling. It all comes from that. Its not so much a job, as it really is very very important to me.

D   Then finally, other media, do you read or consume other media?

P   Yeah. I read a novel or two a week. I used to read a novel a day when I was working in a bookshop. Mainly science-fiction, but very sporadic. I'll go through periods where I'll read like an animal and then calm down for a while. Films, again there's a big science-fiction thing there. I like a lot of more off the wall stuff as well. The only medium that I'm not huge into would be music. I've a very strong visual sense, the music I really like always conjures images. I just absorb information like a sponge. People are always giving out to me that I'm throwing out facts and figures.

One minute I'll be talking about super conductors and the next I'm the latest... Fortean Times is actually the only thing that I will sit down and read every week because I think its brilliant. I watch a lot of documentaries more on tv and there are television programmes that I really like as well. I do think things like the X Files although very mainstream, when its good its excellent. It shows what you can do with television, which again is an under-rated medium. I've an idea for a novel I'd like to write one day, but at the moment its comics, that's the main thing. Eventually, I'd like to play around with one or two other things.

D   Excellent, that was brilliant Peter, thanks very much.

ENDS

APPENDIX G

Interview 26-8-1994

Mike, Darren, Oisin & Vicki   26 Aug 1994

Denis   Could you just introduce yourselves

Oisin   I'm Oisin Mc Gowan

John   I'm John

Darren   Darren Davis   (DD)

Vicki   Vicki Errity

Mike   Michael

D   Okay, first of all, how long have you been reading comics?

M   Oh God, since I was a child; I can't remember exactly how long: since I could read I'm not a massive comic reader: I like a comic every now and then, so probably since three or four

D   And was there any time when they started becoming more important to you?

M   Yes. When other people bought them, I didn't buy comics: I read my friend's, when he got Warlord or Battle Action and this kind of thing. I'd go over to his house and spend most of the time reading his annuals and things like that. So, I didn't start buying comics until I was about twelve or thirteen.

D   How about yourself Darren?

DD   Yeah, basically the same. When I was about four, I used to get comics, then, ever since then, I've been reading them and getting more and more interested in them

D   Was there any specific point when you said: "Yeah, I'm really into these ?"

DD   When I was about eleven, I really started to get into them. I began to read a lot more of Marvel stuff, superhero stuff, rather than The Beano.

D   Vicki?

V   I wouldn't have read much stuff. The odd thing every now and again

D   So you basically got into for work?

V   I suppose, yeah

D   So are comics important to you?

O   Yes. I mean, I'd read more books than comics, but, I get a great buzz out of reading a really good comic. I'm of the opinion that most comics out now aren't very good at all. A really good comic is as good as a really good book or film, or a song. I enjoy the process; I love doing them, rather than reading them. You can read a comic in an hour; its only a short thing, but its very easy to do; its very relaxing, whereas you get more, you get adrenaline from drawing. Yeah, comics are really important, but its really only the good ones - I'm very critical.

D   How about yourself?

DD   Well, it began because I liked the art and then the stories are kind of okay, when I noticed there were good storylines, they were exciting

D   How about you? Are they important to you?

V   No, I do them for work more than anything else.

D   Would you call yourself a fan?

O   Eh, that would depend. I always look on a comics fan as someone who knows what happened in issue twenty-three of Superman back in 1950, you know, that kind of thing. I would call Dave (Smith) a comics fan. I wouldn't walk into Forbidden Planet to have discussions with them over the merits of the latest Predator comic or whether or not Batman was going to get involved with such and such a woman and that sort of thing. I like the good complete story; I like to go and buy a graphic novel and ... ... I'm a fan of reading; I like to read and I find myself very critical of comics. There's an awful lot of comics I don't like, so as such, you couldn't really call me a fan.

D   I've found that most people I've talked to say the same thing, that there's a lot of stuff that they don't like.

O   I don't read them every day. I'd look out for a good one.

D   How about yourself Darren?

DD   Yeah, but like, whenever I see a good comic I'll get it. You don't have to be dedicated to one comic; if I think a comic is great, I get it (unrecognisable)

D   How about yourself? Since you started working on them, what has been your reaction?

V   Specifically the comics I would buy would be children's comics, for my five year old and the comics I would buy for her would be A, good and B, would have an educational content, Postman Pat, those kind of things. I've really only started to get into comics; animation, cartoons, they're more what I'd be interested in.

D   Is there a social element to comics for you?

O   For me, not really out of the studio, if we go down to the pub, we generally don't talk about comics. None of the people I know outside the studio would be into comics. So, there's not really any social element to it. We went to the Glasgow convention and had a good time there, but then again, its not social, I'm not interested in meeting artists or writers, I've no interest whatsoever in seeing their work. If you meet a very good artist and he turns out to be a right arsehole, its going to spoil it for you, so I'm not interested in that. I used to be really into Simon Bisley, read a load of interviews about him and it turned out I got a negative opinion of the guy. The interviews gave an insight into why he works the way he does, and I don't like it, so it spoiled that.

D   The whole thing about him not doing feet because he can't...

O   In my view he was getting lazy, he was just coasting along on stuff he'd done before. He's done some classic stuff and some absolute crap. Socially no, its not something I'd go on about outside the studio.

D   How about yourself?

DD   None of my friends, none of them are really into comics, they're just something I picked up that I like, its not really anything I'd talk to anyone about much unless some guy was really into them. No, most of my friends aren't into comics and its just something I do

V   Its just something that's very small and very few people are into it, whereas if you go to a group of fans, you know they're going to be into it. Everybody would be familiar with something or other; there'd be people over here reading Asterix or something like that, and they'd say " ah yeah, I read a comic two years ago ". There's not many people fluent in comics; its still considered very childish by a lot of people. You know, you have to be simple-minded to read comics, because there's pictures, you don't need to be intelligent to look at pictures, its that attitude.

D   Do you still get a lot of that?

O   Less of it, people have become more aware, because things are being done more in a visual way all the time; books are being presented more visually, as opposed to lots and lots of text, and people appreciate it because, you know, it makes them easier to read, and you don't have to slog through as much, and because there's a lot more adult or varied comics on the market.

D   Do you think the medium is being used as much as it could be?

ALL   No

D   Why not?

O   I think its still being held back a lot by the stereotype of "comics have to have superheroes in them" and they have to be about the end of the world as we know it being pushed upon us, this kind of thing, when they could do the exact same subjects as books, just have the subject more visual and do it that way. So, no, they're used to their full potential, very few writers do.

D   Would you agree with that?

V   Yeah

D   Since I started studying this, you see stuff like Little Nemo in Slumberland or Krazy Kat, the more you see stuff like that, it gets harder and harder to read stuff because you see how good comics can be.

O   Well, when you think about it, any film that's being done could be done as a comic at a fraction of the expense and a fraction of the time, and can be sold world-wide, and can be translated into any language very easily, and its just not used that way, its still... ... I personally have a grudge against superhero comics. They spoil it for other people; everything's got to be big muscled characters standing out in the middle of the page; its very boring after a while; a lot of the techniques that are used in film could be used in comics, and a lot of the subject matter, all of it. It is to some extent, but not as much as it could be.

V   I think from the educational point of view a lot could be done with them, for geography and things like that, there's definitely scope

O   The thing I'm working on at the moment is a history book and the reason I got the job was these publishers, they're very backward in terms of children's books, and they decided to try comics pages in them, and there's seven comics pages in it and they don't know what to do with it because its not a format they're prepared to run with.

V   There's one book I have, and its scenes from German folklore and the drawings in it are atrocious, they'd put anyone off.

O   Its because they won't pay out the money to attract the good artists, they say "we'll stick a few pictures in because kids like pictures", text is the important thing. The idea is "my nephew draws very well, we'll get him to do it"

D   But comics only really took off with Superman so that's why there's such a glut of superheroes. Would you be fans; would you collect comics much?

O   Not so much, because it costs a lot. If you get a good comic its going to cost you six quid the same as a book, so comics are an investment. I'd go out and spend money on something like Sin City or the Dark Knight, you know, classic stuff. In terms of comics, not really: I'll actually go into Forbidden Planet, pick one up and read it and put it back down again, because you can get away with it, I don't really like them because they charge a fortune. There used to be the Alchemist's Head where you

could walk in and put a deposit down on a comic. I used to get 2000AD; I got that for about three years, because you got a good variety, but that went down, it wasn't worth the hassle anymore.

D   How about you?

DD   I felt that there were a lot of comics that I liked, but that was, I got those a while ago, at the moment, you know, to get an anyway decent comic its at least one-seventy-five, and up to fifteen quid for a graphic novel. When you see so many good ones you want to buy, you can't buy them all, you can maybe buy one or two, but you can't get what you really want. I suppose in a way, its an art form, and you pay a lot for a painting...

O   You can get them in, I've seen comics every now and then and graphic novels in second-hand bookshops, but its very rare, you might be able to pick up something good.

D   You wouldn't go out and get every issue of a particular comic?

DD   For a while I used to get X-Men, but those are kind of amusing but then they kind of run down , now whenever I see one, I just pick it up

V   My husband, he's very into comics and he collects lots of things: I think he was collecting Judge Dredd and 2000AD, but I don't know if that's the case now...

D   Nowadays I can't afford anything myself; I usually just get the Comics Journal. Would you be a collector yourself?

M   Yeah, I liked 2000AD and Judge Dredd, I used to buy them out of habit, and I collected them over the years. Every now and again, you get comics cheap in comic newspapers; you get these offers, that's only maybe once or twice a year you'd be able to splash out, makes it worthwhile.

D   Would you call yourself a fan?

M   I suppose in this business you have to be

D   Everyone I've met has complained about the quality. Why bother continuing if you're dissatisfied with what's out there?

O   Because the stuff that is good is worth it. When you get stuff like the absolute classics like the Watchmen, the Dark Knight or the Sin Citys, you get a book every now and again and its so special it makes an impression on you. The actual process of doing the art and the writing is so enjoyable.

V   There's always anew generation coming up, changing things.

D   Do you think that comics have changed?

v

O   Oh yeah, god yeah. They've changed a lot in terms of style and because of the technology, we can now do full colour very easily as opposed to twenty years ago when everything had to be one of five colours, and the actual styles: the tolerance has gone up - you can do a lot more with comics now. The comics code in America is still in force, but its flaunted.

D   I got a comic recently, the American Judge Dredd and I was shocked by the amount of violence allowed and yet it was a comics code comic.

O   Its lip service, that's all it is at the moment. The amount of violence, sex and atrocities that you can get into comics has really gone up in the last few years, and the reader's tolerance for it, the reader's need for it, like you were talking to the two kids and they said there wasn't enough violence in it, you look at the likes of Bisley or Kevin O'Neill, all these guys, they get quite explicit and some people lap it up, so, yeah, they've become more extreme. In terms of art, the art has changed as well: 2000AD would be the classic example; everything in 2000AD is now fully painted, and they're paying less attention to the storytelling, the storytelling is left a bit too much, its something we're all very conscious of: like when you're telling a story make sure that everything is clear, but the priority now has gone towards the finish and: "is that dress beautifully painted, does that gun have all the nice airgun glints on it?" and that has been a priority over the last few years, and I suppose that's one of the reasons why the comics industry has gone down a lot, because they've given up their traditional line-up.

V   I think more of them are made to sell the toys that go with them, rather than the stories.

O   A lot of it is toy or tv tie-ins now.

D   I think its partly because they're written and drawn by fans for other fans: there are more and more comics that look like they're based on comics rather than real life. Is the form of the comic important - monthly comics or graphic novels?

O   Well, I prefer a book, I prefer to read a story all in one go, not to have to wait till next week.

D   And the better paper?

O   As long as it looks good. I don't take a lot of time complaining about the quality of the paper. If you're going to do full colour artwork it takes a certain quality paper to do it well. Its the artwork. I used to get BattleAction with the likes of Charlie's War, it was printed on newspaper, but I didn't give a damn: I loved the artwork; Johnny Red and those: they're classics and they'll always be classics, no matter what they're printed on. You could put them on tissue paper, toilet paper, they'd still be as good. But for colour artwork you need decent paper.

M   I think the form of comics, these glossy covers, these illuminous covers that are starting to creep into the American way of selling comics, all the new comics that come out from Marvel, its a shame really: it brings a comic up for one week and when the next issue comes out its gone down.

O   They're changing the outside of the package but the quality inside is gone.

D   What about yourself?

DD   I don't really mind as long as the inside's good. What's on the outside is - just the other day I picked up Alien vs. Predator or something and the cover was brilliant, but the inside was really bad. If they had a really good inside and an okay cover, maybe it wouldn't sell as much, but still, the inside and the story at least would have been good, its a complete waste when you look at the cover and think what's inside.

O   I've always thought the cover should be done by the guy who does the inside: so you can know what's going to be inside. You could have lovely linework inside and a painted cover as long as its by the same artist you've the quality, but if you have Bill Sienkwvics or Brian Bolland doing the outside, a lovely cover, and then you open it and its shite, you're let down. You get so used to seeing all these lovely covers on the stands that you just don't know what to choose anymore, whereas, if you have a cover and the guy whose done the inside has done the outside, you're able to say: " ell I'll decide on his art" and make that choice and you're not let down.

D   How about yourself?

V   My first reaction is I'd go for a graphic novel before comics, because I like a nice thick read as well, but, I could get into comics: I've read one or two and looked for the sequel and then got frustrated. It would be very easy to get into them.

D   Some people really like the flimsiness of the monthly comics and that's what makes you want to protect it more.

V   Or there's a good story and you want to collect them all; that's where I think the social element of comics is

O   That's what would annoy me, like you might need twenty issues and you're missing one and you'd be kicking yourself: the idea of, you'd go through years saying damn, I wish I had issue three.

V   Yet you'd be on the lookout for it, and you'd talk to people about comics and stuff and try and get it someplace.

D   Some of the people I've talked to said the love the idea that they probably won't find the missing issue; they like the gaps.
Is the shop where you buy the comics important?

O   No

DD   As long as the comics are there, there's actually not many shops that sell them; if there were more comic shops you'd probably get a lot of people into them. But, every time I want a comic, I have to go into Forbidden Planet and pay them. I don't mind it, as long as I get a good comic, but its just that I wish there were more shops, then you'd probably get a lot more people reading them, like I said.

O   What can be nice is, if you go into one of these small stalls, like Zenith comics in the Grafton Flea Market: you never know what you're going to find there: you might find: here's one I was looking for years ago and I really wanted it and here it is and its two pounds, and that can be nice, but the problem is, if you're definitely looking for something, you go in and chances are its not going to be there, so its nice to go in and be surprised, but as long as they have what I'm looking for, they could sell it at a banana stall, it wouldn't bother me.

D   How about yourself Mike?

M   What makes a comic shop is its variety of material, other than that, there's not a lot there.

D   So, its not a place you'd hang out?

M   No. You go into Forbidden Planet and its nice to walk around and look at all the different kinds of artwork, at the end you buy one comic and you take it home to read it at home.

D   How about you Vicki?

V   I haven't been there; I'm trying to imagine it. Your local newsagent only has a few things unless you have a reference like a comic shop you can't really know what's on the market.

D   What about the actual reading of the comic? What way would you normally read a comic? Would you do it to kill some time or would it be something you look forward to?

O   Generally what I do is wait till late at night - its always nice when its raining outside, and I just have a lamp on, and something small to eat. I have a nice time, its late night, read your comic, really get into the story, you've no other distractions, I love just reading a comic without any distractions, and that's why I like the book form because you can sit down for an hour or two and enjoy it.

D   How about you Darren?

DD   I like it, like, when you go to see a film or something; its like having your own little theatre. Its really brilliant, cause you never know what's going to happen on the next page. You spend hours of entertainment in one book; you can read it about five times and its still good.

D I'm the same with 2000AD: I've read them so many times they're inside my head. What about you, how do you normally read comics?

M Its mostly tea-time with something to eat. What you're saying there about storing them in your brain, I had an old set of 2000ADs and the stories were still great, but I've lost the connection. It'd be nice to get them back again, even though you still remember them, just to have them so you can look at them any time you like.

V I'm a fanatical reader; if I sit down and read one page I'm gone; I'll read all day, so, whenever I sit down and start reading comics - Roger had some; I can't remember the name of them now; I think they were a Batman series, and once I finished one, I'd have to pick up the next one. I think I read about three or four in one go - I don't like to pick one up and read one here and read one there; its all or nothing for me.

D I always think that reading comics is a very personal thing.

O It is you know, its a form of escape: you don't want to escape for a couple of seconds and then be distracted - you get into it - forget everything else for a while.

D I remember as a child I'd go off searching for stuff, because there was no Forbidden Planet or anything and I'd find these interesting things and I'd read them out in our back shed because I knew my mother would kill me for spending all my money on comics. I have very strong memories of the rain on the corrugated roof and the smell of the earth outside.

V I remember we used to get comics from - this is a childhood memory too - they weren't available in Ireland at the time and my grandparents were in Germany and they used to send over a selection of two or three different types and we were always very excited, waiting for the day to arrive.

D Finally, what do you hate most about comics?

M I suppose its the way they're going into the painted format: its very muddy and its not very clear - the clarity of story is vital I think.

D How about yourself Darren?

