

GRAPHIC NOVELS: A NEW LITERARY GENRE IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

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Although different forms of popular culture are now taken much more seriously by specialists in literature, most current research remains at the level of historical surveys or thematic studies. The lack of useful critical methods becomes apparent when one attempts to analyse a recent phenomenon, the graphic novel. This term was first used in 1978 by Will Eisner, to identify his comic-book collection, *A Contract with God* (Arnold, 2003). Steve Roiteri has defined the graphic novel as “a standalone story in comics form, published as a book” (Roiteri, 2003). This distinguishes the graphic novel from the comic book, which is actually a short magazine, usually about 32 pages in length, published as a serial with a soft cover and on cheap paper. The comic book has always been a very inexpensive product aimed primarily at children and adolescents, though not read exclusively by them.

The graphic novel of recent decades, on the contrary, is an expensive publication on fine-quality paper; it may be soft or hard-covered. Its prospective buyers may be teenagers but are more usually adults. This shift in audience reflects a rise in cultural status for the graphic novel and

comics in general in the last two decades. In North America, it has only been since Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus* won the most prestigious of American literary awards, the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1992, that English-language criticism of comics of all kinds has burgeoned. Spiegelman’s text is about the Jewish Holocaust; it established the notion that comic-book forms could also deal with serious and even tragic themes.

The marketing of this new literary genre in the English-speaking world has been helped by the success of the Japanese version of graphic novels, the manga, among Western consumers. As Sharon Kinsella what is a new form in North America, the book-length illustrated narrative, has been extremely popular in Japan since the 1960s among readers of all ages (Kinsella, 2000, 43). The styles of illustration developed by manga artists were then imitated in Japanese animation films which have gradually entered the Western market. In turn, this has sparked interest among younger Western readers in the manga themselves, so that since the 1990s many manga have been regularly translated into Western languages. In North American bookstores

today, both Japanese manga and Western graphic novels are usually displayed in a single section.

The aim of this article is to look more closely at some recent graphic novels produced by American and Canadian artists, considering what critical approaches best illuminate both the genre as such and the specific narrative style used by each artist. First, however, the Western comic-book genre itself needs to be presented, as its narrative style provides the visual and literary context out of which the graphic novel has grown. Second, a brief review of current theoretical approaches to comics will be given. The third section of this article is devoted to a closer study of four different graphic novels, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (part one, 1986; part two, 1991), Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001), Chester Brown's *I Never Liked You* (2002) and Gregory Gallant's *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken* (2003).

Comics: an introductory history

There is considerable disagreement among historians of popular culture about the origins of present-day cartoon strips and comic books. Much depends on how the cartoon strip, which is the building block used to construct both comic books and graphic novels, is defined. Klaus Kaindl's definition is usefully neutral in tone:

Comics are narrative forms in which the story is told in a series of at least two separate pictures. The individual pictures provide contexts for one another, distinguishing comics from single-frame cartoons. Comics involve linguistic typographic and pictorial signs and combinations of signs as well as a number of

specific components such as speech-bubbles (1999, 264).

It is over the question of speech bubbles that many cultural historians of the comics are divided, with some insisting that any cartoons in which the speech-texts are placed at the bottom of the frame rather than in bubble-like circles connected to the character who is speaking cannot be called comics. The issue takes on a nationalist flavour, with the American David Carrier, for example, claiming that the 1897 American *The Yellow Kid* is the first true cartoon strip (2000, 3–4), while a British critic, Roger Sabin, gives preference to the British tabloid series *Ally Sloper*, published from 1884 (1996, 15). Thierry Groensteen argues that the cartoon strips produced in the 1830s by the Swiss artist Rudolphe Topffer clearly precede any English-language comics (2000, 105–114). In any case, all historians of comics agree that forms of popular visual art that tell a story using a sequence of frames which are accompanied in some way by a text can be found since the early days of printing, but that it was the development of much cheaper photographic processes in the nineteenth century that made it economically practical to sell magazines with many illustrated stories (Sabin, 1996, 12–14; Carrier, 2000, 2–6).

Although comic strips and often comic books have appeared all over the world, they have not entered the cultures of all countries to the same extent. While Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan have been major producers of comics, many other countries have functioned more as importers.