DD I'd like more people to really like comics themselves, rather than saying why are you buying comics again? and they haven't read any themselves.

D How about yourself?

O There'd be a couple of things: first would be the fact that writers especially and artists to a lesser extent tend to look on comics as: they don't have to do their best, writers turn out second-best work, just because its a comic, while if they were doing a book themselves, they'd put time and the effort and soul into it: I think there's too much second-best stuff out there, with nobody trying very hard. There's also the fact

that on the art side of it, there's the dividing up of the art between five people and you deal with editors and editors in chief. The American way of doing it basically: I hate that process; I think if you're going to do the artwork, you do the art by yourself, maybe having someone else to do the colour so that you can get on and do the black and white stuff yourself, but I hate the idea of somebody else inking my pencils or me inking somebody else's pencils. I think it takes away from the art and makes it much less unified: the Europeans have the best way of doing it - the guy writes it, letters it and draws it - everything, and the whole thing hangs together better because of it.

D   How about you?

V   I don't know, the only thing I really don't like is the violence part of it: I have two kids, and if and when they get into comics, I'd be very worried about the violence, because it just seems to be getting worse and worse and worse. Its the same as with television.

D   What would be best about comics then?

V   Well, they can sit there and read creative and good stuff.

O   The sign of a good comic is when you pick it up and read the first page and you forget about the artwork, and you're checking out the story and it gets you to the last page, and then you cop it: oh, I only meant the first couple of pages, and you've enjoyed the story - that's the sign of a good comic - you stop; it all becomes one; you just read it through. Its just a story to you, and you don't think of it in terms of a comic, or in terms of art and story, its just - it is a story; you read it as a story; you don't read it as a comic. The good ones work well like that.

DD   I think they have a great ability to - for this writer to put all these emotions and everything on the page, like Shakespeare writing his plays - now this century, its like a more modern version, that people can have themselves - its an art related to you - I like this, you know.

D   How about you?

M   A comic that makes you think is ... ... their ability to make you think and to question things is great.

D   That's grand; I'll stop it there.

ENDS

APPENDIX H

Interview 13-12-1996

D First of all, what's your name?

M Martin Smyth

D How old are you Martin?

M Twenty-four

D How long have you been reading comics?

M Since I was four

D What got you into them?

M My father

D Your father?

M Yeah. He used to just bring comics home and I'd read them. And just from there on.

D Are they important to you?

M Well, I'm here every Wednesday and Thursday when they drop in the deliveries in here. So I think that answers your question. Although its my hobby, its my hobby.

D Would you say that you're a fan?

M I'm not obsessive with them. I could take them or leave them, you know. I'm not what you'd call... You couldn't compare me to, say like, a Trekkie. But I do have comics that I really like. But I wouldn't be obsessive, no.

D Basically, you'd be saying you wouldn't be a fan-boy at all?

M No.

D Would you... there are comics that you would get regularly?

M Yeah, yeah. Most of the Vertigo titles; I like them. And a few of the X-titles, Star Wars, things like that. Just pretty normal, what everyone gets. Nothing out of the ordinary.

D   Was there any time... a lot of people that I've been talking to have said that there was a certain time when they got into them, when it was more than just reading them, they really got into them, there was a comic...

M   Yeah, I think it was when I was really really small, my oul' fella gave me this compendium of comics that you used to be able to get in the seventies, they were like telephone books. I got one of them, and it was like, wow, there was a load of different things, like the Avengers and Spiderman and Star Wars, just a load of different stories. It was always like, they never gave you a complete story, you got two issues of a storyline and the cut it, so it was like: what happens next? But you just don't have it, so you're searching, always looking out for that one you don't have.

D   When I was a kid, I got this thing, and there was no cover on it and it was all bashed up, and it had the Avengers and Daredevil and a couple of different things, it was very...

M   Very exciting, particularly when you're a kid, this is just brilliant, particularly if you've never... because I used to just read the Victor and the Warlord and it was just like: "ah yeah, war stories..." but then you got these Avengers and the Hulk and the stories were way out there. Its like, completely different things. It was like a kind of transition. I left all that stuff behind...

D   All the Victor and the Warlord?

M   I started reading all the more fantastic sort of comics.

D   How has your taste changed over the years?

M   Not much. (laughs) Well, I mean, there's two different levels: you've got the Vertigo level, where there's a lot of serious writing, and these guys are very serious intellects. There's thought that goes into the storylines, and you appreciate it at that level. Then there's the other level that's pure fuckin' trash like the X-Men, which is just pure excitement, you know, its good.

D   Do you collect, do you have a collection?

M   Yeah... a massive collection

D   Really?

M   Ah, its big enough, there's about four thousand, four or five thousand comics, I would say.

D   How long have you been collecting then?

M   I've only really been seriously collecting them... I used to get them in the seventies, they'd be there and me Ma would throw them in the bin, and I'd be, ah fuck it, they're gone in the bin. But since nineteen... just around about Watchmen and the Dark Knight Returns, the Killing Joke and all that, I started keeping them, looking after them and putting them into little bags.

D   So, do you poly-bag most of the stuff?

M   Well, a good fifty percent I'd say of the stuff is in bags.

D   Do you buy stuff hoping they'll get more expensive?

M   Nah. Initially, you probably do, when I started off, but the bottom's fallen out of that market. I never bought two issues of, like, the first appearance of Gambit or something; I just bought my issue. I was never into that. It was always really kind of bullshit.

D   You were saying around the time of Watchmen and all that (get interrupted) you started collecting seriously, was it because of them, or was it just around the same time?

M   No, how I started collecting then was I went to an exhibition because I'm into the art, so I went to an exhibition of comics artists which was on in the Douglas Hyde Gallery years ago. They had a load of comics out for people to sit down and read, and they'd all this Watchmen and stuff like Swamp Thing and the Dark Knight Returns, a few things. That just piqued my interest in that kind of comic, so I just started collecting from then on.

D   I'm actually reading Watchmen again at the moment... Which comics would you get regularly then?

M   X-Men, Hellraiser, most of the X-titles, Hellblaser, Stray Bullets, Sandman: The Dreaming, Star Wars, I get them every month. And then you get your mini-series and things like that... Batman, that's about basically it.

D   Is there a social side to comics for you? Would you talk about them?

M   Nah... Well, I go out with the lads, when I go out with Rob and Brian (owners of Sub City) they're all my friends, we'd bullshit... we wouldn't go out and talk about comics exclusively for the night. I mean, that's stupid. We'd just be messing, whatever, comparing so-and-so to so-and-so, you know, he's a bit like him. But no, there's no social aspect, well apart from coming in here and seeing all my friends. They're just my friends and I come here to see them, well I know Rob and Brian years; Luke and Richie and all the lads, all friends.

D   Would comics be an important part of you saying: "yeah, that's who I am", would they be mixed up in that kind of thing?

M   Not personally, but I suppose from an objective point of view, other people would go: "oh yeah, there's Martin, he's a huge comic collection". All my friends who come around know I'm into comics. There'd be comics lying around and they'd read them and say "that's brilliant, do you have any more of them Fantastic Four?" So I suppose I am Martin the comics guy.

D   So would you try to get them into them?

M   No, not at all. If they go "that's an interesting story" they'll sit and read it. If they don't like it, they don't like it...

D   It doesn't bother you?

M   Well, my girlfriend, I've lived with her for the last four years. She hates them, and she read... she reads The Preacher and things like that, purely because there's a good story, she wouldn't be bothered with anything else.

D   What about people who say comics are for kids?

M   They are exclusively for kids. But, you grow up with them, they're a part of you really, so I mean, I've been collecting since I was four, getting comics, reading comics since I was four... They're made exclusively for the kid market, but I mean, I've seen guys come in here fifty, sixty, and buying the Avengers, just because, again, they grew up with them, they started reading them, say Fantastic Four, when it came out in 1963 and they just never stopped collecting it. Its become an integral part of their life as well.

D   Well, for me with 2000AD, if I didn't get it on Friday, there was something wrong, it was like an itch that you couldn't scratch.

M   Well, I used to drive my parents demented on holidays: you had to get your 2000AD and that was that, they used to have to go, it had to be got, there was no other way about it. I used to drive them mad, driving around shops looking for 2000AD.

D   I remember I used to go off hunting for stuff, and sneak comics in because I knew my mother would go mad because I was spending all my money on it. What's funny is that I'd then just lose them, I didn't keep them. Then you realise later that these are really collectable things that you just threw out...

M   That wouldn't bother me, what'd bother me more would be to be missing part of a story or something, I wouldn't...

D   Who'd be your favourite artist?

M   I can appreciate different art at different levels. I really like the guy that draws Stray Bullets, David Lapham; he's a very simplistic style, its a very scratchy kind of brushwork. Its not particularly good or anything, or its not anatomically correct or anything, but its a nice style to it. Then I like really detailed things like John Totelbein and Steve Bissette who used to draw Swamp Thing; I really like that kind of stuff as well. I appreciate it on a whole different load of levels.

D   What about writers?

M   I wouldn't exclusively... I mean, the writing is secondary to me because I am interested basically, exclusively... if the story's good, its good. I suppose I like a few of the Vertigo writers: Garth Ennis, he's quite good, but I mean, its not a major factor for me. I wouldn't buy a comic because he wrote it, I wouldn't be too bothered.

D   Do you think they're art?

M   Yeah, I do, actually. There's some guys in there that will scare you, how correct the postures and the figures are. People say its very throwaway, but it takes skill to draw things like that. There's guys doing it twenty, thirty years, I'm sure to them its an art. It is an artform.

D   Somebody like Brian Bolland or Bill Sienkwvics...

M   Yeah, he was... he expanded the boundaries of it, he started doing things that people had never ever done before in the medium. Back in the eighties, his colour, on the covers of Elektra: Assassin, I don't know if you remember, he had these montages and things, and people were going "what is this?". And then, Dave McKean, its very rare that he would actually draw a cover anymore, or paint a cover. He uses photo-montage and he creates a lot of his covers by using computer programmes like Adobe Illustrator. The boundaries of it are just expanding.

D   I was reading how Dave McKean was saying that all the painting and heavy illustrative, textured work got in the way. You know his series Cages?

M   Yeah.

D   I was shocked, very disappointed when it came out because he was going for something else.

M   There's a guy who has an infinite amount of styles, you'd notice it more on the Sandman covers he's done: some of them are really exotic looking things, then some of them are just pen scratch-marks or just a colour montage.

D   I like the stuff but I couldn't believe that he was saying that stuff that I really liked, that it didn't work.

M   Its the sign of a good artist that he can be critical of his own work as well. I think its a healthy thing that he does criticise his own work, it only promotes him to do better stuff. Its very modest of him as well, because his covers are amazing.

D   Other media. Would you be a fan of other stuff?

M   Yeah, I... photography, film, literature, I'm interested in all of it. I collect videos, I read books, I have a passing interest in photography... I'm just totally into art.

D   Would you make your own comics?

M   I used to years ago but I just don't have the time now. That was what I wanted to be at one time. I was really into it, drawing for 2000AD or whatever, I've a really big portfolio of stuff but I just haven't got the time now, I'm just so busy at work. Maybe sometime. I'm hoping to still send off a few things but I just can't find the time at the moment.

D   I have a character I'd like to do something with... Would you say that comics are a way of you kind of getting back at the whole art thing, as an oppositional thing, against high culture, or would it be part of the same thing?

M   For me, it goes hand in hand in my lifestyle, because I paint, I draw, I illustrate and I also read comics. I don't think the two things conflict at all; they're two totally different things. You're either interested in it or you're not, its as simple as that. I don't think it conflicts at all, personally speaking anyway.

D   Okay, that's grand.

ENDS

APPENDIX I

Interview 29-6-1994

Lewis and Peter, 29th June 1994

Denis What age are you both?

Lewis I'm twelve.

Peter I'm fourteen.

D And how long have you been reading comics?

L Six months

P About six years, but not as much ages ago as for a year; I'm a lot more interested in them now.

L I've been reading them actually for a year but I only started collecting about six months ago.

D What got you into them?

L Friends

D Why? For you too?

P Yeah, going into town and hanging around Forbidden Planet

L Yeah

D That's why you like hanging around there?
What do you do when you go there - look at the new comics?

L Well, we usually buy the new comics - if we have the money that is, and if we don't its 'bye bye' no comic

D Is it important going into the comic book shops?

L I mean, I have a standing order in Forbidden Planet, so I could go in every three weeks if I wanted to; I could save up and buy whatever's in my locker.

D Do you like going in with your friends to buy?

Both Yeah.

i

P We don't really buy the same comics because if we get the same ones we can't read them off each other. He gets Batman and I read them off him.

L And he gets Pitt and I sometimes read them off him.

D What kind of comics do you read?

P I like Batman but I don't really collect it because he collects it. I get Pitt, Lobo, like a lot of Lobo, Punisher.

L Violent ones

P Yeah, violent ones mainly

D Why do you like violent ones?

P Action.

D What do you like most about comics? Is it the art, is it the violence or what?

P Art and violence.

L Well, there are certain circumstances where I'd prefer the plot to the violence, like Aliens Labyrinth; that's brilliant. That's really classic, I mean the plot in that ends up really well; there's a brilliant ending in it. Its really cool.

D Why are comics important to you? Why'd you get into them?

L We were doing the Christmas exams and I wasn't really into them then; I just read them off other people. I read the Dark Knight Returns and thought: " Jesus, this is brilliant! " Then I read The World Without Superman, which is a bit gay, however. I just got into them. I started going into town from then and I started buying them, and it just grew on me.

P I'd go into town with my parents and I'd go into Forbidden Planet and look around and buy a few Batman, for a year or so. Then all my friends, we started going into town a lot and just hanging around, and then going to Forbidden Planet and just staying there for ages, and just got mad into them.

D What is it that you like about the shop?

P Its got new stuff. Like there's another shop in the Grafton Flea Market called Zenith comics, and they only sell back issues, but in Forbidden Planet it sells all, well not all, but a large selection of new comics.

D Do you prefer new comics to back issues?

L Not necessarily

P   Because back issues don't always come in; there's always new comics every month or every week, and you can see what's new on the market and new number ones. A new number one would only be about one-seventy but an old number one would be about three pounds.

D   How much would you be willing to pay for a comic?

L   It depends on the comic. Well I paid five pounds for Pitt number one.

D   Would you pay fifty pounds for a comic?

Both   No way!

D   If you had it?

Both   No

P   The most I ever spent on a comic was five pounds and I wouldn't spend it again. He spends about five pounds on a lot of comics. I bought Batman 500 for five pounds.

L   I bought Pitt one, Maxx one, Supreme one, all for five pounds because I collect all the Image number ones from 92 to 93 - I've got eleven I think.

D   Do you collect characters or publishers?

L   Characters, and then Image.

P   Characters; I collect anything really; whatever's on the shelves if I like it.

D   What about people like Valiant and Malibu?

P   Never

L   Rubbish

P   I've never actually tried it so I don't know.

L   I saw, what's his name, the fella with the spot on his forehead?

P   Bloodshot

L   He's crap! I was standing in Forbidden Planet and they had it and I read it, and it must have been the worst thing I've ever read

D   Why?

L   Absolute rubbish

D   I know nothing about them

P   I've got one Malibu comic: a Tiger X, and in the back its got an ad for another comic called Ripper who goes around with a big sword chopping people's heads up

L   (laughing) Conan the Librarian?

P   I'd like to get that

D   Would you call yourselves comic book fans?

L   Yes (reluctantly)

D   Why do you say it like that?

L   Well, I know that I am a definite comic book fan but I don't know what to say, because I haven't been collecting them for long enough, I think.

D   Why do you think you'd have to be collecting them a long time?

L   From the collection I have: I have about ninety-odd comics and eight graphic novels, then lots of Overkill, like magazines.

D   Yeah. What do you think about graphic novels; do you like them?

P   Well, you have to save up a lot of time for them, about ten pounds, but they're generally worth it because you get about six comics for ten pounds, and usually six comics would be about twenty pounds nearly, or fifteen pounds, so they're generally good value, but they're not original, and so it doesn't give the feel for good comics

L   It doesn't matter really

D   Is that important?

L   Single comics.

P   When we get older, if we lose interest in comics, then we can sell them off and they'll be worth a lot more money but the graphic novels won't be.

L   They will gain value in time, but not as much as comics

D   Is it important to you that they become more valuable?

L   No. In certain cases, yeah; in certain cases I only collect comics for the value.

D   Why?

L   Because I want to be rich (laughing) - I want to live a fruitful life. Supreme number one is such a take-off of Superman but I don't care because its going to become valuable anyway. Its already five pounds, well seven pounds now. So's Pitt number one, but I bought it anyway cause its deadly.

P   I was going to buy Pitt #1 and I'm so pissed off that I didn't get it. I picked it up and I was going to the counter to buy it and then I thought ' nah ' and put it back   (both laugh)

D   I bought Batman #500

L   With the newsstand cover or what?

D   Yeah

L   Azrael is cool. I prefer the old Batman now, but what Azrael does is: every time he fails he improves his costume. He's improved it three times by now. Now he has a flame-thrower on it and 2000 rounds of anti... Batarang things with a chain from his wrist to his arm and he just shoots them and "Bang!"