Since the early twentieth century many daily newspapers in Canada and the United States have carried cartoon strips on a daily basis. Being part of daily newspapers gives comic strips a paradoxical status in the culture of these countries, as Carrier observes, for while they have one of the largest markets for any form of popular culture, they are read quickly and then thrown out with the newspapers that print them (2000, 63–65). Carrier places comics into the cultural category of works which straddle traditional generic boundaries: they are in-between works which are viewed as either irrelevant or transgressive by the cultural elite (*Ibid.*, 66). In an interesting way, this sense of marginality has become one of the attractions of the comic book. Sabin calls comics “a private reading space for children, a place where they could negotiate adult power and authority” (1996, 28).

Current theoretical approaches to comics and graphic novels

Outside of the English-speaking world, the primary critical approaches to comics have been based on structuralism and semiotics. Umberto Eco was already writing with insight and sympathy about popular American comics like Superman or the Charlie Brown series as early as 1963 (Eco 1994). French criticism has also been dominated by semiotics; this is the approach taken, for example, by Pierre Alban Delannoy in *Maus d’Art Spiegelman: bande dessinée et Shoah* (2002), the first book-length study of a graphic novel. Delannoy, places the novel in its cultural context and then

focuses on the way in which it brings together different kinds of visual and literary discourse. He calls it a “poetic experience” (Delannoy, 2002, 35) and uses the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony to analyse the different levels of response it evokes from its readers (*Ibid.*, 71).

No English-language criticism of this length on any single work or artist has yet appeared, but in recent years American and British critics have moved away from historical surveys and thematic categorizations to look more closely at the specific nature of comics and graphic novels. Using theories drawn from narratology and film criticism, Scott McCloud emphasizes the need to focus on the interaction of picture and words. McCloud’s book, *Understanding Comics* (1994), is itself a comic book with a caricature of its author leading the reader through the intricacies of terminology and analysis. Like David Carrier (2000, 4, 29), McCloud argues that comics bring together word and picture in a form of discourse that is unique and demands new methodologies of analysis. He also suggests that the radical simplification of the human face used by some of the most successful comic-book artists, allows a process of “universal identification” to take place between the reader and the character so that “We don’t just *observe* the cartoon, we *become* it” (McCloud, 1995, 36; italics in original). In this way he accounts for the addictive kind of relationship many readers develop with comic books.

Another critic, Robert C. Harvey, agrees that the feature that distinguishes comics from other narrative forms lies in the mutual dependence of word and picture,

although, in his opinion, it is rare that a comic strip “exploits to the fullest the specific character of the art form” (Harvey, 1994, 9). In part, Harvey states, this depends on the category of comic strip that is in question. In those sub-varieties in which a long narrative is being told, pictures often become static while the number of words in each frame grows. Although the essentially static nature of such scenes can be masked by varying the angle from which the figures are seen, or moving from medium shots to close-ups, still the balance between the visual and the verbal is upset (*Ibid.*, 10–17).

Interest in this “word/image unity” appears as well in Carrier’s *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000, 4). Like McCloud, Carrier is also very concerned with how comic books engage their readers. He emphasizes the way that comics cross and even break down boundaries: “We expect our world to fit our preconceived stable categories, and so what falls in between is easily felt, depending upon our temperament and politics, to be either exciting or menacing” (*Ibid.*, 70–71).

One of the most theoretically sophisticated studies of comic books to be published in English in recent years is Mila Bongco’s text on language and culture in superhero comics. She points out that the comic-book form allows artists to draw simultaneously on the narrative devices of two modes, one visual, the other linguistic (Bongco, 2000, 56). Bongco emphasizes the significance of the frame, showing how it serves as a unit of composition which can impose order on a narrative, but which can also be disrupted. Often the picture and words violate the boundaries set by the

frame or even the page, thus heightening the dynamism of the actions that are being depicted (*Ibid.*, 56–59).

Thus the greater respect for comic-book narrative in recent years has been accompanied by the appearance of a more flexible critical language. Many critics not only borrow terms from literary or film studies, but also create ones specifically suited to the nature of comic-book art.

Art Spiegelman’s *maus*: the holocaust in comic- book format

At first glance, the choice of a comic-book format to deal with the horrors of the Nazi genocide of European Jews seems highly inappropriate. However, as Pierre Alban Delannoy explains in his study of the text, Spiegelman, the American son of Holocaust survivors, is primarily concerned with finding a form that lets him present his own personal relationship with the Holocaust. The trauma experienced by Holocaust survivors was passed on in a different form to their children, and it is this double trauma, as Delannoy states, that *Maus* depicts (Delannoy, 2002, 12). The main characters in the novel are Spiegelman himself and his father, Vladek, a Polish Jew now living in Brooklyn, New York. Encouraged by his son, Vladek recalls his and his wife’s lives and their experiences under the Nazis. Thus the narrative moves back and forth constantly from a present time in suburban America in the 1970s to the interwar period and then to wartime Poland, especially the death camp of Auschwitz.