P   I like the way they changed it, because Batman was doing really bad; they were barely selling any. But I like the way they changed it to the new chap, cause he's quite good, but I don't think they should keep it like that, they should change it back eventually

L   They are

P   But they're doing that now

D   Are they?

L   They're in the process of that now

D   What do you think of the way people see comics? Amongst your friends, would most of your friends be into comics?

Both   Yes

D   But what do you think when people say comics are stupid...

L   Comics are for children

D   What do you think about that?

L   Bollox!

D   Why would you say that?

P   Well, if you go into Forbidden Planet, most of the people there are generally older than us

L   Yeah

P   Only a few people are younger or our age

D   What do your parents think about you reading comics?

L   My mum thinks its better than...

P   Drug-dealing

L   Yeah, its like comics - they become like you have to know what happens next month. Well, you don't have to, but you generally want to.

P   It gains conversation; you can talk about them

D   I notice everyone who reads comics likes to talk about them

L   Can talk about them. Can talk about them and is willing to as well.

D   So, do you think that's a big part of the comics - being able to talk about them?

L   Yeah, well, not necessarily talking about them, but you kinda sit down and talk about them. We had a conversation today. I got Killian Plunkett, the fella who drew Aliens Labyrinth - he's a priest's nephew and my mother is a nurse for that priest, and he got Killian to send me the comics. First of all he sent me issue #1 of it. Then he sent me issue #1 again and the other three. So I'm going to swap one issue #1 with him for something I don't have, so, we just had a long conversation about that this morning , like: "Punisher War Journal #24, no" "Next" ...

D   Why do you want to draw comics?

P   Its something to do. Its not much fun though.

L   But when you get finished you're really proud of it

P   Yeah. On an average school day you're finished about half-three and all you can do is go home and call over to Lewis here cause he's the only person who really lives close to me. There's not much to do. We can just talk to each other, but then, when we do the comic, we can talk to each other and do it at the same time

L   Yeah

P   We can go out and play football or something like that, but you get sick of that, and there are new pages to do

D   Do both of you want to do comics for a living?

P   No

L   For a hobby

D   Do you think there's any chance of making a living out of it?

L   There is, but you have to be a bit freelance. Like just a tad. Like Bastard Bunny: have you seen that? Brilliant comic. It comes out every two months and Eithne - I know most of the people who work in Forbidden Planet because they know my family. They say Bastard Bunny comes out about every two months, and Eithne says that the guy who does it is really freelance and does it as a hobby and gets it published

D   But you wouldn't see it as a career?

Both No

D   What about the future - would you like to do something arty, or something more normal?

L   I either want to be a sociologist or a psychologist

P   Not something boring like an office, but get a general pay and then do some sort of art for a hobby and if I was doing any art, I'd like to do comics

L   Yes, that's a valid contribution (laughing) . Alan Grant and Frank Miller are probably some of the most famous writers from DC, well Frank Miller doesn't really work very much for DC, but in general, because Frank Miller wrote Sin City and he drew it as well, didn't he?

D   Yeah

L   Because he does mostly for Dark Horse now

D   Yeah, for Legend. Getting back to what other people think about comics: what about people who say comics are for kids?

L   Bollox! I said it earlier

P   Other people might think its a bit gay, as in: you can't really go to your friend's house and say " Hey, lets read some comics " Its a bit boring, but...

L   But then, say you go out and you buy some comics and you haven't read any, and you get into bed, you say: "Oh nice one; I'll read that"

D   So reading them is more by yourself

P   Yeah

L   Well, most of the time when we come back from town, we come back here or somewhere for half an hour and read one of them. We don't go out and buy one comic and leave town: you buy two or three. If you have the money that is.

D   How much of your spare money do you spend on comics?

P   Nearly all of it

L   Not all of it, but nearly all of it

P   Well you've got a lot more than me

L   Well I know, but most of it

D   So its the main thing you spend your money on?

Both   Yes!

L   Once a week, yeah

D   What else do you spend your money on?

L   Anything that catches my eye

D   Would you read much science fiction?

P   Not really books; I don't really read books.

D   You don't read books?

P   No action in them

L   I tend to read Terry Pratchett sometimes, and Greg Bear is a bit like "The astrological assonance of the a to b of outside world..." and so on. They're good books but they get boring after a while

D   What about the Batman films, and films about comic book characters?

L   Well, Superman has to be the crummiest low-budget film, superhero film ever made: its crap

P   But Batman: I love that movie. I've seen it about ten times and I still love it.

L   Yeah

P   I saw it about three times in the cinema. I love it so much

L   I like Batman, but I don't really like Batman Returns - good film, but its just too much of the same

D   What about the Superman tv programme?

L   That was good, but I mean, its like the old Incredible Hulk tv programme: he turns into Superman for about two minutes at the end of it Wow...

P   Yeah, all you want to do is watch Superman for nearly all of it, but he's Clark Kent for most of it

D   there's too much talking in it?

Both   Yeah

L   Not enough bashing

D   You normally read superhero or vigilante comics?

L   People outside the law but are the law

D   What about other types of comics?

P   What you're saying about superhero and vigilante: I kind of prefer vigilante to superhero because, Superman, he's invulnerable, he's kinda like the person you shoot bullets and they bounce off his chest. Like, Punisher, he gets shot and bleeds like a normal person. Superman I think is stupid - I don't like his comics.

L   In Shadow of the Bat #20, its brilliant, there's a guy called the Tallyman who's like a lunatic and he has to kill sixty-eight people for some fulfilment or something. And he comes along, he gets Batman: you know the way that Azbats, Azrael is Batman now, or is about to not be Batman anymore, shoots him straight through the shoulder and the picture looks so cool. He's climbing up the side of a building like this (gestures) and it comes out the other side and it says something like: "A cold fire of hot lead shears through the metal and in through my shoulder. Its so cold I don't even notice".

D   Do you think comics are art?

P   Yeah, they are art, because you can nearly stick a comic picture on your wall, but you'd be wrecking the comic, so its a bit stupid, but the covers are great art: whenever I'm drawing a picture I always do it of the cover probably

L   Or of the ads, you know, like the ads for Knightsend; they're all really cool

D   What do you say to people who say they're just for kids? What would you say to them to convince them that they're more than that?

P   Who makes the comics? Older people make the comics; they have come up with the ideas

L   Exactly, I mean, what makes you think they're for children? Is it the fact that you can buy crap like the Beano and Whizzer and Chips and the Bunty and stuff, and that's what they think all comics are: they recognise comics as stuff like the Beano and the Dandy

P   Like: "In my day we used to have the Beano and the Dandy; we'd none of this Punisher and Batman..."

L   Ah but I mean, if they read them: Aliens Labyrinth has such an adult theme, its brilliant - in the end the cyborg turns out to be having a homosexual affair; its brilliant; its so funny: "Oh there's something I forgot to tell you about your fiancee who's now dead, who was eaten by an alien" "What's that?" "I was having an affair with him; you obviously didn't know , she just goes "What?". Its so funny

D   So you just say that they're written like someone would write a book?

L   Yeah, like Frank Miller has written books

D   Has he?

L   He wrote... No, it was Roger Stern who wrote The Death of Superman, no it wasn't Frank Miller; I'm lying

D   Frank Miller wrote Robocop 3

P   I saw it ages ago - its a bit crap though; its only fifteens - no blood in it

D   Do either of you read 2000AD?

P   Yeah, I get it every week

L   ABC Warriors: I don't have any, but I've heard that the guns are like enormously large. Its like Prophet; he either uses only knives and swords he has this little dude who kinda jumps over his shoulders who has guns bigger than himself

P   Lobo has big guns and Slaine has this huge big axe and he chops everyone up

L   Cool

D   Have you ever read stuff like Love and Rockets, or do you ever read any of the black and white comics?

L   I don't read crap really

D   Why do you think they're crap?

L   I just think; I have this thing if its not colour its crap. Not necessarily - some of the black and white stuff like the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers is classic

P   But that's comedy. One of the things I like about comics is the art, and the art really attracts me to them, like Pitt, its a brilliant story, but the art is so brilliant that you really want to get it

D   Would you go more for art then?

P   Yeah, I love the good art

D   What about comedy then? You don't like it?

P   Oh I love the violent comedy like Lobo: he's really funny. There's one that Lewis has; he comes along and he kills Santa Claus and he kills all Santa Claus' little helpers. Its really funny. Or, he has to deliver loads of presents and he's going to kill loads of all the bad boys, and he's in the reindeer's place and he goes: " Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer

L   "Had an unsightly snod"

P   And then he says: "Rudolph will you lead my sleigh tonight?" , no he won't, so he shoots him

L   No he goes "Rudolph lead my sleigh tonight or I'll blow you away" and he goes "No no no, you're a very naughty boy" , "BOOM; Thud". You don't even see it! Then they come out and he loads rockets, Polaris missiles onto the sleigh and he just gets this huge big gorilla who's like Santa Claus' right-hand man to drop all these bombs all over the place and on all the bad children's houses. He just blows the shit out of the houses.

D   How do you think other people see comic book fans, and how do you see people who aren't comic book fans?

L   When they see a comic book fan they would picture like "Daw, I'm going down to get some comics" (puts on a silly voice), something like that. You know they reckon they'd be these geeky "Aw..." (giggles moronically)

P   Like we might slag off people like Trekkies. Are you a Trekkie?

D   No

P   We might slag off Trekkies, and other people might slag off people that like comics like we do

L   Its more fun taking the piss out of Trekkies than comic book fans

D   They go much further

L   Trekkie Conventions!!!

D   Would you be interested in dressing up as characters?

Both   No way!!

ENDS

APPENDIX J

Interview 14-12-1996

John Callanan 14th December, 1996

D   First of all, what's your name please?

J   John Callanan.

D   How old are you John?

J   I'm twenty.

D   And what do you do?

J   I'm in my final year of a philosophy degree in UCD.

D   How long have you been into comics?

J   I was into comics, I suppose I still am into them when I was around ten. I started off with the Beano and the Dandy, got into Warlord and BattleAction of course, which was an amalgamation of Battle and Action Force, and then I just came across 2000AD and kept that on until I was about fifteen or sixteen. I'm not really sure when I started getting into comics, I seem to always have been into them. Definitely seriously into them for a good five years.

D   Do you have any idea what got you into them? Was there any moment when you said "wow"?

J   I only seriously got into comics with 2000AD, like I said, and that was definitely because of the boys' dream: it mixed swords and sorcery with science-fiction, which is what everyone wants and it just appealed to me. There was guys with big boots with big swords basically.

D   Are comics important to you?

J   Yes, definitely. Before I say, in terms of what I'm doing now: a philosophy degree, a lot of thinking philosophically came about through reading comics, even though I didn't know it at the time. Especially with Nemesis the Warlock. That was really the most intellectual, it introduced me to a lot of history, a lot of science-fiction, a lot of philosophy, and I didn't know it at the time, until afterwards. I suppose that's the answer, I'm just diversifying on what I learned through comics at the moment.

D   Are you a fan?

J   No. Unfortunately, there's a comics world, there's aficionados, there's people who are in the know and there's people who aren't and I just wasn't willing or able to keep up with being in the know of the artists and the movements and the trends and

the storylines, and I just didn't want to and I had to stop. And if you stop keeping up to the minute, then you're alienated to an extent from the whole world. I was saying to Barbara (a mutual friend), I went into Forbidden Planet after about two years and I felt like an interloper.

D   I feel the same, in that I hadn't been in there for a long time and you just lose track of what's going on. Its very difficult, plus, something you might be interested in, its normally the last issue, or number 4 of 6, you've missed out on stuff. Did you collect?

J   No, not now. I did, I got some comics actually regularly: I got 2000AD always and I remember my excitement when Forbidden Planet opened because I'd got 2000AD about two years before that, and I knew of Forbidden Planet through the comic. And when they opened up a branch it was, you know, enlightenment was coming over to Ireland, we were part of a system. I think there is that kind of attitude, while England has such great systems, that we're being acknowledged as comic buyers within that system. I think that was part of why I started buying more regularly, apart from obvious accessibility, availability at least, of comics. Also, you were part of that system.

D   You were actually being recognised.

J   Um. I got Batman... there were two different types of Batman, in fact there were three, but I got both of those, I got another... it was more of a comedy type comic... Justice League of Europe, which was great fun, it was poking fun at itself. I bought that at the same time, repeating myself: I didn't know I was doing it , but   I was just escaping from the trends, but I didn't realise it at the time.

D   You would still keep your comics now?

J   Yes, I'd keep the comics out of... because they've bred so much of the way I am now. A lot of the way I'm going now has obviously been influenced by comics. I have to say I keep on to graphic novels a bit stronger, because the graphic novels I've had have been excellent. I'd say the Watchmen rates as one of my favourite books per se. But comics, I keep them on board because of a certain appreciation factor, like hanging onto your roots, I suppose.

D   Are there any comics that you get regularly?

J   No. I pick up 2000AD when I'm in shops and it looks terrible. I feel that its gone downhill; I don't think its any exaggeration whatsoever. It was going downhill when I stopped buying it. I stopped buying it out the of monetary and social aspect basically. I couldn't start it up again, its just too poor.

D   When you were a fan, buying comics, was there any social side to it?

J   Yes. I went into town every Saturday with three other guys... and I remember they stole comics and I didn't, and I was very... anti-theft. I used to have, before I knew it again, philosophical discussions on theft. It soon occurred to me that stealing them took away from the fun, most of the fun was collecting. This one guy had every of those paperback editions of collected stories of 2000AD. He stole nine volumes of Swamp Thing in one day. He went in and out, took out three volumes at a time. What's the point? It was the collecting: it was going through Fantasia (a second-hand comics shop, now closed) seeing all these issues that you had and finding the one that you didn't, that was the whole point. If I could have them all, that would be the problem. That would make no sense to me. I needed to be a collector, not a...

D   That's an interesting point, about stealing...

J   Oh, I think almost everyone... Its a matter of seriousness: I think people who steal see themselves as being serious collectors, because they need to have the volumes, they need to have the totality because they like it so much. Its a sort of an intellectual vanity that they need it. And I'd say that the people who I knew who stole comics, they've carried it on in their personalities, they need a totality of knowledge to be bona fide collectors, while I've always thought that my ignorance of a lot of areas was, sort of, my virtue. That's what made it fun. But I was very jealous of the guys who had all those books, in fact, I'm going to buy some off them, he still has the old ones he's stolen, so I'm going to get them back, some of the old Swamp Things were excellent.

D   Do you ever talk about comics?

J   All the time. Well, no, I talk to myself about comics because I've no one to talk to about comics. I could talk about them for hours and hours whenever I have company that would be interested in the conversation... I think all my conversations about comics have been about Alan Moore's Watchmen, because that's the richest.

D   Why do you want to talk about them?

J   Because they're just so damn rich, basically. They... its all you want: you can relate it to anything, the better the novel. Say, Return of the Dark Knight...

D   The Dark Knight Returns.

J   Yeah. That was deconstruction before I knew what deconstruction was, and I knew it was fantastic. It was sincere parody in a strange way. It was wonderful and it made it... even though it was undermining everything about the Batman myth it had a grudging, not a grudging, an ungrudging respect for it. It was something that would make you come back to it again and again, and relate it to... relate it to

comedy, say on tv, where people undermine traditions: say Father Ted and priests, or... these are things which at the same time that they're totally destroying them, there's a grudging respect of the tradition. They need the tradition and they wouldn't in a million years try to attack the tradition, separate from whatever it is that they're talking about. And this is something I've been finding out in deconstruction, there's no... the myths of Derrida and co. are that they're out to destroy everything, but they're not, they're just saying that its necessary to have a look at the traditions, to respect the traditions and to undermine them to respect the traditions. The more I go on, the more I find that comics have influenced me heavily.

D   What would you say to people who say that comics are for kids?

J   I would... I shift... the problem is that the rise of the graphic novel which came about in the early eighties, when they started trying to give some credibilty to the whole thing, that was such a reaction to 'comics for kids' thought that I felt that it was... that it had to be distinguished because that distinction was there so strongly. At the same time, while Watchmen was a fantastic novel, I disliked the whole anti-'comics are for kids' movement, and it sprang from, I much more enjoyed finding adult themes within transient movements in comics for kids. I thought that was much more interesting, and I think that's much more legitimate in a way.

D   The mixture between the two?

J   Yeah. Though if someone asked me "what do you think, are comics for kids?", I'd probably say yes. But we're all kids you know? I'm still a kid and I just appreciate them as a bigger kid, I suppose. A qualified yes.

D   Would you have a favourite artist?

J   Brian Bolland was God. He was the man, he was so clear, so sharp and fantastic. And then Sienkwvics came along and people started getting influenced by him, and then Simon Bisley was this whole different area. Simon Bisley had a quality because you couldn't compare him to anyone else. While Sienkwvics seemed to be from a certain school, or in anyway, he certainly influenced a school. I wonder actually, if they are a separated, the artists into separate schools of specific styles?

D   To an extent. It always blurs... it depends on the amount of time they have to put in heavy amounts of work into particular comics. It depends on the context of production. What about a writer or a character?

J   Well, Alan Moore, definitely. Grant Morrison as well, with Zenith, which was very clever. It went progressively downhill; I think the first book of Zenith was fantastic and then he disappeared up his own backside, basically, when it came to Zenith book three, which was great in its own sense. I suppose because, coming from the

school where you're used to Carlos Esquerra (an artist for 2000AD) who never changed, he was the same sort of artist all the way through and he was familiar, and Grant Morrison changed so much in the way he wrote. He was somebody that I'd probably appreciate more if I looked back at it now, but at the time, I disliked the amount of change.

D   I find his stuff very interesting...

J   I remember a story that I mentioned to Barbara, that I went into the Alchemist's Head about four years ago, when Zenith book two was out, no book three, because book three was sort of hinting back to book one and was better writing than book two, which just seemed to be meandering. I went in and bought this short graphic novel called St. Swithin's Day, and I brought it up to the guy, and in these shops, these guys are notoriously cynical and sarcastic, and I could see he was biting his tongue as I bought the book, but he took my money first, then handed it to me saying "pretentious nonsense". Which was right; it is. I think that was when I first became really critical of graphic novels, because the whole tradition was to accept whatever comes out every week. From the whole 2000AD thing. But that was so godawful bad, when presented with something like that, you can't not be critical. After that, I became an awful lot more critical of the things I read.

D   I had the same experience with a couple of graphic novels which came out within a couple of months of each other, where you get to the stage where you just feel you're getting ripped off. Are comics art?

J   Definitely. Brian Bolland's clarity was gorgeous. Alan Moore's writing is fantastic and I go back to it again and again, Bill Sienkwvics was shocking, all his drawing were a sort of violent movement, no one was static, wherever they went, they left traces, and they came along behind them. Even the colours and the lines. And Frank Miller was another demi-god. Of course, I'm speaking as a person who's really into it, but I always thought that they were art. I still do. Comics are... sometimes with a graphic novel, guys feel more free with their imaginations, because they can picture things as they see them in their heads, hopefully. With novels, you have to... I suppose its kinda like tv: you had this, in graphic novels you have this image thrown at you. You don't have to work so hard, you have a strong image of what the artists want. It always occurred to me at the time, when you say "God, that'd make a great idea for a film", that no one would have the money to make a film to pay for the imaginations of these artists. You think of it in monetary terms: you could do things that none would have the cash to do otherwise.

D   Would they important to how you put across your identity?

J   Well, personally, they've had a great effect on me, and led me into the history of philosophy which interests me. Socially, that's what I like to talk about. Being into comics is, in a lot of ways, and you can tell this by the people you see in comic

shops, is a sort of glorious alienation. They love being alienated. They are the deviants of society. They're just looking for a family and they love the idea that they don't have any special group; that turns into a group themselves. Which can get very distressing when you're in there, you're just turned off by the whole thing. I think I'm in a pretty healthy aspect, because I think the best attitude to comics is to, in a sense, to leave them behind, not to have any affinity with the world of comics, but not to deny them. So, it has affected me socially because its something you have to overcome in a sense.

D   Would you see comics, in relation to what you were saying about deviancy, do you think they can be used as part of an oppositional stance against the dominant way of looking at things?

J   I think definitely. I think definitely its fine art for teenagers, that's how it starts... it is an entrance into art, without making any overt pretensions as a teenager, which I was scared of doing. Why go into the national art gallery when you can go into Forbidden Planet and get stuff that caters to you? It leads on. Personally, I think there are levels of art, and when it comes down to it, I think comics hint towards better forms of art. Its too much of a compromise and a mix, and sometimes that shows through. It hints that its a beautiful denigration of art, if that's possible. Its sort of taking it all saying "this is where we took it from, and we can't do it as good as this, I'm not Picasso, I'm not Dostoevsky, but together we've something that, while on each of the media isn't as good, as the pure media, together they're a medium unto themselves and its a good thing".

D   Would you consider yourself a fan of other media?

J   I have to say, I don't know whether this is personal, I have very little taste, aesthetic taste: I go into galleries and ninety percent of what I see has no effect on me. Its just occurred to me, is that an effect of having cultural theories which were bred into me through comics. There's not much discernment in comics when you're a weekly buyer. You take what's given to you and you take it because you're a fan. No, that doesn't hold up, because literally... in literary terms I've become more discerning through comics and more appreciative, I think. But as far as art is concerned, I've become less open, and I think because there are strictures of the media in there. It kinda depresses me when I think that some of the things I thought as frightfully pretentious artistically, were just things I wasn't used to.

D   Surely that's a matter of discernment, of choosing...

J   Yeah, but in the whole thing, in the whole comic world, we used to argue over whether Simon Bisley or Bill Sienkwvics were artists, there wasn't the impetus to question the artform itself. It'd be like discussing Cantona vs. Giggs instead of questioning the valid aspects of popular sports. You know what I mean, you don't... you're in the world, especially in the comic world its very hard to question it and to

look at the totality. Because of the whole family aspect, the whole fan aspect. So, in a sense, you become discerning on a narrow-minded level.

D   Would you describe yourself as a fan of other media?

J   Yes, very much so. That's the good thing about comics: its popular culture and it gives you an appreciation of popular culture through how it caters to it. Watchmen is a good reference in that sense. Popular culture is completely satirised in that. It opens the door to popular culture rather than 'fine art'. That's a good thing and a bad thing in comics.

D   I reckon that's it.

J   Alright.

D   Thanks.

ENDS

APPENDIX K

Interview March 1995

Joe McDonagh March 1995

Denis   First of all Joe, how old are you?

Joe   Twenty-nine

D   And how long have you been reading comics?

J   Since I was twenty-two. It depends on what type of comics you mean.
Well, Judge Dredd up till about fourteen and then, the Dark Knight from about twenty-two, and then I started to read the other ones. There was a big gap there when I never read comics.

D   Why was there the big gap?

J   I think really, well I started off with the Beano and all these Warlord and all that kind of stuff, then, I don't know, Judge Dredd was slightly infantile, but then, when I saw Judge Dredd it was a bit better, so I saw another dimension to it: comics at that age were only very - violence and drawing and stuff like that. It was only when I was an adult, when I saw the Dark Knight Returns and saw what it could be, there was another dimension to it.

D   So obviously it was a very definite thing - how did you get the comics?

J   It was a friend who draws cartoons, and he said: look at this. I was very wary and I said, okay, I'll read this, and it was superb: it was brilliantly drawn, drawn in colour, whereas the Judge Dredd up till that would have been in black and white. Also, its a very sophisticated storyline - the Dark Knight returning coming back with these issues like mortality, and so, there was a lot in it. The trouble is that if you say to people that its comics, there's the attitude that " I had those, but its for little children's amusement", when they worked in some kind of amusement arcade. so when I came back, that was it, and it spurred me on. But, having found that Batman, there aren't a lot of titles in Batman that are particularly good. The Dark Knight was the best of the whole genre. That moved me to go to other ones, to look around and to go to Forbidden Planet - it wasn't in Dublin at that stage. When I was in London, then I read V For Vendetta, which this fella once again recommended to me, then I read the second one and the third one: I would wait every single week till it came out. It was just brilliant, it was absolutely superb. That one sort of initiated the whole thing.

D   Have you kept on buying stuff?

J   Not as frequently now. I think there's a whole area, its probably outside what you're doing - this Terry Pratchet book that I'm reading and so on - highly imaginative,

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fantastical things like The Hobbit that I got on tape. I have kept reading, but not as much because I think about two or three years ago the quality started going down very rapidly, and very tiny bits of the Dark Knight were turning up - in other words, fantastic drawing or the violence or the other things: the themes, but they weren't very well fleshed out, so the trouble is, you've got a good drawer but not a good writer. So that's the problem. So not so much, but I go in and - the cover would get me first of all. I could see from the cover if it was sophisticated, done in a sophisticated manner, then look in and pick out a few pages at random. I'm trying to read the Sandman at the moment; I've got a whole load of particular ones, but I hear the Sandman is quite good, and it deals with various sophisticated themes. The trouble with a some of the comics is that they're very horror orientated and I don't like that too much. I think that things that have a connection with reality, and illuminate reality, are good because the graphic novel is like no other novel. You see what the writer is thinking; it gives you ideas, but you can still imagine it in your head. So the answer would be yeah, not as much as before.

D   Are there any particular titles that you get on an ongoing basis?

J   I have to declare my all-time favourite, Bloom County would be just the business.

D   I've never read that

J   Its sad. Its another dimension you're missing. Doonesbury isn't as good; there's nothing as good as Bloom County. The thing about Bloom County is that the more and more I find out about American culture, and culture in general, I get references. For instance, there's one character called Oliver Wendal Jones; there's a famous US supreme court justice from the thirties called Oliver Wendal Holmes. So there's all these characters referred to and... There's a Bloom County Babylon, and only last Christmas the brother got a book called Rock and Roll Babylon, which is the famous one, so he was punning on that and then all the characters and everything referred to that, so he wasn't just political or overtly political, as Doonesbury, but still its absolutely brilliant. He stopped that in about '88-'89, no, 1991.

D   What's his name? Its a very unusual one isn't it?

J   Berke Breathed. He's started another one now with some of the characters called Outlands. So, to answer you question, that's the one that I would buy as much as possible. Now, the fella who draws the Simpsons...

D   Matt Groenig

J   They're very staccato. The one with the kid and the lion...

D   Calvin and Hobbes

J   Yeah, that's very staccato and its too limited: its only about the kid and what he does, and there's no commentary, so regularly, no, not anymore because they've just dried up. The good writers aren't writing as much and the good drawers aren't going

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with them, so I go in from time to time, but I figure the same themes are emerging that sell lots of them to adolescents, lots of vampiresses and musclemen and stuff like that. You can look at most of the covers and say: 'no, forget about that' . The same things come up again and again; but they're writing for a market, so that's the bottom line; it does so well - so no - I go into Forbidden Planet every two or three months or so to see what's on offer. There's one around on George's Street as well...

D   Sub City

J   Something like that. That'll probably go out of business soon, unfortunately, because its the wrong place and everybody goes to Forbidden Planet. So no, well yeah actually, there is a section I'm trying to find out more about: this book Raw in which you get a very adventurous " adult " type of themes. That's promising, but that's... What I'm saying basically is: when you're favourite band has produced five albums and you can't get any more, and you'd like to have one every single day and you just can't!

D   Would you consider yourself a fan?

J   I would yeah. A fan is somebody who is predisposed to something and likes the whole medium a lot, like if you like Tom Waits, then you're a fan, so yeah, definitely yeah.

D   Would you see a social element to comics; or would you see yourself aligning yourself with other people who read comics?

J   No. Because its not something you do socially. You can discuss it, but I find that the discussions are very limited, because you get something so personal out of them. I would categorise people who like it or don't. There's an acid-test for me to give them a copy of Bloom County, and if they don't like it at all, then it says something about them; its like a personality measure: if they don't like it, there's something wrong with them. More often than not the people I give it to do like it. Its something unusual. So, its a test: read that - are you psychotic or not? If you don't like it you are psychotic. I would say there is a group that do appreciate these comics and discuss it. Its only very limited, but you would gravitate towards yourselves, towards each other. You find that if someone de facto says 'comics, oh, they're ridiculous' you find out that they're small- minded and they don't read very much at all, so it says something about them.

D   Are they important to you?

J   Yeah they are, because, say when I'm a bit pissed off about things, I bring in Bloom County and just sit there reading it, because it gives me such a laugh. The ones like the Dark Knight Returns, no, I wouldn't read them as much. I'd go back to them from time to time, like V for Vendetta, but the comics - most people would understand cartoons as comics, I'd go back to them. They are very important. I think they are important yeah.

D   And what is it? Is it just that relief from pressure that makes them important?

J   Its sort of an askance view on life. The realisation that there are actually other people in the world who appreciate that life should not be viewed in a particular unitary way.
You know, just a very skewed glance at things. Its important - a good laugh - something like this: reading Pratchett on the bus in the morning, a good laugh. You have to laugh; psychiatrists say that.

D   Is price important to you?

J   Since lots of them are over eleven quid, yeah. But no, if I want it enough, I'll pay for it.

D   What about the format - for example monthly comics or graphic novels?

J   Its a bit irritating when you get it month by month and you have to wait for the next one to come out, so I prefer the graphic novel because you get more of a whole from it and you can read it again and again. So I think buying it monthly is a bit irritating, so I prefer it all in   one go and the book is nice as well. Also, with the graphic novel you get a good introduction, like the V for Vendetta seemingly had bits more in it, like artwork and stuff.

D   Would you be a collector, would you collect particular titles or have a collection in a particular place?

J   Do you mean a collection that would aspire in value? In cellophane bags and that sort of thing?

D   Well possibly, but would you do that to any extent?

J   Yeah, definitely would. There's a whole shelf at home with all the novels and whatever arranged there in a particular order, so like that . I'd never be the type who'd buy it and never look at it again. That would be ridiculous, the collector who never reads the books.

D   Do you think that the content has been affected by the market, by the fans who read them?

J   Most of the people who read these things are quite adolescent, so it has to strike them immediately; it has to be very graphic, so definitely, yes it is. What I wonder though is: is it a phase that people just grow out of. I think they've become slicker; there's more colour; they're slightly better drawn, but I think in general, they're very badly drawn. People don't take their time and there just don't seem to be good drawers, but its inevitable, just like anything, its marketing, its a business.

APPENDIX L

Interview 26-8-1994

Denis   First of all Eoin, how old are you?

Eoin   26

D   How long have you been reading comics, have you been into comics?

E   I've been into comics for as long as I can remember. I think I drew my first comic when I was about eight - I was after seeing the Incredible Hulk on tv, so I just put something together, I think I was in second class -m that was the first comic I actually drew, but I've been into them as long as I can remember, you know

D   And was there any specific time that you changed from just reading comics into something more?

E   I don't really know what you mean

D   Most people would just read comics when they're younger

E   Yeah

D   Was that the time that you felt there was something more?

E   Well I was always just mad about them - for me there was no real difference between reading them and wanting to do them, you know. The first thing I read , the first comic that really grabbed me was The Vulcan, a comic from around twenty years ago with a thing in it called The Steel Claw

D   Ah yeah

E   I just loved that and it never occurred to me that I wanted to do anything else. It was just the fascination with it.

D   Would you consider yourself a fan?

E   No, I don't think I am, I mean, I used to think I was, but having gone to conventions and stuff, I think I've seen what a real fan is, you know

D   And what's that?

E   Well, they're kind of unfairly described as like anorak, guys in anoraks, who are saying to each other : " Have you got Aliens 52 reprint ? " and all this - that doesn't really interest me - there are relatively few comics that I really do love, and I think, the older I get the fewer there are that I like

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D Why is it that you can say that you love comics, and yet there are very few that you really love? Everybody says that

E Well, I've got a massive collection of 2000AD's; I kind of grew up on the golden age of 2000AD, you know fifteen years ago, Kennedy, Gibson, McMahon and Bolland, you know; I loved all of those and Steve Dillon too. But I honestly think the quality, well, specifically the quality of 2000AD, has plummeted in the last five years. I think everybody's aware of it; maybe for that reason, as I get more critical, I don't look on it with the same dewy-eyed wonder as I used to, so, the more critical I get of my own work, the more difficult it is to find something I think is really good. Sure there are still a few, but the majority of comics don't really interest me.

D Which ones would interest you ?

E The ones I like the most are Kennedy still, Howard Chaykin - he's an American, Bill Sienkiewvics, Kent Williams - Kent Williams is more of a fine artist than a comics artist

D Sienkiewics is as well

E He used to draw in a strictly Marvel style, he used to do Moonknight about fifteen years ago, and he just developed his own style by first off all copying Bob Peake, a very famous American illustrator and he's just created something new

D I remember reading one time about Sienkiewvics doing covers for the Titan Judge Dredd reprint books

E That's right, yeah

D And they'd come to the printers with instructions on where to put the batteries

E Yeah, spark-plugs and doilies and everything - well a lot of people have ripped that off, but spark-plugs and doilies in their own books, I think its really good, he's just a great artist and he makes good use of whatever he does. There are only about three or four of them now that I really worship

D Are comics important to you?

E Oh Jesus, yeah, well its how I make my living at the moment. Yeah, they're really important to me

D Why?

E Why do you like what you like? You can't really explain

D But are there any specific things, what are the pleasures you get from them?

E   Well, the pleasures I get from them is simply drawing; drawing's what its all about, drawing people. I think its a huge challenge to be able to draw a good piece of comic art, of comics page - there's a lot more to it than I used to think - I used to think it was just muscles and flowing hair and beserk expressions and all that, but having worked with Will, there's just so much

D   That's Will Eisner?

E   Yeah. You've got to design environments; you've got to make them believable; you've got to have costumes right, pacing timing, you know, there's just so much in it, its unbelievable: its like being a film director; that's the way I look at it now

D   Is there any social element to comics for you?

E   There is yeah, a very small backslapping one. I won't say its a well known fact, but its reputed that the best way to get into British comics is to go out for a pint with the editor, get pissed with him, so there certainly is a small kind of a clique, certainly in England, I'm not too familiar with the American market - its a lot bigger - but I think the Americans honestly have a better grip on it than anybody else, apart from a few europeans. Its a small scene, and its very much to do with who you know and if you've got an artist friend who can recommend you, you're flying. From what I've seen of it, I can take it or leave it, the whole scene, there's a lot of bullshit in every business. Most of my friends aren't comics artists and I'd like to keep it that way.