Delannoy considers it significant that Spiegelman began his work on *Maus* in

the 1970s, when the children of the survivors reached maturity and were becoming parents themselves (*Ibid.*, 14). It is clear in the narrative that the son needs to come to terms with many features of his father's experience, not the least of which is the resentment he feels against his parents: his mother, who, like many concentration camp survivors, finally committed suicide, unable to bear the weight of her memories, and his father, a difficult man who has often turned his suffering into a weapon against the world.

The first and most startling impression made on the readers of this graphic novel is Spiegelman's decision to follow comic-book tradition in the visual presentation of his characters. In what is known as the 'funny animal' comics sub-genre, all the human characters are depicted as animals: Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs and so on. The title *Maus* itself means 'mouse' in German. Thus the narrative is placed firmly within American comic-book tradition, in which mice often play the roles of heroes. At the beginning of his second volume, Spiegelman even quotes a Nazi condemnation of Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse cartoons as degenerate cultural works, so that in some sense the choice of mice can be interpreted as representing the counter-culture in general.

Nevertheless, Spiegelman does not cast his Jewish characters, especially the figure of the father, as simply victims. He chooses to begin his story with Vladek's earlier life, which was characterized by egotistical self-seeking, and also repeatedly returns to his later life in America, in which he plays a far from admirable role in rela-

tionships with others. In this way Spiegelman undercuts cultural stereotypes about the hero which comic books have tended to propagate.

The artist's choice of a double narrative and his inclusion of himself as a comic book artist driven by his own egotistical needs is postmodernist. The son as presented in the novel is not always sympathetic. In one particularly effective scene, he is depicted working on his novel, first in a close-up showing him wearily leaning on his desk and wondering about his own motivation in creating this work. Then the frame expands to show a mountain of dead bodies under his feet and the gates of Auschwitz. But this vision is again given its ironic counterpoint by a speech bubble in which a film director calls for the cameras to record the scene (Spiegelman, 1991, 41). In a very metafictional narrative game, the way that the Holocaust has sometimes been turned into a commercial product is alluded to here.

Throughout *Maus* the horrors of the concentration camps are set against trivial scenes of family conflicts between Vladek and his second wife Mala, or Vladek and his son. Yet it is evident that these two lines of narrative are not without connections. The Vladek who uses and abuses the love of those around him is not very likeable, but it was the same ability to manipulate people and situations that helped him survive in Auschwitz. Nor is it possible to feel comfortable in condemning this egotistical old man, since the readers have been forced to understand the minute details of the events that shaped his personality. Unlike the typical comic-book charac-

ters, who are stereotyped in all senses and never develop and change. Spiegelman's father and son are multi-layered personalities who often intrigue or surprise the readers. In this way Art Spiegelman succeeds in turning the comic-book genre into a psychological drama that encompasses both tragedy and comedy.

Joe Sacco's *Palestine*

Along with Spiegelman's *Maus*, Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, a cross-over text that turns journalism into the form of a novel, encouraged literary critics who had ignored comics into admitting that the genre could be the vehicle for powerful and aesthetically satisfying works. Sacco, a journalist who has carried out projects in war-torn areas of the world, wrote *Palestine* based on the two months he spent in the Occupied Territories in the winter of 1991–1992, speaking to scores of ordinary Palestinians as well as some Israeli Jews. The novelized series of interviews in comic-book form was published in nine issues from 1993 to 2001; then the whole series appeared in book form. In 1996 the series that had been published up to that point won the American Book Award, a fact that meant that this graphic novel was discussed by serious literary reviewers in the United States and elsewhere.

Like Spiegelman, Sacco turns himself into a major character in the narrative. Sometimes he is the narrator whose words are presented in square-block bubbles. More often he is pictured as the listener to whom Palestinian men and women describe how they were beaten, imprisoned and tortured by Israeli authorities, or how

a friend or family member died violently at the hands of Israeli soldiers.