D   You said that you wouldn't go to any more conventions

E   I would alright. I'd go simply for the opportunity to meet publishers and editors, but not to just go for the sake of it, to be a comics head and go along. I've never bothered collecting autographs or anything or I don't go searching for back issues of this or that

D   Would you be a collector at all?

E   Not really, not anymore. There are a few things that I still buy, but I'd often go down to Forbidden Planet for an hour and come away with nothing, having had the intention of coming away with something

D   What stuff would you collect?

E   Well its artists now that I collect, its not a particular theme like Aliens or Judge Dredd or anything; its the artist's work and the few artists I mentioned, anything new by them that I haven't seen I'd buy

D   The common perception of comics is that they're kids' stuff; how would you feel about that?

E   Well, the reality is that its not kids' stuff anymore, because the market has changed, the target audience has changed massively in the last ten years. I'm not sure of the

statistics, but in England now the main market, the most lucrative market is I think 18 - 30 or something like that. And I mean, these books are more expensive, they've more challenging storylines, they deal with more human issues and political issues, so, I think, Marvel and all that: the classic Marvel superhero stuff still sells to kids, that's well catered for by Marvel, but, its absolutely not kids' stuff anymore

D   Do you think the market actually caters to you?

E   To me? Well, I don't know, I'm a creator not a fan, so no, not really

D   Do you think a lot of people see comics as a few genres rather than as a medium?

E   I don't know because I'm not really a fan really, but I don't think that people really see it in terms of genres or anything, they just buy what they like. Its as simple as that.

D   So the aspect of buying isn't really important to you compared to being a creator?

E   Ah yeah, I spend more money on cigarettes than I do on comics

D   A lot of the people I've talked to even if they're creating will go out and search for stuff to buy

E   A lot of the stuff that I look for I sometimes can't find. Its just not mainstream. Forbidden Planet in Dublin isn't bad but it tends to cater for the mainstream. There're a lot of things by Chaykin that I want to find that I can't find in Forbidden Planet

D   I was in America last summer and I went into a fair few comic shops and it was entirely superheroes, just racks of DC and Marvel. I never saw Love and Rockets while I was over there

E   Well, fair due to the Americans, they're more or less responsible, I mean you could get into a big debate about this, but it seems to me that they're responsible for making comics more adult-oriented. Although, in fairness to the europeans, they were doing it before the Americans, but the Americans seem to have brought it to the world market. The Americans started off with Epic Illustrated - it was a bi-monthly, about twelve years ago, and that was the first comic for adults, and a lot of it was just an excuse to show women with nothing on, instead of with clothes. But, in fairness to Epic, it seems to me that they started the ball rolling.

D   Its the same with the Catwoman comic; its just outrageous

E   Well Heavy Metal still caters for that. Heavy Metal still is very much for that market.

D   Thanks very much Eoin

APPENDIX M

Interview 10-8-1994

Stephen Walsh and Paul Duane, 10th Aug., 1994

Denis   How old are you?

Stephen   Twenty-eight

Paul   So am I

D   Stephen, what do you do?

S   At the moment I'm working at a couple of film scripts, one of which is with Paul, the other is with John O'Donoghue, and I'm working on another comic book with Kelly Strom and some short comics pieces with Brian O'Toole.

D   Paul?

P   I'm just doing what I usually do, which is trying to finish one film and start another one, and I'm not doing any comics - reading the odd one.

D   How long have you been reading comics?

S   Well, actually, some of the best comics I ever saw I came across before I could read, and I think if I had been able to read them, the impression may have been muted, I think there   was always that thing, especially with American comics, the way they were distributed over here, because they were long stories, you never seemed to see all of any strand of continuity. So, you'd see an issue here and there. It was almost like, not being able to read, because, your mind did the work, they were a lot better, and when years later, you came across a big collection, and he insisted on sending you home with them, you can't leave without it . You'd go home with about forty comics, and read them in bed that night - an   awful comedown in your life

D   Why because you saw all the bits

S   You saw the resolution. This obsession they have with continuty in American comics.I like the idea, but I don't like the... ... I like the fact that somebody can pop up from forty years ago and say: ' it was really me all the time', but I don't like it being explained why he did it. So, even English comics, I would always see sort of a random issue when I was in a cousins house or in somebody else's house, and they always seemed a lot richer, the stories, you know. The Victor, they had a story that, you know, I'm sure if I saw it today I'd be very embarassed. It was a story about a dispatch- rider in the first world war, he had this snazzy, vaguely futuristic bike in the first world war and his thing was: he was the only person who knew about these giant armadillos who lived in between the British and the German trenches, and his worry was that the war would somehow affect these armadillos,

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or they would be seen and they would be destroyed or they would be exploited. So, in between all his missions, he would sort of go and take care of these giant armadillos. Although, I seem to remember that at once stage, they seem to have developed the ability to shrink to normal size if they were discovered. I don't remember how it ended, but it was one of the great experiences of my life.

D   About what age would you have been when you started reading or writing comics?

S   Reading, that would probably - the first time I got the same comic two weeks in a row would have been the Beano or something like that. When I was about four, three.

D   Very young so

S   Yeah that would have been 1969 or something.

D   How about yourself Paul?

P   Well, I remember vaguely reading some Beano and Sparkle and stuff like that when I was a   kid, but the major sort of epiphany or whatever was when I was in my second year in school. I would have been about five and somebody gave me a dog-eared British republication of some Marvel comics, and it had the origin of the Incredible Hulk, with Bruce Banner driving across some radioactive wasteland while a bomb was going off and turning into the Incredible Hulk. I only remembered, actually, about a year ago, reading that. I had no recollection of my first experience with comics. That kind of struck me as kind of a revelation. I'd never seen anything like it, and of course, as Stephen was saying, it   was impossible to get a follow-up. I don't think I was able to get another comic - another superhero comic for probably weeks or months after that. I remember looking for them really really hard, whereas I'd never been aware of them before, and they were a huge thing. It was like when I was   watching tv: when Star Trek or The Man from Uncle or The Avengers was on. It was like finding that except better in some weird way. Then, all the usual stuff, like colour Marvel comics and Eerie and Creepy and things like that. They   always turned up like messages in bottles from some sort of weird civilisation. The Warren stuff had references to previous issues and competitions, and they always had weird dates: they were always two or three years out of date. I remember letters telling great stories, and you'd read them as if you were a scholar looking at hieroglyphics, trying to discover, to find more out from the weird kind of cryptic references to stories you never read.

D   I remember reading a strange A5 book of Batman stories, and it was really weird and I didn't understand it - it was very dark. What about places like Forbidden Planet, where nowadays you can get whatever you want?

S   In a way, a lot of the time my heart just plummets. When you see something you really want, your hand gets it before your brain does. If I was to see an old issue, it'd be in my hands before my brain recognised it. In Forbidden Planet, my hand rarely flies up. I'm not trying to make some carpet put-down of comics now, but, it

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makes me sad because I wish I could out, now that I have a little bit more money, now there are shops like Forbidden Planet, part of me wishes that there was this strand that I could plug back into, and let it wash over me.

D   How about you Paul?

P   I really vividly remember the early days when I started getting interested in comics, when there was only The Alchemist's Head. It was my second big phase of getting interested in comics...

D   Which would have been when?

P   When I was getting ready for my leaving cert I discovered there was a comic called Warrior, which was British published thing, which Alan Moore used to have some sort of very general role in. He wrote comics for it; he kinda seemed to edit it as well; he wrote articles about comics; he wrote articles about music; he seemed to be able to run the entire thing himself, and he drew my attention. Reading that, and picking up the things like Marvelman which he wrote and thinking 'my God, this is quite extraordinary'. No, actually, even before Warrior, it was the thing before that that Alan Moore edited and it was republishing Marvel comics in Britain, but with the occasional British hero

S   Yeah, Daredevil

P   Yeah, all that. Anyway, he started to do comics reviews of little fan comics by people like Eddie Campbell, and I remember reading that and being caught up by his enthusiasm, and I actually corresponded with Eddie Campbell for a while because I really... I sent him offers for some of his comics, but he wasn't - there were maybe, there were a few thousand comics fans in Britain at that stage, or people reading this kind of comic, so at that point I started to write to him and got a few letters and encouragement because I wanted to draw comics at that time,encouraging me to go to art college. So Eddie Campbell changed my life! Thank you Eddie. After that, I was discovering things like boxes and boxes of comics in the Alchemist's Head which you had to sift through to get the really good stuff.
Maybe its kind of like a snobbery thing that now that you can go into Forbidden Planet and its all alphabetical and you can go straight to the thing that you want, but I love that sort of weird serendipityof: there'll be boxes full of comics, and discovering something like Love and Rockets or discovering something like, I don't know, bizarre weird stuff underneath a pile of trash.

S   The first time in years that happened was yesterday: I found a Steve Ditko book, a self-published one, in Forbidden Planet for two quid, marked down from eight quid.

P   Just goes to show the... an example of the kind of stuff that people in Forbidden Planet are buying, because, rather than going for the real bizarre stuff like Steve Ditko and Jack Kirby, they're all going for... whatever they're going for - X-Men and Beavis and Butthead comics.

S   I think that basically, you'll find, especially with people who read comics, they all have similar memories, but when they're all so relentlessly reminded, you end up with 500 comics in Forbidden Planet that are of absolutely no interest, to me at least.

D   Could you explain that please?

S   I don't know. I know from meeting people, a few comics people, we could get talking about the first Incredible Hulk story, or the first time he turned into the Incredible Hulk when the geiger counter started going ' tick tick tick tick' and his shirt burst, and everybody's going ' oh yeah! When I got into comics, that's exactly what I wanted to do '. Then they turn around and show you Spawn or something and you go... and you walk away sadly, you know.

D   I was the same - it was a very private thing...

P   It wasn't respectable...

S   Its semi-respectable now.

P   It was almost like pornography in those days; you'd find it - in the back shelf of respectable newsagents, you'd find a copy of Eerie or Creepy or some American comic - it just really looked: it was almost hidden.

S   I remember older relations of mine, a couple of uncles who were only about five or six years older than me, and when I was really small, they would be coming home with an issue of Creepy. Well, not even as extravagant as that: they'd come home with an American colour comic and it would be taken off them because it was lurid.

P   But that's the kind of thing that makes you completely addicted to it. I remember reading about Bring Me The Head of Alfredo Garcia, and because you couldn't see it, because there was no possibilty of ever seeing the film, you just colour in all the blank spaces with the most incredible characters of your own, and the same thing with comics. You couldn't get them; maybe they're too accessible now.

D   Its interesting what you say about the gaps being exciting.

S   Although, obviously one wants a great particular strand of the comics.

D   Do you buy many comics?

S   Not really, no. The only comics I'd buy - I'm not making a case that only old is good, but - usually old things. Second-hand things. I find the cacaphonic approach to comics... ... part of me will always love those old numbskull superheroes. There was a thing called Negativeman a few years ago which was an absolutely loving parody, and he actually almost got as far as leaving the gaps. That was good for a while and that lasted for a while. Eightball is like that as well. You can tell that's

from exactly the same - the characters in Eightball are the characters who end up pointing at the monsters in the sky in a Jack Kirby comic. Standing in the street like that (gesticulating), but they never got to tell their story. Until now. And it had to be somebody very particular who was going to tell it.

P   That's because he's bumping into the fella pointing up and going: " Hey! Watch where you're going you sap! " as he passes by.

S   Its very rarely, and only in these sideways looks at things that you can cut to the quick.

D   How about you?

P   The last four comics I used to buy were Yummy Fur, Eightball, Love and Rockets and Hate. I've given up on all of them because of the financial: partly because paying three quid an issue never seemed to be worth it. After a while, you picked up an issue, buy it and apart from the occasional moments of brilliance, I wasn't getting the same kick out of it. Particularly - I used to be absolutely obsessed with Love and Rockets, and used to beat the door down to get into Forbidden Planet to get an issue, but, what made them great in the first place, all of those guys, was that they were ignoring the world outside their own little obsessions. But, they seem to get more and more self-indulgent until the point when it just wasn't communicating anything anymore. It got to the point where I had to go back and read the previous two issues in order to get what was going on in the current issue, that kind of thing. I just said: " Fuck it. Its a waste of my time and my money to do this. "

D   I suppose that's the same as the superhero comics as well, because there's a whole history...

P   Or even just the assumptions you have to share in.

D   What do comics mean to you? Would you consider yourselves fans?

S   Would I consider myself a fan? Its strange, but I would consider myself a fan of the things that I love. By the same reflex, if there's something I can't stand, its something I don't like. I'm a fan of the things I am a fan of. I adore things that are adorable. Then again, how can we agree on things that are adorable? I can say it back in French if you like laughs) You can't see eyebrow movements on the tape though.

D   How about you Paul?

P   I would be a comics fan, but that doesn't mean you have to buy comics.

S   Yeah, that's the thing, memory. The problem I think an awful lot of comics people have is that they still have all the comics that they read when they were kids, and they refer to them, trying to manufacture that sense - if you're stuck to them, woken up at five o'clock in the morning by a memory, you know, Doctor Strange or something, its going through a completely different set of nerves...

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P   Or Spikes Harvey Rotten... ...There are certain things - I can't remember the last time I picked up an old issue of 2000AD and reread it , its probably about seven or eight years ago, but it doesn't matter - its all there. If they cut me open and printed me out as a computer printout it'd all be there.

D   Its true. I'm the same myself.

S   Well, its the perfect arrangement to have them in a house somewhere else and go and visit them once a year.

D   Is the form of the comic important to you?

S   Partly I like the feel of the slippy paper of the covers, but, the thing of finding things - I think there are two strands of people who buy comics: the people who find comics and the people who collect comics. I remember when the comics culture got... ... just before Forbidden Planet opened, when The Alchemist's Head was doing so well, before it fell apart, people were setting up different mail order businesses and stalls in various markets. There was a guy called Leslie Aust, do you remember him? He had a stall somewhere and I used to go in there and find all sorts of comics and he was a ruthless character in a vaguely nice way. He could plug into what you wanted and just as you got your money out to pay for what you'd already found, this thing would be raised from behind the counter just like that (slowly and tantalisingly) in his hand and as soon as I - I could feel that he knew what bells to ring in my head, I never went back to the stall again. It was never really conscious, I just sort of went ' oh my God ', this is the magic I remember.

P   He's like some thing from another planet.

S   That's exactly what the feeling was; it was like: " Earthboy, do you want this earthboy? " Not that he glowed or anything.

P   How do we know?

D   Is the form important to you Paul?

P   Not at all. I don't have very many graphic novels; I find them maybe a bit pretentious, but it doesn't make any difference what shape they come in.

D   What about price?

P   Oh, price is very important. Price is the reason I don't buy most comics. I'm not willing to take chances on comics. Most of the records and books that I buy are all cheap or second-hand, while good comics - the whole thing ain't cheap. Taking a flier on something that's really cheap isn't a waste of money if its a load of crap. Its disappeared; there aren't any; there's no such thing as a cheap comic anymore.They're all four quid or so

S   I remember the last time I actively collected a comic, a Marvel comic, for six months in a row its cover price was twelve pence and a penny tax. You could get six of them for a pound

P   Jesus!

S   The thing on my mind is: " Hell, they're the same comics, they're not even as good anymore, slightly shinier on the cover, slightly whiter paper, which I think shows up the imperfections in the artwork and everything else, and its two-seventy-five!" You really have to do an awful lot of thinking before you go near that.

P   There are a few good things that I have on my shelf that I would never part with, like the Eddie Campbell book and the early Love and Rockets and all my Eightballs and stuff like that, but other than that, I've a strange feeling that its all gone - I'll never be excited by a comic ever again. All the excitement has disappeared.

D   Do you think there is a social element to comics?

S   Like any other form of trainspotting its completely full up of viciousness and backbiting. I've been to a couple of conventions and I talked to a couple of people, and literally, as nice as they are, they stand there telling you what idiots the people who've just left the company are because they ...   I was semi-volunteered onto a panel at a convention last October, a comics panel with Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, blah blah blah. The people on the panel just ended up talking about Crazy comic from 1976 or so, or the Victor or whatever, and occasionally these hands would go up in this audience that was more and more disinterested and would ask: " Do you think Spawn should team up with Batman, or is that selling out?" Silence. Then somebody (on the panel) would whisper: "Action comics, do you remember Hookjaw?" we'd just be off again.

P   Or that guy who used to drive a truck - Hell's Highway. I remember reading it once and seeing the truck driving over a brige and seeing this guy's head getting mashed and thinking " Oh God comics have gone very very strange all of a sudden. " It was great.

S   That was probably two weeks before Action got banned.

P   When Action got banned, that was an age for me. It seemed to go on for years and then it came back and it was castrated. It was a really sad low point of my life.Or Flesh - that was a much better idea than Jurassic Park. Why would they bother resuscitating dinosaurs for a theme-park when they could use them for meat

D   They went back to the past

P   That was one of the best ideas ever. They were comics you could read.