Sacco does not use the 'funny animal' convention, yet his way of representing human beings visually is definitely within comic-book traditions. All his human figures, including his version of himself, are drawn as caricatures, with special prominence given to mouths, thick-lipped mouths twisted into anger or pain or grief, mouths with prominent teeth that dominate the minimally outlined faces. They are mouths telling stories to an anxious, sombre, sometimes shocked Sacco. From this image the narrative then usually moves into the story past, so that readers see the scenes being narrated, with the narration itself continuing like a voice-over in cinema. Finally each separate story comes to an end, and the images are again those of Sacco listening or walking with a Palestinian guide.

In purely visual terms, Sacco's style is striking and highly dramatic. The individual frames vary enormously in size and shape. Unlike the tight progress of neat rectangles that is typical of most of Spiegelman's pages, here a single frame often fills the whole page; the majority of the pages and double-pages are composed of curving, bulging frames pushing at each other. The coherence and progressive movement in time of the verbal narrative is countered by the uneasy rhythm of the visual blocking, explosive and chaotic like the scenes in the Occupied Territories that it depicts. The feeling of being pushed at from all sides, is one of the themes of the narrative from its opening episode, a full-page panel in which a small, de-centred Sacco is squeezed in the crowded streets of Cairo

and the barroom jokes told by two Arabs (Sacco, 2001, 1). Sacco's eyes are blank circles of eyeglasses; indeed, throughout the 285 pages of *Palestine*, his is the only face without eyes, adding to his stunned, almost foolish expression.

Further pressure on the readers is created by the quantity of texts and the way in which texts push themselves in between figures and objects in the frames. As the comic-book theorist Mila Bongco asserts, the eye in reading comics is drawn first to the images on the page; only gradually do the readers return to the beginning of the text (Bongco, 2000, 46). In Joe Sacco's work, the readers have to make their way through a dense labyrinth of texts, texts complicated by the fact that they are often spoken by more than one character, all of whom seem to be speaking loudly at the same time. The novel suggests the pent-up words waiting for release among Palestinians living in crowded quarters, subjected to the unrelenting pressure of political and economic forces.

Paradoxically, the aggressiveness of Sacco's visual style is counterbalanced by a strong sense of idealism and moral purpose. After an initial period of learning to read this style fluently, the reader is led to the perception not of violence and chaos at the centre of the Palestinian experience, but something profoundly more moving. Through these stories of suffering, humiliation, helplessness and pain, Sacco affirms the principle of human dignity. This respect for human relations appears in the repetition of scenes of eating and drinking, as the journalist is sat down at tables in one crowded home after another and

served with what is available (for example, Sacco, 2001, 16, 60, 64, 70, 131, 152). Respect, too, is affirmed by Sacco's patient listening, which honours the experiences he is told about. Like Spiegelman, Sacco presents an extraordinary story through ordinary people, though the irony the former uses against many of his characters is generally absent in this novel.

What irony there is appears mostly in the depiction of the author himself. Although one cannot speak of parallel story-lines in *Palestine* as in *Maus*, Joe Sacco does create a kind of narrative about the process of journalistic investigation in places of crisis. He presents his comic-book self as a standard character in literature, the quiet, anxious, rather incompetent Everyman caught up in a historical crisis beyond his powers. Nor does Joe Sacco project a stereotypically masculine image. Although the work he is doing is dangerous, he minimizes his own risks and instead emphasizes his fears and sense of inadequacy. After many interviews of Palestinians who were tortured in Israeli prisons, he admits: "Me? I wonder how long I'd last getting the business behind a closed door [...]. Not long I bet, I'm a PussyFirstClass [...] a harsh word and a dirty look and I'd be screaming for Amnesty Int'l" (*Ibid.*, 97; punctuation as in original).

In addition, in a meta-discourse which is also frequently found in Spiegelman's work, Sacco refers to his own project of creating a graphic novel out of his interviews in the Palestinian camps. For example, the opening page of the chapter called "Pilgrimage shows a full-page spread of a street in Jabalia, wind and rain-swept

shanty-town style with housing. Narrative blocks referring to the picture of Sacco and his Palestinian friends sitting on an open donkey cart fly in the wind at the top of the page like bits of laundry hung on lines: “We’ve hitched a lift [...] a donkey cart [...] another authentic refugee camp experience [...] good for the comic, maybe a splash page” (*Ibid.*, 217; punctuation as in original). The irony in this text is heightened by the final narrative block, this one at the bottom of the page, at the feet of a Palestinian woman and her son struggling to walk against the wind: “this is my fourth day in Jabalia, Sameh’s been here most of his life” (*Ibid.*, 217). What is a working visit for the journalist is the hopelessness of whole lives for the camp dwellers.