S   That's what Charles Barnes does he makes these straight to video films. He says he wants to be M arvel Comics 1963, so he makes these straight to video cheapo films

that are done, at their done with a fair old degree of love and affection and wit and silliness. You can tell all the time that he's big into the memory of comics. He's got a film called Doctor Mordred...

P   Like Doctor Strange

S   Yeah, he even has the same costume as Doctor Strange, and he goes to a museum and all these come to life and start to fight with him.

P   But you can't do Steve Ditko art in a film

S   All those skylights he used to have

P   Aw God yeah! I used to love those roundy things that came around his hands when he was doing a spell

D   What would you say to people who say comics are just for kids?

S   BBBBBBBB!

P   Ya Boo Sucks!

S   I don't know. I suppose they are (laughs). Somebody said to me at the convention in Dun Laoghaire: 'comics are for the illiterate' - at their best (laughs). Whatever about the jokey component of that remark - I was being ironic and I wasn't being ironic - I didn't connect with the guy I was speaking to. He went away and went over to his friends and pointed at me from a distance.

P   The Classics Illustrated approach to comics that's kind of killing them anyway. The whole thing of ' hey! Clive Barker writing a comic! ' What was the comic you picked up in Forbidden Planet yesterday by Miguel Ferrer or something? Its like: 'Comics need some credibility; get some people other than comics writers in to do them'

S   I saw a compilation of Star Trek comics down in the library the other day, written by George Dukai, and basically his story was that everybody discovering the worth of Mr Sulu, and how did we overlook him for so many years... (he is the actor who plays Mr Sulu in the series). But the thing is I could show it to you but it wouldn't be anything like as much fun, its just, my God...

D   How do you think writing for comics differs from other types of writing?

S   Film writing and comics are almost exactly the same. The discipline of writing page panel after panel. The pacing is more or less the same as writing for the camera. Its not somebody drawing all the pictures and writing in the words afterwards. I would more or less decide the pacing of a page, how many panels were there, what point the story ended on that page...

(ENDS)

APPENDIX N

Interview 16-8-1994

David Byers, 16th Aug. 1994

Denis   I'm trying to see what people who read comics or would see themseles as fans think of comics and things related to them.
First of all David, how old are you?

David   Twenty-five

D   What do you work at?

DD   I'm a solicitor.

D   How long have you been reading comics?

DD   Let me see. I suppose for the last eight years I've been reading comics. I started off reading comics as a child, but gave it up during my adolescence. Then, in 1986 was when I started again.

D   Was there any particular reason?

DD   Yeah. I think around then I had a friend who worked down in the Virgin Megastore, and he was in the buying department and was getting in all these comics and giving me copies of comics he was reading. I hadn't been reading comics for years and I just started reading them again.

D   Would you consider yourself a comics fan?

DD   Well, yes. I buy regular comics, I do. There are certain titles that I get every time they come out. That said, I don't buy comics indiscriminately. There are about four or five titles that I buy, so I suppose so yeah. I still like them; they're still there in mind.

D   Is the social element of buying comics important to you? Would you talk to other people about them, or would you seek out other people who read comics?

DD   I wouldn't necessarily seek them out. The buying of comics is quite social, in that, in Dublin now - there were a few years ago a number of shops, whereas now its basically Forbidden Planet. You quickly get to know everyone in Forbidden Planet; you know everyone who's there. You do tend to go in and chat about what's new and what's on. Forbidden Planet itself is very social; its a clique. There are a lot of people who you get to recognise through that. Outside of that, I don't think I've ever

talked comics, about comics with people. But, in the shop you certainly would; you go in and discuss what's new out and what isn't.

D   Do you like that?

DD   Its great, yeah. Well, the people who work in the shop are my friends as well, my friends from outside, so yeah, I do. I think its a great shop actually.

D   Some of the other people I've talked to felt the same. Other people are put off by it.

DD   I can see certainly, when I talk to people in work about comics - it comes up around Christmas when people are looking for presents for people, and they're thinking of somebody they can't get a present for, something really strange, and I say: ' why don't you go down to Forbidden Planet because you can always get something there' and they just say: ' no way ' , they won't do it. Maybe they're really intimidated by the whole thing. I think its just by the fact that you go in and they're playing really loud reggae music, and there are dreadlocked people on the counter, they say: ' I'm not going in there '. I think that's funny; you come across it. I think they have this very strange opinion of what goes on in there. Its worse than that of course in reality.

D   I was actually surprised when I went into Forbidden Planet on New Oxford Street: the atmosphere in there compared to the one here in Dublin is very different.

DD   I would have thought its much more accessible, actually. No?

D   Its much darker, something almost slightly malevolent.

DD   In New York, certainly, there are some of the shops there that the people actually just criticise you when you come in (laughs), if you don't fit their understanding of the comics fan! They just start slagging you off and they would refuse to sell you things, it was incredible. Some of the more esoteric ones.

D   Would you see a difference between comics here and in New York?

DD   Well, in New York like anything there, they've a much bigger populace so its easier to specialise because you're always going to get people to support, however specialised the undertaking is. You tend to get these really specialised comic shops: there'd be the ones that sell all the Marvel and DC stuff, and then there are the ones that just sell art comics and they're really really small places, and then there are ones that just sell grungy comics or seventies underground comics, and entire shops are taken over by these genres. So, to that extent its different; to that extent its much more selective in terms of the people who hang out there.

D   What would your preferences be?

DD   I don't really read much of the Marvel and the DC superhero comics. It would generally tend to be the more sort of, I don't know, ' arty ' comics like Love and

Rockets and stuff; the objects really - you know the things you want to have as opposed to stories you want to read. They'd be kind of the expensive ones, the good quality paper and all the rest.

D   A lot of the people I've talked to said that they wouldn't spend money on a comic because to them a comic should be something cheap and disposable.

DD   No, I'm a big fan of the comic as object. I tend to , they're things you buy to keep. If only because of the fact that its... ...Well, its art; its drawing or painting or whatever, but its in an accessible format and its relatively cheap; its still pictures basically. The ones I buy, certainly, I like to keep.

D   What do comics mean to you? Why are you into comics?

DD   I don't know, there are various reasons why I buy them. There's a sort of soap opera element certainly. There are certain comics that I started buying six years ago or eight years ago: you feel that if you stop, particularly with things like Love and Rockets, which comes in instalments - you feel that if you stop you're going to miss something. Its just continuing on the story, that's presumably not why I buy them. I don't know, I'm just a huge consumer: I buy so many books; I buy loads of books and I read loads of books and I buy lots of records, far too many records, I just buy everything, and I tend to buy comics. I'm just this media and culture junkie

D   I'd be the same, exactly the same.

DD   Its just another thing to buy. I know that sounds terrible, but its almost like that.

D   Its the same for me: I just know that I'm addicted to reading record covers, and its the same with books - I've got about fifteen books that I haven't read yet

DD   I'm the same: I have a must read pile of books; I buy records sometimes just because the cover is good - that must be good, it looks good, and with comics to a certain extent I'm like that.

D   Would you be a collector?

DD   Not really. Put it this way: I have a friend Liam that's very into it and he talks about the value of comics and what they'll be worth in a couple of years. I have all my comics stacked in piles in my bathroom, and they're all going mouldy. It upsets him greatly; it really does upset him. Like you know: "You have to get those into bags" I don't throw them out, but I don't prize them, but then I don't throw anything out. I'm a hoarder.

D   Are there any other reasons why you're into comics? Is it the genres, or the stories?

DD   It differs for the various comics, like Hate I just really like, I find it very funny, a good read. Dirty Plotte is another one, a Canadian one which I just think is fantastic. It just looks fantastic.

D   That's by Julie Doucet

DD   That's right yeah. I think that one just looks great; that's why I get that one, whereas Hate is one I'd get to read on the bus for a giggle. They're the ones that I'd read; there are not that many anymore. There was a time when I was buying a lot more junk, but I don't really.

D   This is a loaded question: what do you think about people who think that comics are just for kids?

DD   Well, this is the old one. I remember having big arguments with people about eight years ago about this and the argument I'd heard at the time, and I thought this was a great argument at the time was that: comics first came into being at the same time that movies did and that film has grown in the last century into this great artform which everybody thought was an artform, but comics had never done so and they were trapped into this particular... ... certainly in Britain and Ireland its packed into this particular way of seeing it as to do with superheroes, end of story. It was a very nice argument, but its not really true (laughs) To an extent they probably are; I do think anyway, its perhaps not as valid an artform as many others but its good fun

D   Why would you say that?

DD   Its this whole thing about whether it trivialises it, and I do think that the succession of images, the way its normally done does usually trivialise any serious issues. It is a very difficult thing to actually convey any serious message with that. Again, in the comics world they always, the one they always bring you against is Maus which is an absolutely incredibly serious issue which was dealt with very well. But there's never been a comic like that since: that was meant to be the first one; there was this comic; this was meant to show the way. But there hasn't been one since. I just think it is too difficult to get serious emotions across; I don't know why that is. I think its just generally...

D   Is that the medium or the market though?

DD   Yeah, possibly. Although to an extent I'm not sure that's true because there're a lot of comics being issued at the moment that don't have what would traditionally be seen as a big market. I think its because of the people it attracts as artists as opposed to the people it attracts as a public. Generally, the people that are interested in comics or draw comics are... ... have a particular set, an agenda that they want to convey which isn't perhaps the same as in other artforms. I've no real fixed viewpoints on it. I just haven't seen a serious comic.

D   Personally I think a lot of it is because its been ghettoised over the last twenty-odd years with the advent of specialist comic shops, and the comics are getting more and more fannish, less and less connected to real life.

DD Yeah, that's right, they're completely self-referential. Certainly its only comic book fans that are the ones that draw comics and anybody else trying to convey a thought will go somewhere else - write a book or paint a painting. Its odd: Hate is one of the ones I like - I don't know if you've been reading it recently, but it started off as the grunge lifestyle and it was all about that. The last few issues have been all about going to comics conventions and what its like drawing comics

D   Really?

DD Yeah. Its just completely imploding; its all about comic book artists sitting at conventions and drawing comics for other comic book fans; you just feel this person hasn't been getting out a lot.

D   Buddy Bradley is doing this?

DD Buddy just keeps going to comics conventions and selling comics, and its obviously because Peter Bagge's been to comics conventions so his comics do.

D   Is reading comics important to you?

DD Probably not terribly. There was a time when I'd go into Forbidden Planet with my standing order and get very worried about what was coming in, but now I tend to miss issues. So no. Its just another way of getting rid of my disposable income (laughs).

D   I was there last Saturday and I hadn't been in for quite a while, and there really was a big buzz off buying the things.

DD That's the best way to do it actually, not go for a couple of months, then you run in and say: ' I'll have this, this and that '. There's not actually that much good stuff around, is there? Well the stuff I like anyway. Its few and far between.

D   For this thesis I've been reading a lot of the best of things over the last hundred years and the more you see of the best stuff, the less you can bear to read some of the slop,   because so much of it is. Obviously in all media, most things produced will be mediocre if not bad, but recently its been terrible because you know how good it can be.

DD In a way I find it odd, because I do have friends who just buy everything and anything, you know, boxes of the DC comics, all the X-Men and the X-Factor stuff. I really don't understand why at all. I don't know. I'd say I'm pretty typical to a certain extent...

D   No, everybody's been very different actually...

ENDS

v

APPENDIX O

Interview 13-12-1996

Alan Crosby 13th December 1996

D   What's your name?

Alan   Alan Crosby

D   How old are you?

A   24

D   What do you do?

A   Fine art, I do fine art, specialising in painting.

D   So you're a student.

A   Yeah.

D   How long have you been into comics?

A   I've been collecting comics about eight years.

D   So, since you were about fourteen.

A   Yeah.

D   Was there any reason that you got into them?

A   Not really. My friends, sort of from reading 2000AD, and then I walked into Forbidden Planet with a friend and just started picking up a few things I thought were interesting and just got into them through that really.

D   Are they important to you?

A   Extremely important, yes.

D   In what way?

A   I don't know, I just love comics. I love comics, its a great feeling, a great buzz when I read comics.

D   What is it about them that's different from other things you'd be doing, is it the reading?

A   Just reading, you know. I think... when I started off reading comics, it was the artwork, because I always drew when I was in school, and I got into specific comics because of their artwork and writing wasn't really a big part of it. But I have to say now, the writing is more my thing now than the artwork.

D   Do you write them yourself?

A   Yeah, well I dabble but I haven't published anything.

D   So, they're important to you?

A   Oh yeah.

D   Are you a fan?

A   Em, yeah.

D   You say "eh, yeah", everybody does: why do you think?

A   I think... I'm not a total fanatic, I'm on the verge, on the edge of it. Like I'm in Sub City, Forbidden Planet three or four times a week. I buy... oh Lord, I buy thirty, maybe forty monthly comics. Whatever I can afford. I buy about twenty or thirty a week. I read an awful lot. I don't drink and I don't smoke, so there you go.

D   That helps.

A   Well I spend about thirty pounds a week, twenty-five pounds, it depends on my money. I organise my comics around whenever I get money. I work for Christmas, so I get money, therefore I can afford to put by comics for the first few months after summer and then buy them all at Christmas. I collect, I collect everything and anything.

D   When did you realise that you were a fan, rather than you just read them?

A   Ah, that would have been just about three years ago, four years ago. Its a big change really...

D   In what way?

A   I mean, you read comics because they're interesting, and you know, I'd buy the odd graphic novel when I was young, and I'd put them down and that'd be about it. Now when I pick up a comic and its a really good comic, you'd read it again, or you'd put it down and read it a week later. You just get such a, you know...

D   At the moment I'm rereading Watchmen for this thesis, which I haven't read in a long time, but with me when I was collecting 2000AD, it got to stage when I

didn't have to read them anymore, they were all in there. Another chap I talked to said "if you cut me open they'd be inside me"... So, you collect.

A   Yeah.

D   How do you store them?

A   I've got several boxes, storage boxes. I built my own, wooden, like the blocks they have over there (Sub City). I built my own. I have one of those on top of my presses. It can fit five blocks, about two foot long or three foot long.

D   Would you poly-bag stuff?

A   Everything, yeah.

D   Is it important to you to keep them in good nick?

A   I think so, yeah. Not for the money, I never ever... I've never sold a comic in my life. I still have all my old 2000ads. I still have the first comic I ever bought. I still have... I mean I hate the X-Men, I bought the first twenty, I think the first eight were really good, I really enjoyed reading them, but I lost interest. It took those other twelve issues for me to say "well, these are gone out the door", but I still have them, even though I'll probably never read them all again. I don't know, I just can't part with them really.

D   I've always collected comics and collected records and over the last couple of years, through being mercenary and being broke, I've been selling stuff and its not worth it because you do regret it because the money's gone almost as soon as you get it. Do you get any comics regularly?

A   Oh yeah.

D   Which ones?

A   Okay, this is going to be a long list (laughs). I read all the Batman titles, I read Action Comics, let me see, DC, I read... I'm now reading the new Aztek one by Grant Morrison, I'm reading Hitman, I read Preacher, this is all DC.

D   They'd be mainly Vertigo?

A   Yeah, I collect most of the mini-series from Vertigo. I used to read Swamp Thing, its gone now. Sandman was the reason I got into comics, big time anyway. Image, I get Spawn, I get Witchblade, Tales of Witchblades, will get The Darkness, only no. 1 has come out... let me see, Hellblaser, Shadowman, I read a ton, an awful lot

of indies: I have all the Astral City stuff, I read Kabuki, which is another indie, I read... Marvel, what do I read? Daredevil, I used to read the Avengers, not anymore.

D   I was never that cracked on them.

A   I just read the odd one. I liked the team work, that's what I liked about it, it was very refreshing because I don't read the X-Men, I don't read Wildcats or anything like that, so I liked the Avengers just for me.

D   I'd normally come across them in these compendiums. When I was a kid, you'd only every so often come across this weird stuff. I remember the first time I went into Forbidden Planet in London, I was dizzy, I was on a school tour and realised that Denmark St. was just around the corner... that was just amazing. You were saying earlier that Sandman was the one that really got you into it. What was that?

A   Yeah, it was the power of the story really, the story-telling, and the art wasn't really that important. He's practically my favourite writer (Neil Gaiman). I've everything he's ever published. I just think he's an amazing story-teller. I just bought his book, and I finished it for the second time. I think he's just an amazing writer. I can really relate to what he has to say.

D   I'd probably go more for Frank Miller: I've spent so much money on that man. I mean, Elektra Lives Again, a waste of money. I read that the other night, a waste of money, but then again, I'm glad I have it.

A   I have the Daredevil/Elektra #181, where Bullseye kills her. I have most of his run on Daredevil. Frank Miller is brilliant, I love his philosophy about comics, he really has a head on his shoulders, he knows where he's coming from.

D   Is there a social side to comics for you?

A   A social side? No, no.

D   Would you talk to other people about comics?

A   No, no. I always find that I will, but they get bored. I've no friends that collect comics. A friend that first really got me into this, he lives in America now. I haven't seen him in years, and he wasn't my best friend or anything, he was just someone I'd meet or knew. He was just in town one day and he brought me into it. But I have noone, absolutely noone to talk to, other than Rob and Brian, they're sick of me (laughs). Its probably the worst part for me, I hate it so much, because the stuff that I figure out is on my own, or reading Wizard (a fan magazine). And then again, I'd love to read more titles but I haven't got the money yet. A friend of mine could be reading them and I could be taking them of him, I miss those sort of things.