It seems ironic that two of the most powerful and well-respected graphic novels created by Americans should be about the Jewish Holocaust and the Palestinian tragedy. Art Spiegelman and Joe Sacco’s success demonstrates the range of subject now open to graphic novelists. They can move the comic-book genre from its traditional comic, fantastic and science fiction themes to the historical and psychological without abandoning the basic principles of comic-book art and narrative. In this way the new genre maintains a place in popular narrative while drawing on the qualities of canonical fiction.

Seth’s *It’s a good life if you don’t weaken*

Canadian artists like Seth (Gregory Galant) and Chester Brown have been very strongly influenced by American comic-

book traditions. American comic books have always been sold in large numbers in Canada and, along with American cinema, popular music and television, have long constituted a major cultural force in Canadian society. Nevertheless, there is a distinct difference in tone and style between the leading American graphic novelists and those in Canada. Americans favour a harder and more violent visual style and are more ideologically marked. Even when similar themes are being treated, the pictorial style preferred by Canadian artists is distinctly quieter, more lyrical in its use of spacing and more inclined to privilege picture over words.

The visual sensitivity of Seth’s work has recently won him unusual recognition within the Canadian art world. In the summer of 2005 the prestigious Art Gallery of Ontario acquired one of his works for its permanent collection and also put on a solo show of Seth’s graphic work. Earlier it is unlikely that the notion of so honouring comic-book art would have found support within the world of high culture.

The main character in Seth’s *It’s a Good Life If You Don’t Weaken* is also called Seth and seems to be, as in the work of Art Spiegelman and Joe Sacco, an autobiographical version of the artist. Here, however, the artist’s consciousness forms the main subject of the graphic novel. The text has a number of interwoven plot lines: Seth’s visits to his mother and brother in the small town of London, Ontario, his relationship with his girl-friend, his conversations with Chet, a close male friend (based on Chester Brown), and Seth’s search for information about a now forgot-

ten Canadian cartoonists named Jack Kalloway, who used the pseudonym Kalo.

Although the novel is set in 1986 and there are explicit visual references to the Canada of this time, many of the illustrations evoke an earlier period in Canadian history, the 1930s and especially the 1950s, which the main character says “always seem very ‘Canadian’ to me” (Seth, 2003, 92). Seth often wanders about the areas of Toronto that still have buildings from these earlier periods. Indeed, buildings and industrial structures are reproduced in much greater detail than the human characters, who are depicted in the stylized manner that Scott McCloud argues makes identification easier for the reader (McCloud, 1994, 36). In addition, the visual narrative blurs the distinction between the 1980s and earlier periods through a number of techniques. One is that the main character is dressed in clothes that remind us of the mid-twentieth century, though other people around him may be dressed in fashions typical of the 1980s. Seth himself does prefer to dress in retro style. Besides, the whole text is presented in three colours, black, white and a greyish blue, creating effects reminiscent of the black-and-white movies of the 1940s and 1950s.

As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Seth’s quest for facts about the cartoonist Kalo is related to a search for meaning in his own life. He repeatedly alludes to other cartoonists, doubts his own skill and tries to understand his obsession with both cartoons and the past. Although his relationship with a new girl-friend ends rapidly and bitterly (mainly because he distances himself from her, as he does

from everyone except his friend Chet), still Seth succeeds in speaking to Kalo’s daughter, mother and fellow workers. It turns out that Kalo’s career as a cartoonist was not very successful; after he married and had a child, he gave up cartooning. Yet his mother insists that he was a happy man, and this assertion, given in the closing pages of the novel, provides a sense of quiet achievement in this melancholy story (Seth, 2003, 163).

The novel is visually very beautiful. Seth indicates dialogue with the usual speech bubbles, while the protagonist’s reflections are given in white letters on a black background without any framing, but very often there is no text of any kind. Such pages of pure illustration, most often showing Seth looking at the facades of different buildings, provide periods of meditative tranquillity which invite the readers to consider what human life means, how it is situated in a specific time and place, and how places themselves retain something of the lives once lived in them.

Chester Brown’s *I never really liked you*

The same kind of quietness is evident in Chester Brown’s *I Never Really Liked You*, although the visual style used by Brown is different from that of Seth in many ways. While Seth’s frames fill each page neatly, Brown often varies the number, size and positioning of his frames on a page, and sometimes creates a long pause by placing only one frame on a whole page. Joe Sacco also does something similar, but then he enlarges this single frame in the graphic-novel

equivalent of a film close-up. Brown, on the contrary, uses what cinema calls a long shot, keeping the frame tiny on the large white space of the page. Both Seth and Brown show the influence of film technique, as do almost all contemporary comic-book creators. In Seth's work, however, this shifting of angles and distance is most often used for scenes without any human beings in them, most often for scenes of streets, buildings and means of transportation. In Chester Brown's novel, the human being is always the centre of attention.

Both Canadian artists accentuate the loneliness of the human condition, the difficulties we all have in communicating ideas and feelings, and the fragility of human relationships, but while Seth focuses on his main character's inner world, Brown is more interested in social interaction. Language is used even less often in Chester Brown's novel than in Seth's, but it is almost all dialogue, not monologues as in *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken*.

Brown's *I Never Liked You* belongs to the literary genre of the novel of development or *Bildungsroman*, taking readers from the main character's childhood through the troubled identity crises of adolescence to some form of maturity. It may also be characterized as a novel about the development of an artist, as the protagonist, named Chester like his creator, is a would-be artist who draws illustrations based on comic-book prototypes.

The novel is set in a suburb of Montreal, Chateauguay, the place where the author himself grew up. Quite differently from the complex urban settings which are practically characters in their own right

in Seth's novel, here readers see mostly a single building, the suburban family house and rooms within it. This world is one of children and teenagers; only Chester's mother appears as a significant character from the adult world, while school life is depicted entirely without any visual reference to teachers. All that readers encounter are the pupils coming home from school or talking to each other in study rooms or the cafeteria. This choice reflects the significant concerns of adolescent life: relations with parents and siblings, with school friends and bullies, with the other children in the neighbourhood. Chester falls in love, daydreams about sex, listens to recordings of rock music, watches television, draws pictures and talks to his friends.

Out of these banal everyday activities, Brown constructs the drama of growing up in late twentieth-century Canadian suburbia: the desire to be oneself, resistance to pressures put on the adolescent by parents and classmates, and long periods of self-criticism and self-doubt. Chester often feels trapped within himself: he cannot express many of his strongest feelings and shuts himself off deliberately from the love that others offer him. He both desires love and avoids relationships.

His relations with his mother are handled with particular sensitivity in the novel. When he is still a child, they are able at times to communicate their feelings, as is seen in a very brief episode near the beginning of the novel. The young boy confesses to his mother that he has been trying to juggle an egg and has dropped it. The sequence of frames start in silence with the boy not speaking but clearly troubled. He

leads his mother to the kitchen where the egg lies broken on the floor. The episode ends with the mother suddenly understanding what he is afraid to say, and the warm hug that resolves the tension and expresses her love (Brown, 20002, 13–15).

In later episodes, however, there are many moments of conflict between mother and son. Chester does not want to go to church on Sundays with the family; he refuses to go to the store for his mother. In a pivotal scene he refuses her repeated requests to say he loves her (Brown, 2002, 122–123). At the end of the novel, she has a mental breakdown and is placed in a hospital in Montreal. On his way there to visit her, Chester tells himself that now he will finally speak the words of love she has asked for. However, when he stands beside his mother, now a very ill woman, he finds he cannot speak these words (*Ibid.*, 161–164). With her death, he seems to have completed adolescence.

In the final episode of the novel, he breaks with the girl he has been seeing and chooses solitude. As always in Brown's work, what is not said is even more important than the words the characters do utter to each other. Here Chester is mowing the lawn: his girl-friend walks over and invites him to go to the fair with her and her family. He makes excuses, but she persists, with each frame showing her face in larger and closer focus, while in the frames in which he appears, his face becomes very small. The final frame of the whole novel, alone in the middle of the page, shows two tiny figures seen from the air, he mowing the lawn and she walking away (Brown, 2002, 180–185).

All of these episodes are handled with minimal visual and linguistic means. The narrative rhythm that Brown creates with spacing and silence, as well as with constant shifts in visual perspective, is very striking. In quite a different way than Art Spiegelman, for whom language is always of primary importance, Chester Brown also creates a graphic style with dense psychological implications.