D   So, you would talk about comics if you could?

A   Yeah (with feeling).

D   Because a number of people seem to just say no, they couldn't be bothered.

A   Ah, I'd love to. I think they're important, its an artform really, in a way.

D   That's another question I wanted to ask you: do you think they're art?

A   Yeah. I think so, definitely. Not in a conventional sense, like as a visual reference, but an awful lot of comics have an awful lot to say, especially about modern day stuff. I mean, the last Batman, I think it was a two-shot mini-series, an Elseworld sort of book. And it was basically, Batman goes to Thailand, and its all about child pornography and child abuse, and at the end of it there's a little essay about the child-porn situation in Thailand. I think that's an amazing way to tackle it, through a superhero character. Its the changing attitudes of publishers and writers that say "lets tackle this".

D   I saw a comic today *Death of the Innocents* about landmines. I was gobsmacked. Who's your favourite artist?

A   Favourite artist? Ooh, God... There's a couple, Dave McKean, although I have an awful lot of his out-of-comics stuff: he's an illustrator, he's an artist. The way he, his images, his Sandman covers are absolutely amazing, there's so much in each cover and they're just a cover. People just fob them off as just a cool cover. Ilove Kelley Jones as well, he's an extremely atmospheric artist. He draws Batman the way he was supposed to be drawn. Who else... I love Gary Frank's work on Supergirl, that's brilliant: its very realistic. Not realistic in the sense that its boring life-like drawing but its very soild, three dimensional work and that's really very solid work. Its brilliant; I really love it. What I hate is Rob Liefield (laughs). He has no... he's going for a style and I don't know, his art is very weak; its very sloppy. Its a money thing to him, I think at the end of the day. I think he has a lot of worries at the moment, Captain America #1 was an absolute disaster as far as I'm concerned. He should never have been let do it, especially after his split with Image. It was just a disaster.

D   So he's left Image?

A   He's gone from Image, yeah.

D   What about Jim Lee?

A   Jim Lee? I think his work is pretty good, I like his... He's more of a... he knows what he's drawing, he's a more solid artist, he's not too into a style. Although there is an Image style, that's without a doubt. Its like a little factory. At the end of the

day, he's one of the cogs. I read the Fantastic Four. I've got the Heroes Reborn Fantastic Four. I think the artwork, it is good, it is suiting the story, but I think his story is going somewhere, I'm interested.

D   What about writers?

A   Oh, Neil Gaiman without a doubt. Definitely, definitely.

D   What about characters?

A   I think Batman is my favourite character. I love what DC have done with him. He's such a dynamic character really and they've done so much with him. He's like plasticine, they've stretched him in so many ways.

D   Its true, but they were doing so little with him previously.

A   Well, Frank Miller started it all off, really.

D   What is your reply to people who say comics are just for kids?

A   Absolutely ridiculous. I don't know, I think its a stupid comment to make about anything. I mean, are cartoons just for kids? They're not. I can enjoy Tom and Jerry just as much as a ten year old. Anyway, most of the comics that I read are mature title comics. Even some of the comics that I read like Batman and Superman, they're aimed at that sort of market, a young market, with that sort of view in mind, but I still enjoy some of them, they're good. I think its a stupid comment.

D   Part of the reason for doing this is because people very often...

A   They just don't know, they haven't got a clue.

D   What about comics being part of your identity, of how you say "I am ...", putting yourself across

A   I think the comic character I most with would be Batman, the whole idea of a mask. I think everybody has masks anyway. I really can relate to Batman in that kind of way. That's personal, that's a personal reason. I think I've been collecting them so long now, some of it has to be rubbing off (laughs).

D   What about the whole creative thing? Are you interested in doing comics, or would you do any?

A   Yeah, I've dabbled in the last few years, especially since I went to Mountjoy Sq., that I've learned to paint. But most of the stuff I do is about the nitty gritty

modern life, its not about superheroes. I couldn't see myself ever doing a superhero comic.

D   Why not?

A   I think its the old cliche, the easy way out: design a super-character that gets powers some way, its a bit... Another reason why I like Batman is because he's no superpowers, he's the great detective really. There's no bullshit with him, and they don't treat him like some sort of arsehole character, that beams in from outer space and saves the world with his super-strength eyes or something.

D   Finally, other media, would you be a fan of other media, would you be into other stuff, or would comics be the main thing?

A   No, I love cinema, I love science-fiction. I like things that are visually striking. I love sculpture as well. But having said that, I like foreign films and stuff like that. I'm very keen on stuff like that: cinema and videos and work like that.

D   Would you consider yourself a fan of other things apart from comics?

A   Not really, not at the moment. College and comics are really enough to be going on with. If I'm not reading comics, I'm working on some project in college. Its all got to do with art really. And my girlfriend.

D   Another expensive thing. Would you see comics as a way of getting back at the fine art tradition, they're seen as popular culture, would you being into comics, would you see it as taking an oppositional stance? Or is it the same thing?

A   I think... I think comics have a long way to go, I think fine art at the moment is extremely conceptual, and I think comics are, I think deal with things in a very blunt way, in a very clear way. I think if I was doing a comic I'd want to relate it   to my own feelings towards a certain object or idea or theme. I could tie them together... but then again, there are certain comics out there that are very close to fine art, Violent Cases is one. I mean, what is the difference between that and an installation or a piece of sculpture? They have the same message.

D   I find the whole conceptual art thing, it does very little for me. Every so often, you come across something that might be vaguely interesting...

A   Visually, but you don't understand it unless the artist tells you what its about.

D   Yeah, which is absurd. But you wouldn't see it (comics) as an 'up yours' to fine art? Or your interest in comics and fine art would come from the same place?

A   No. I think there's a major problem at the moment in America where they set up colleges to shove out these boring, crap artists and writers who are sticking to the

structures and guidelines, and I think the people who have made a big difference have come from their own situations and their own ideals, Frank Miller being one of them, Peter David is another. He's... I mean I could list off to you the people I hate who've just come from college. Its like a factory; Image is a factory: the same ould shite. All superpowered mutants. I think it has a long way to go in that sense. I think the people I most identify with are very close to the fine art and the literature end of it, Dave McKean being one of them, there's various artists...

D   Or someone like Bill Sienkwvics...

A   Yeah, his work is definitely closer to fine art than it is to comics, especially his painting.

D   I remember hearing a story about him giving in a cover to one of the Judge Dredd anthologies and the instructions saying "plug the battery in here". (laughs) Probably my favourite artist is Brian Bolland. When I started reading 2000AD his stuff was so clear...

A   Very solid. Almost photogenic really.

D   Without being too... it was still pushing along the narrative, while other artists, it gets more difficult to read the story because you're looking at the art. That's pretty much it, thanks Alan.

A   No problem.

ENDS

APPENDIX P

Interview 20-12-1996

D   How old are you?

P   Twenty-three, both of us.

D   Okay. So, what do you do with yourselves?

P   Job-wise? I work in a newsagent's.

A   I'm an art teacher for children: one to four years of age.

D   How long have you been into comics?

P   Ten years, roughly since the beginning but I sort of had a hiatus for about two or three years in between... (indecipherable) and the formation of Image.

D   Why did you go off them?

P   When I got into it I started reading X-Men and Iron Man. Iron Man just wasted away to complete crap, then with X-Men, I was more of a fan of Jim Lee and when they formed Image, I didn't like the look of what they were doing, so I just stopped there and then. Then after a while I picked up Spawn, after about two years, liked it and just started back. I caught up with the other ones and what they were doing and it just snow-balled from there: I got addicted again; I think its something in the newsprint (laughs).

D   How about yourself?

A   Well, I got sick of being dragged into comic shops every time we were in town and spending hours in Forbidden Planet and Sub City. And one day I just saw something that my eye: it was Grifter. I just liked the look of the cover, the front page and bought it. And I liked him, and then I found out he was in Wildcats, so I back-tracked and started reading that. That's how I got into it.

D   I only saw Grifter for the first time last week. When I started doing this, I used to spend most of my money on comics, apart from what I'd drink. But then because it became work I got sick of it, I just couldn't face reading comics because I was doing this bloody thing and it was all based on comics, so comics became associated with that. Its only now, that I know that I'm nearly finished it that I can go in and enjoy them. What got you into them?

P	Just a guy I hung around with. He was reading them and I hung around in his room reading them, so I just started picking up, and I tried to pick up different titles than he was reading but along the same lines. We swapped them round; I was just dragged into them sort of.

D	What about yourself?

A	Well, it was because of him, obviously, I started reading. But I buy different... I'll read his comics, but I'll buy my own, my own particular interests in different things. I'll read all his back-issues...

P	Its the same thing (laughs) the same thing as me; she's bought all the...just swapping titles. We've spread ourselves around.

A	I like them mainly for the artwork, that's why I...

D	Yeah, a lot of people say that as well. I want to ask you, because most of the people I've talked to have been men, how do find it coming in as a woman going into comic shops?

A	I don't know, maybe the first time I went in... there doesn't seem to be that many women interested in comics, so I can sort of see why. Its always been... its male-orientated anyway, as it is. I don't know. At first I felt really odd; I felt very uncomfortable going in with him, or when I was going in to buy my own, I'd be getting back-issues. I remember buying back-issues, and it was five of the Wildcats back-issues and I brought them up to the counter and the guy behind the counter said "Are these for you?" and I went "yeah", y'know. And he liked this, and he went "there's a really good... and there's a nice one...", so that was okay. At first it was kinda difficult but now its okay. They're grand. I talk to the people in Sub-	City all the time and they're really friendly and very helpful.

D	Yeah, they seem dead sound. Forbidden Planet wouldn't let me go in and talk to anyone, they just said no.

P	I don't like going down there now. I only go in if I have to, if there's something that they don't have in Sub-City. They're pretty ignorant.

A	We always buy our comics in Sub-City (laughs).

D	They've been dead decent to me. Are they important to you?

A	Yeah. Not very important, like life or death, but they are important. I love getting them.

P   I hate to admit it, but yeah, I suppose. Its probably worse than a drug (laughs). I wouldn't be naive enough to say I could give it up just like that if I had to. It'd be difficult. I've tried to cut back on titles to try and compensate for social life (laughs), and its just got worse! I'm up to about fourteen or so regular titles. Its sad. I need a better job.

D   Why would they be important to you?

A   I don't know. I suppose you spend $2.25 or $2.75 on a comic and you like it, maybe the cover or the artist, sometimes comics you really like the story in, you go "Yeah, I love that". Its just important. Its like a good book. I read a lot of books: I read Terry Pratchett and Robert Rankin and they're important to me as well. I've often re-read them and I just think they're really funny and y'know, things like that. I love meeting people that actually say "Have you read that?" Its sort of a sharing thing as well.

P   You're afraid you'd miss anything as well, its like soap-opers (laughs).

D   I think, for me, because I'm going back into it, when you have missed out on stuff, its difficult: you don't know where to start.

P   That's like when I went back and started reading again, I didn't touch any of the titles I'd read before because I knew in the space of two and a half years or so I'd be completely lost. Even Iron Man, I only picked it up because its started again, and that'd be one title I actually liked although its fairly rubbish.

D   Would you call yourselves fans?

A   No. I wouldn't call myself a fan because its a very private thing. When you think of someone who's a fan of a group, you see them screaming "eeeeeh!" Well, if you ever met any of the people in comics like Jim Lee, artists you respect, or Mark Silvestri, I wouldn't go "Oh, hiya, how's it going", and "I can't believe..." (in a hysterical voice) I wouldn't react that way to them. I wouldn't say I was a fan in that respect. I do love them and I like them and I read them and I enjoy them, but not to the extent where you're going "Oh Mark, look how you did this..."
        (hysterical voice), I'm not a fan that way.

D   How about yourself?

P   Well, I've been accused of being a fanboy because of the way I dress (laughs). (Paul is wearing a Spawn baseball cap and a t-shirt with another comic character printed on it) I suppose I'd have to say I was but I wouldn't like to admit it. I a bit like admitting you're an alcoholic. Its probably the first step (laughs).

D You keep on saying you think its a bad thing because you're doing that. Everybody seems to think...

P I think I've beeen absorbing everybody's... like you said, you get a lot of negative opinions it by people who don't know. I do as well; I meet very few people who actually read comics other than in there (Sub-City). I've never lived in an area where there's a lot of people who do it. When I got into it, there was only one person I knew who read comics and since that person, a guy came working in the shop I'm in and he read comics as well. But in ten years or so, on a personal level, that's all I've really met. So every other opinion is sort of negative towards it. You feel guilty for reading them all...

D Its funny that a lot of the time people say "Jesus, why are you reading those?", then they pick them up and half an hour later you try and get them to go to the pub and they're like "Hang on a sec, I just want to finish this one... can I take a loan of these?". I find that all the time, when they actually read them.

P I'd be ashamed. I actually wouldn't read them on a bus going home or anywhere outside.

D Really?

P No. I'd feel embarrassed to be seen reading them because I know that people have a negative view of them, people would be like "Ha ha" laughing, because basically most of the people who'd be on the bus would be scum-bags anyway (laughs). They'd probably rip them up or something.

A That's a terrible thing to say.

P Well, I do get embarrassed about it and admit that I do, which is weird, considering I go to to...

A Well the only difference between me and you with comics is that I've more restraint. I'm not in it that long, so I've more restraint, even though I'd say "I'd really love that, even though its thirty quid" and I'd go "I couldn't be bothered", but he couldn't say that: he'd have to have it, he'd really have to have it.

D Its a difficult thing because I know there were a couple of things that I got that just weren't worth it, I went off and spent a lot of money and... Do you remember that Elektra Lives Again thing?

A Yeah.

D It was hardback etc. and I read it again the week before last, and it just wasn't worth the money. There were a couple of things that I got in a row over two or

three months where you were forking out a fair bit of money, that if you had've bought ordinary monthly ones, you would've had more fun, you wouldn't have spent a fortune on stuff where the story wasn't great even if the art was.

A   I suppose as well, if you look at it repect of a habit, almost like an addiction, you're really not doing anything detrimental to yourself and the fact that you spend forty quid on a comic, at least... you could have spent that on drink, and imagine what effect that would have on your body, or drugs or whatever, so I suppose in one way...

D   You wake up the next day and you still have the comic.

A   Exactly. That's the way I see it.

D   And it respects you. (laughs)

P   You can get some money back on them if you end up hating them, or you end up needing it.

A   Yeah, you mightn't get much but it'll still be worth something.

P   Well, you will make a few mistakes in buying... Jesus, I have six, seven hundred comics at home and I've got a handful of them that I'd be really proud of, y'know, good calls. But twice as many would be turkeys, real rubbish, but I take that in my stride by this stage and try not to get upset about it. I still wouldn't part with the rubbish ones. I'd hate to sell any of my stuff. I hear people, guys in Sub-City, they're real serious about some of the stuff they're getting, say "Aw, I sold a load of these ones...". I've got my hands on them and that's it, they stay there, there's no way I'd part with them.

D   Was there any stage when you realised that you'd changed from just reading to being a fan?

A   Well, if you go into a comic shop on a regular basis and buy comics, they obviously mean something to you, you're into it, its a hobby. Maybe its a hobby, people look at it as a hobby. Some people like to go golfing; I can't see the point of golf myself, my brother loves it, but I'm going "And you walk around there for four hours? Right fair enough. And you get up at six o'clock in the morning, then you have to go to work when you're finished? Grand...", but I can't see the point of that. Whereas, he thinks "Are you reading those comics again? Oh God!", you know. I suppose I'm lucky like that: my family never say... they'd say "Are you reading comics? Oh that's nice, that's lovely. Is that person being mutilated? That's lovely". (laughs) That's the way they are about them.

P   I take flak over it at home, definitely.

D   Really?

P   I'm fairly sad, still living at home at my age. I hear about it on a daily basis: "what rubbish did you buy today?" That's usually what its referred to as: rubbish.

D   I know my mother, as A kid, she used to go mad because I was spending all my money, so I had to sneak them in, but that was more because I was supposed to use the money for other things. Do you collect?

A   Oh yeah.

P   Yeah.

A   I'd keep them, bagged and board. I bag and board everything.

P   Pretty much.

A   Even the rubbish. If you're spending that much money on it, you might as well keep them and keep them good. What's the point in buying something and just throwing it around. You wouldn't buy a piece of Waterford Crystal and wash it in the dish-washer.

P   Or leave it in the shed.

A   Why not? Why not look after them? At least they'll be in good condition anyway, regardless. They'll sell much better then (laughs).

D   Is price important to you, how much it costs to buy the thing?

P   It would be before I pay it but in the end, something I really want, if its twenty quid, I just reach in and grab it out. I'd set myself up and say "I have to cut back, I'm only going to spend fifteen pounds this week and I'd go in and spend about thirty or forty. And I come out pleased, so price is important in theory but in practice it just goes out the window.