Conclusion

Each of the four artists discussed in this article has a characteristic visual style and narrative manner that enables readers to recognize their work at a glance. Yet all of them continue to have strong ties to comic-book traditions. It is true that thematically their texts represent a major break with the typical concerns of the comic book: none of them feature superheroes or include any elements of the fantastic. Visually, on the other hand, they employ the language of the comic book, both in the way they depict their characters and in their manipulation of the possibilities of the layout of frames on the page. Their stylistic differences demonstrate the freedom the comic-book narrative offers to authors. These four novels, as well as many other ones by a wide variety of artists, challenge literary critics to widen the scope of their research in narrative theory and technique. While traditional comic books may be relegated to the realm of popular culture and so marginalized from academic discourse, the graphic novel, as the works of Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, Seth and Chester Brown show, cannot be pushed aside so easily.

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GRAFINIS ROMANAS: NAUJAS ANGLOSAKŠŲ KULTŪROS REIŠKINYS

Milda Danytė

S a n t r a u k a

Šio straipsnio tikslas yra pristatyti naują naratyvinį žanrą – grafinį romaną (angl. *graphic novel*), kilusį iš komiksų tradicijų. Komiksų vieta Šiaurės Amerikos kultūroje paradoksali; nors jie nuo XX a. pradžios spausdinami beveik visuose JAV ir Kanados laikraščiuose, nevertinami nei kaip menas, nei kaip literatūra. Tik paskutiniame XX a. dešimtmetyje literatūrologai atkreipė dėmesį į komiksus, kaip savitą naratyvinį žanrą: aiškinama, kad būtina analizuoti žodžių ir vaizdų sąryšį, kuris sukuria išskirtinę naratyvinę kalbą. Šią kalbą meistriškai naudoja grafinių romanų kūrėjai – pritaiko ją visai naujoms temoms. Pavyzdžiui, amerikiečio Arto Spiegelmano romanas *Maus* („Pelė“, išvertus iš vokiečių kalbos) pasakoja apie žydų holokausto siaubą. Iš pirmo žvilgsnio atrodo beveik šventvagiška, kad autorius apie žydų kančias Aušvico lageryje pasakoja naudodamasis žinoma komiksų „kalbančių gyvulių“ tradicija. Tačiau A. Spiegelmanas sugeba tragiškus įvykius perteikti ironišku komiksų stiliumi. Jo romane išryškinama

antrosios kartos paveldėta kančia, kuri komplikuoja tėvo ir sūnaus santykius. 1992 m. romanas *Maus* pelnė autoriui prestižinę Amerikos „Pulitzer“ literatūros premiją. Kitas amerikiečių grafinio romano kūrėjas Joe Sacco taip pat domisi istorinių katastrofų poveikiu paprastų žmonių gyvenimui. Romanas *Palestinas* vaizduoja autoriaus klaidžiojimą per palestiniečių pabėgėlių gyvenvietes. Romano įtampa kyla iš autoriaus bendravimo su palestiniečiais – ironijos objektu dažniausiai tampa jis pats, naivus svečias iš turtingų Vakarų. Žinomiausi Kanados grafinio romano kūrėjai Chesteris Brownas ir Seth (rašytojo Gregory Gallanto slapyvardis) taip pat linkę naudoti autobiografinę medžiagą. C. Brownas romane *Tu man niekad nepatikai* (išleistas 2002 m.) galima išvysti *bildungsromano* bruožų. Pagrindinis herojus, kaip ir autorius, vardu Chesteris, augantis Monrealio priemiestyje, turi tipiškų paauglystės rūpesčių. Tik vaikino motinai staiga susirgus nervų liga, susidrumsčia ramus priemiesčio gyvenimas. Chesteris priverstas

subręsti. Seth'o romane *Geras gyvenimas, jei tik nepalūžti* (išleistas 2003 m.) irgi autobiografinis; pagrindinis herojus, kaip ir autorius, vardu Seth'as. Romano veiksmas – Seth'o pastangos surasti žinių apie vieną jau seniai užmirštą Kanados karikatūrininką, su kuriuo Seth'as tapatinasi. Autorius nenori prisitai-

kyti prie Šiaurės Amerikos polinkio greitai užmiršti praeitį, nevertinti jos kultūros. Grafinis romanas apskritai yra iššūkis literatūrologams, verčiantis juos ieškoti naujų teorijų ir metodologijų, pagal kurias būtų galima nagrinėti naują žanrą.

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