A   If there's something I really want, I'll get it. I was up in Belfast and I got the Grifter/Shi hardback sign4ed by Jim Lee and it was fifty-two pounds, and I didn't even think about the price, I just wanted it, so "Right, I'm getting it". Just like that. In some ways it doesn't, but other things... If its not, if I didn't really like that, I wouldn't bother.

D   Are there any comics that you get regularly?

A   Yeah.

D   What ones would they be?

P   Jesus, I tried to remember a few weeks ago because I don't even have a standing order. The most one I go for is Spawn, you know, Spawn, Shi, Maxx, Wetworks, Witchblade, Strangers in Paradise, Preacher, the odd Batman special. There's too many Batman titles, millions. In my opinion, its the best character there is, still, but I just don't collect them on a regular basis. I pick up the trade paperbacks or specials now and again... I get Iron Man, and the Fantastic Four at the moment.

D   How about yourself?

A   Grifter, Wildcats, Cyberforce, DV8 and I think that's it...

P   Backlash.

A   Oh yeah, Backlash, that's it.

P   Mostly Image.

A   Yeah, all Image. I like team comics.

D   Why is that? I normally go for the solo ones.

A   I like the way the relationships develop in them, people that don't get on, all the different little things that go on. I just like it. Sorry. I don't know: I just like them (laughs).

D   Is there a social side to comics for you? Talking to people about it or...

P   No, I'm pretty closed about it.

A   The only social side to it is in Sub-City.

P   Talking to the people in there, outside of there no. Its a fairly private thing. There's not that many people out there. I assume there is a lot of people...

D   I suppose there has to be.

P   I just don't know... I see millions of people in there every day.

A   But that's probably all you'd have in common with them, is the fact that they read comics and so do you. Whereas I've loads of friends that don't read comics but I've other things in common with them, so it balances itself out in that way.

D   You were saying its a very private thing, you mean the actual reading of them?

P Yeah. I'd wait until I'm on my own to read them in quiet. I'd prefer to sit down and read it all the way through, I hate to leave half a comic there. I don't tell people that, as a hobby, that's what I do. If people say what are your hobbies, Id list off a few things before I'd get around to reading comics.

D I always think, talking about not reading on the bus, to an extent it ruins it because you might have to finish half way through. I always prefer to sit down somewhere where you know you're going to be able to read, that could be in the middle of O'Connell St., if you knew you wouldn't be moved or it wouldn't start raining.

A But it looks very odd though, people kinda go... its not a magazine or a newspaper: its a comic, its smaller...

P I'm not saying that I wouldn't read them in public, I don't think I've ever seen anyone reading a comic book in public.

A You did today.

P Where?

A In the cinema.

P You saw someone in the cinema...

D They went to the pictures and then read a comic?

A It was just before it started.

D If I was waiting to meet someone I'd take them out of the bag and start reading...

A I'd feel too self-consciousto do that. I don't know why. I just would. I suppose its because sometimes the pictures, they're very, they way people are portrayed in comics, the men are very muscular, the women are very, very... (laughs)

P T and A (laughs)

A Very very, so people look at that and go "look at that, look at your woman, noone could be like that, built like that. And a lot of them might think that the women... when I first looked at them, I used to look at the way they dressed I was going "I can see why you read the comics...". But when I started reading and getting into characters like Zella and Cyblade, they were very strong regardless of how they're dressed and they really hold their own. I really liked them. When I went back and read the Wildcats and I was reading Booley, when she first came into it, she was a very weak character, she had to be looked after, I really didn't like her, really

didn't like her until recently, where she came into her own. Now she's one of my favourite characters, so...

P   You speak of them like real people.

A   (laughs) I know, but that's the way I think about it, when they're really strong women.

D   Its the same when you're reading a book, the characters have to become... if they're just ink on a page...

P   You do have to breathe life into them.

A   Oh yeah.

D   I don't know whether you'd agree with me, but I think that's part of the reason that it is a private thing, its you who puts the life into it to a large extent.

A   Yeah.

D   So you can't really explain that to other people.

P   No.

A   You're imagining... you're reading the printed word but you... after a while of reading a particular comic, you have a certain image of what way a character would react, the same as in a book, but you have the visual stimulus and when they do things you're not expecting, you're shocked and "oh my God". The same as if you were watching a film and 007 does something and you go "oh my God, he's a traitor!", so I suppose it goes that way.

D   I was working in France a couple of years ago, in McDonalds unfortunately...

A   That's a great place to work. (laughs)

D   I was watching Charlie's Angels and everything's dubbed, and you know Bosley, he's got such a distinctive voice, and he had this french voice and it was just so wrong. That's when you go "no!" (laughs). You do have a thing in your head as to what makes a...

A   The characters, yeah.

D   Do you talk about comics, even amongst yourselves or with other people?

P   Amongst ourselves we would...

A   Usually, I'd read my comic and pass it on for him to read, the ones I buy, and I'd say "have you read it yet?", so we could talk about it. And he goes "yeah, yeah, I read it". And I'd go "Did you see such and such...?" and he'd go "oh, yeah!", that kind of thing. So we do together. I suppose it was bound to happen.

D   What about when somebody would say comics are for kids, what do you think about that?

A   No, they're definitely not for kids...

P   Well, if you want to take Beanos and Dandys, yeah, they're for kids. But that's people's perception of comics, the Beano and the Dandy, nobody understands...

A   They're very violent. I don't mean they're violent like... they are very violent for kids. But then again, films are for a certain age-group and parent let them watch them when they come out on video.

P   There is a scale. There are comics that I would say they're childish, but adults would read them as well. But there are some things you wouldn't let a child read. I wouldn't consider preacher suitable for any child. That's a fairly heavy book. Its funny, but you have to be old to appreciate the humour. If you were a child it'd be shocking or you'd probably think it was cool (laughs). Kids love people swearing and chopping other people's heads off. But no, I couldn't consider it childish. I can sit down and go through my collection and put them in age-groups. The likes of Gen 13, kids could read that, its humourous and childish and funny. And then you go up to the other end, the Preachers and... Comics to a degree are childish. There are people out there... Although the beginnings were for children, I wouldn't say they're completely for children. There are groups; it spans generations (laughs). If you want to be cliched about it.

D   Who'd be your favourite artists or writers?

P   Well, Jim Lee, I really like the stuff he does, that 's what was my major upset, when I stopped reading: a great comic, he was doing a great job and made it the most famous comic there was: the X-Men at the time (indecipherable) And a lot of the others that would be at Image like Mark Silvestri and, to an extent, Todd McFarlane. I thought he was a bit crap in his Marvel days...

D   Who?

P   Todd McFarlane, Spawn. He got that going and he's done a good job of it and he's made that nearly the biggest selling comic today. Writers... I've only started to take an interest in who's writing comics recently. Since I started on Preacher I like Garth Ennis...

x

D   I like his stuff.

P   I've tried pick up other stuff he's done. I'd never read any of the earlier stuff he'd done, like Hellblaser or anything like that, or DC's Demon.

D   Did he do that? He's done a lot of stuff actually. I was alays interested in him because he did Judge Dredd, but because he was from the north and he was somebody Irish.

P   Even saying that, he's writing another series for 2000AD and I started picking that up because he was doing it. I work in a newsagents, so I pick it off the shelf when its going back and I just cut out that bit and hold it together.

D   I was working in a newsagents last year, and its great, just pull off the covers... How about yourself?

A   Well, I'm not all that interested in writers. Not yet, give me a while, I haven't been reading that long. I like Jim Lee and Mark Silvestri but I think my favourite would be Brett Booth, who did early Backlash.

D   I don't know him at all.

P   He started off at Image and now he's at Stormwatch and gone off Backlash.

D   So he started off his career at Image?

A   Yeah. I just think he's... I like the way he draws...

P   He's like a tamed down version of Todd McFarlane, he does those elongated figures, very dramatic poses and stuff, without all the over-detailed stuff McFarlane would put in.

D   He does put a bit of detail does young Todd.

A   I think Silvestri's very detailed as well. Every time he ever draws cloth, or capes, its all little folds, very detailed. I like your man, this has got me into an awful lot of trouble: Umberto Romus. He did the first DV8s, they have guest artists at the moment, but he did the first one. And he did X Nation for Marvel. I saw the cover that was # 1 and I just liked the way he drew. He's all over the place basically, not a lot of detail, very odd-shaped, simplistic, but I like him, I just like something about the way he draws.

D   Again, you say you like one thing and then something comes along that's the opposite of what you'd said that you liked, but its good...

A   I like it because its different. When you look at Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee and all them, they draw in a certain style, its semi-realistic, whereas I don't know what he's drawing, its really all over the place, its very loose, and I just think because its so different from their styles, its not as precise...

P   It'd be like if Picasso drew comics.

A   Yeah, I just like it. And its got me into an awful lot of trouble. I'd be saying it to someone and they'd go 'Oh, do you like him? He's crap!"

P   You can give yourself a certain amount of credibility by saying you like Jim Lee, they approve of that, and then some of them will just look down their nose at you.

A   I did that to a guy in the shop: he said he liked Eric Larsen and I started laughing.

I   don't like Eric Larsen at all. He's probably a better drawer than Umberto Romus (laughs).

D   Do you think that comics are art?

Both   Yeah.

P   I suppose I'd be really proud to have some original work. In the states they have galleries with comic art.

D   Kevin Eastman who does the Turtles set up a place somewhere.

P   I figure that's right. I'd love to see some, I know I probably never will, we're lucky to have comic shops over here. You'd never see anything like that over here. I've gone up to Belfast and they shops up there have stuff on the walls, framed and all.

A   That's that little shop isn't it?

P   Yeah. Both of them. I'd consider that art just as much as if I went to the National Gallery. There's a lot of work that goes into it, effort, probably more than some pieces of art that you'll see. (laughs)

D   What about social identity, would it be important to what you think of yourself?

A   Well, you'd say it to someone but they go "oh do you, that's nice..."

P   You'd be waiting for the negative reaction, or expecting it.

A   I say it all the time, I annoy people. I just start telling them what's going on (laughs), "and such and such did this...", "shut up Adeline, just shut up". I just say "oh yeah, wait till I tell you, and he used to be with them and they used to do that..." (laughs).

D   Do you think there's any way to stop people thinking the negative stuff?

P   I'm sure there is, but most of the time I just couldn't be bothered trying to explain it to them. People have fairly closed minds generally. I wouldn't bring the subject up, I'd forget the subject unless I was pushed on it and then I'd be just as quick to try and let it go. I wouldn't try and force people to read them or go "go on, have a look at it..."

A   No, you couldn't do that.

P   "Take this home and have a look and you'll think differently". Because people have made up their minds. You can change them, but its going to be a lot of effort,
        so most of the time I couldn't be bothered.

D   So how do you think other people see you? I know I've already kinda asked you, but how do you think other people see you for reading comics?

P   I know in work, people joke about it, not in any insulting way, they've accepted it and they know there's a bit of a passion in it, just as much as they would be into different types of music or, they have social lives, which I don't (laughs).

A   That's more of a personal thing that you don't go out much. You don't like getting drunk or going out... He doesn't like that pub atmosphere anyway.
P   Comics are an outlet for my money. I'd be sick...

D   You'd be filthy rich. (laughs)

A   That makes you more of an outcast, that you don't really like going out. I'll go out with my friends and get sloshed but he's not really all that interested in it. You're more interested in your comics or reading a book. You know, go in and buy a book on the Incas, the ancient civilisation and read it and tell me all these interesting facts.

D   You're into the Incas?

P   The Mayans. I'm not into it, I've tried to be into it: I've picked up a book here and there and I try to read it, and I keep meaning to buy more. I'd love to go and see the stuff.

D   Oh yeah. I know somebody who actually did go to see them... you know that they could talk forever about it but never get it into words properly. (a short discussion on the temples and the Grand Canyon follows)

P   Its sort of like comics: you can't really explain the fun you get or the feelings or the interest to someone who isn't into it.

D   Do you think that part of the reason that it is difficult to explain is because most people would have a negative idea?

A   They just wouldn't know. If there's something you just don't know about, if you haven't experienced it, and read a comic and said " Jesus now, I really enjoyed that, that was really good", you can't tell someone... you can tell someone what happened in a film or something, or that film was really sad, but unless you've actually seen it and gone "oh God!", unless they've felt it themselves, you can't make someone do something they don't... its like those guys with the books, the Hare Krishnas, they're saying "here have this", and you're going... some people stop and say hello and maybe buy a book, but you go "I can't feel what you're trying to tell me, asking me to change or be something else". I've no interest in it. Obviously they must feel very strongly about it to be doing what they're doing, so it'd be along the same lines.

D   Finally, and then I'm done, would you be fans of other media?

P   I go to the cinema...

A   A lot.

P   We'd go once a week maybe, if there was enough of an interest in it. We haven't been in a while since the summer. The cinema season sorta died off; there's been very little, there's a few coming up in the next month or so. We'd go to the cinema every week. I only get one day off a week, because of time, during the week its awkward to get out, so we go to the pictures. I listen to music as well...

A   Concerts.

P   Because I'd be closed off in my room most of the day, or polishing off my action-figure collection (laughs), I'd listen to music as well. I watch very little tv...

A   And we go to a lot of concerts. Any time there's someone on we'll go and get tickets, regardless.

D   I used to go to concerts all the time but I haven't gone in the last couple of years. Every time I talk to people I end up talking about my poverty.

A   We wouldn't have that many living expenses because we both live at home in our respective houses. So we have more money and your parents are there as a regular supply of money as well: "Can I borrow twenty?", "yeah", "Okay, bye", so we don't really have that much to worry about financially.

P   What I'm buying now, comics and I collect figures as well, if I had to live in the real world, I'm knackered because I'd never be able to afford both. So I'm basically at home till I'm forty or I win the Lotto (laughs).

D   About the action-figures, how much would your normal one be?

P   Well, I bought one there today and it was twelve pounds, they're the larger ones.   It started off as a kid, I liked the Star Wars figures, at the time. Actually, at the   time and even now they're about the same price, about a fiver...

A   Really? (laughs)

P   They're not worth any more. I have a handful of figures and some ships.

D   I had a friend who was a kleptomaniac and just by saying "Oh that's deadly isn't it", an hour later, when you'd left the shop, he'd say "There you go" and he'd give it to you.

P   What was the question?

D   About the action-figures.

P   Its the same as the comics now, the extent I go to, wanting. I'm probably not as bad as some people: I go in and see people who've paid up months in advance.

D   Really?

P   There's boxes kept for them, full of them down there. I just get the ones I think are cool. Its the same thing. What's happening now with the figure is the same as with comics: there are short print runs on certain ones.

D   Yeah it seems to be...

P   Exclusive editions and all that. I wouldn't always go for them. Sometimes they are the cool ones and you might get one of them and probably end up paying more. I equate the two of them, its pretty much the same for me.

D   How would you collect them? You wouldn't poly-bag them...

P There are people who keep them in the boxes but I just stick them out on the shelf beside each other.

D Apparently if you keep the boxes for toys they're worth more.

A But you can't play with them then (laughs).

P Even... there's price guides for comics, you get Wizard and there's a price guide for figures and there are lists for what they're worth in the box, what they're worth out of it and what they're worth without the accessories...

D And what about the cards? What's the deal with them, do they actually increase in value?

P Apparently they do. I've never seen a price guide on those ones I get. I just get them because I think they're kinda cool. There are rare ones as well that I'd want. Its like: the ones I'd want most are the ones with the characters from the comics I read.

D They probably print less of those.

P Sometimes... you end up with a load of rubbish as well. I've got heaps of those at home, I've got doubles and triples, I've nine or ten of some cards. I'd collect the odd set of trading cards as well when they'd come out, like when the Witchblade ones come out, I'll probably buy a box of them to try and get a full set. That I'd find even harder to explain than comics, why I collect trading cards.

D Why?

P Because they'd say at least you can sit down and read your comics, what are you going to do with trading cards? Stick them in a box and put them on a shelf.

D I was working in the US a few years ago and the local comic shop sold all the baseball cards and all the trading cards as well, they were huge. Most of the comic shops were actually opened at the back of the baseball cards, just to make a bit more money. But the baseball cards and the trading cards are *huge!* You're talking every age group, its a fact of life there. Apparently there was a big slump a couple of years ago because there were too many people trying to buy them so that they'd be worth a bomb after. That's another thing, would you ever buy comics or stuff in the hope of increasing the value?

P Only of the ones that I would read normally. I wouldn't go out and buy something I'd no intention of collecting just because it was a really rare edition or enhanced cover. I have a few special editions or varied covers, embossed stuff...

A   But that's only the stuff that you like.

P   The ones that I read normally. There would be ones that I'd keep a look out for that would be worth a lot, like Gen 13 chromium covered and signed. I'd really love to have that.

A   Yeah.

P   Because they do go up in value, but its just to have it.

A   You'd just really love to have Jim Lee's signature, wouldn't you?

P   Yeah.

A   I've got two. (laughs)

D   Two?

A   Yeah, I've got the Jim Lee Wildcats portfolio signed and I've got the Grifter/Shi signed, so that's two.

D   Today I was looking at Cerebus, you know the big phone directories and there was one with a Christmas card signed by Gerhard and Sim.

P   I've heard that Brian gets a card from Dave Sim every year, not Brian, Rob.

D   I may as well finish there, thank you and goodnight.

ENDS

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