Isabelle Murphy

Exploratory Essay

Prof. Ben Cartwright

ENGL& 102

12 March 2026

What is the Relationship Between Comics and Changes in Art Over Time?

Introduction

When I say the word ‘art’, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Is it a famous painting, like *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci or *A Starry Night* by Vincent Van Gogh? Maybe a famous sculpture, like *Pieta* by Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni or *The Rape of Proserpina* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini? Maybe it’s a piece of Japanese calligraphy, or a photorealistic charcoal portrait, or a print you bought from an art market? But whatever you think of, I can bet it wasn’t a comic.

‘Comics’ is a broad term that encompasses multiple different formats. The cartoons and comic strips in the newspaper, the comic books at the local comic book shop, the graphic novels at the bookstore, all of these are comics. All of these include the juxtaposition of words and drawings to convey the context of the scene, usually in a panel format. Famous comics include Batman and Spider-Man, the creations of companies DC and Marvel respectively. They also include the Archie comics, as well as the work of Alison Bechdal, Scott McCloud, Todd McFarlane, and more.

Many people have read comics at least one time in their life, whether by intentionally seeking them out or by stumbling across them in their everyday lives. Many people also have a favorite comic character (or characters), whether for their story

or their character design or just because they think the character is neat. For example, my father's favorite characters are Hägar the Horrible and Dennis the Menace, my mother's favorite is Wonder Woman, my younger brother's favorite is Jughead Jones, my youngest brother's favorite is Alfred Pennyworth, my best friend's favorites are Spider-Man and Gambit, and some of my own are Rogue and Spider-Man. Comics and comic characters influence many things. There are advertisements in a 'comic book' style, there are movies and tv shows about comic characters, there are inspirational quotes by comic characters and comic makers plastered everywhere, even our own motivations and outlooks on life can be influenced by the characters and comic makers we look up to. But, have comics influenced art?

In this essay, I mean to explore the research I have done to answer my question: What is the relationship between comics and changes in art through time? I wanted to explore how comics have influenced the art styles we see in the modern era, how they've changed the way we draw, and how they've changed what we expect from art. I'll go through the main themes I've found in my research throughout this, and hopefully we'll find the answer. I also want to put a disclaimer in that this essay is in a mostly Western, mainly American, perspective, so take this with a grain of salt.

Comics History -or- Comics Influencing Comics

While there have been attempts to combine visual and written elements in art throughout history all over the world, comics really got their start in the Industrial Revolution as a way to test the limits of the printing press. According to Zimmermann, "The means of production directly determined the product: R. F. Outcault's 'Yellow Kid' (1896) was yellow only because this colour was to be tried out in newspaper printing."

(15) They were printed in newspapers to see if newspaper companies could easily include advertisements with images, and eventually color, and art in them. In 2012, Art Spiegelman, the artist and writer behind the *Maus* graphic novels, stated:

> Joseph Pulitzer wanted to bring art to the masses and he wanted to print the world's great art and spent a lot of money making the color press to make it possible. And fortunately, for the degenerates amongst us here, it didn't work. It couldn't be done. The printing wasn't good enough to print the Mona Lisa. It was fine for art with off-register color, and that meant the Sunday supplements got born the way we know them. (21)

They are, inherently, a capitalist invention. Comic strips and cartoons became a success, continuing to be included in the newspaper to this day. They also began to evolve.

The comic book was soon invented, and comic stories quickly began to branch out. Soon enough, every genre you can think of had comics being published about them. There were mystery, crime, horror, fantasy, romance, even erotica comics. Most of these comics were being created by minority groups within the US, exemplified by the fact the heroes were the same. For example, Captain America got his start in comics in 1941 because two Jewish artists, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, wanted to create a story that would show that the ideals of America could defeat Nazi Germany. According to Zimmermann, "Their heroes were outsiders, immigrants and children, who are helpless when exposed to the dangers of the



Captain America No.1 Cover



Clipping from the Vancouver Herald, with a photo from a comic book burning event in Vancouver, Canada, 1954

world but, with a little bit of luck, are able to overcome them." (16) However, this boom was not to last.

With this rise in popularity came a rise in criticism and hatred. All over the world, there were groups that took comic books and burned them to prevent people from reading them. In *Comic Strip as a Popular Art Form*, Hans Dieter Zimmermann states: "...campaign was launched in West Germany which was flooded by American comics after 1945; here the 'fifties brought a wave of opposition to the 'dirt and trash literature'. Comics were collected and publicly burnt in the schools." (13) There were concerns that children were picking up comics, particularly the crime, romance, horror, and erotica genres, and having their morals corrupted by them. Educators were worried that comics would lead to students' literacy rates plummeting. This concern was exacerbated by the release of the book *The Seduction of the Innocent* by Frederic Wertheim in 1954, which just confirmed parents and educators' worst fears. (Zimmermann 13, Nyberg) Spiegelman states in a conversation about the 'sins' of drawing comics:

> ...having instead basically the unwashed and kids as your audience. But all mass mediums are seen as sins because basically we live in a world where if children like something, adults get very frightened, and try to control it. Seduction of the Innocent was a book I found in the library, early on; it

> was responsible for all the comic book burnings. I found it a very useful book because I knew what comic books to buy on the basis of the index in the back. I realized that when we talk about this shifting moment that we've gotten to today, part of it is because when they were burning those comic books, they saw comics as the antithesis to literacy. (21)



Comics Code Authority Seal

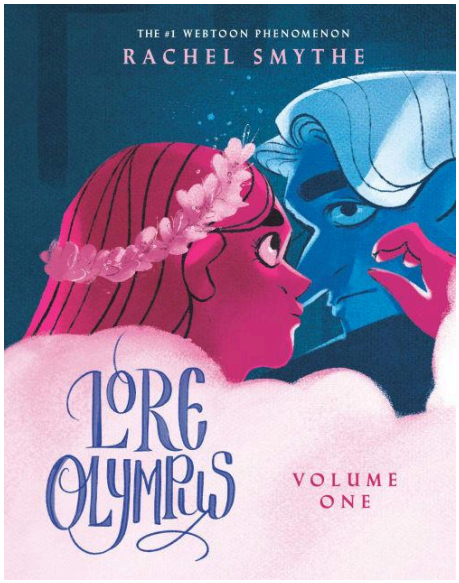
This led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority, a group who created a list of 41 rules for comic book companies to follow in order to be approved. If your comic didn't show the seal of approval, there was a chance that your comics wouldn't sell, or that some comic book stores wouldn't even stock your comic. Some of these rules included: villains and criminals couldn't be sympathetic, no nudity, no allusions to sex or eroticism, respect for government authority must be displayed, among many more. The Comics Code Authority continued to censor and prevent adult themes and content in comics for about 60 years, only finally becoming null and void in 2011. (Nyberg) During this time, the growth of the medium clearly stagnated, becoming specifically catered and made for children and teens. Comics became associated with delinquency and childishness, with teachers confiscating comics brought to read in school and making rules against having them. Only troublemakers read comics regularly, after all. Spiegelman remembered: "...my friend Jay Lynch, an underground cartoonist, used to hide copies of *Playboy* inside his *Mad Magazine*. Then he reached an age where he had to flip it around." (22)

There was clearly still a market for comics and cartoons, and companies like Marvel and DC took over, creating their superhero stories that are still highly influential

today. Many heroes and villains we know and love today - The X-Men, Spider-Man, Daredevil, Batgirl, Darkseid, Starfire, He-Man - were made during this time of censorship.

During this time of growth despite censorship, there were still trials and tribulations for comic creators. Writers and artists were, and still are, overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated. Many times, bigger names in the industry would get their name slapped on a comic, even if they weren't even involved in the process of making it, while the actual creators barely got any mention, if any mention at all. For example, Stan Lee's name is on the title page of all four of the 1995 *Rogue* comics in the run, even though he never touched the comic while it was being made, as he name isn't in the credits, except for saying he 'presents' the comic to the reader. The actual creators of the comics names are tiny, underneath the title of the issue, almost like a footnote. (Mackie et. al 1) However there were still conferences and ceremonies put on by groups like the National Cartoonist Society. According to Art Spiegelman, when he started in the comics industry, it was an unglamorous job that had no recognition, "and the fact that you could fly under the radar and be left alone was an important aspect of being a cartoonist for me." (20)

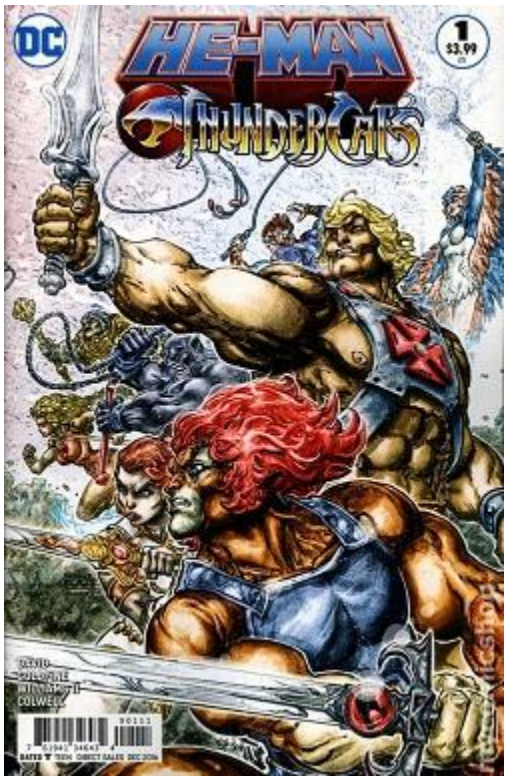
At some point, comics began to spread from the page to the screen, taking the forms of animated cartoons, tv shows, and movies, featuring favorite characters from Marvel and DC. Today, some of the biggest, most popular movies have been a part of either the Marvel Cinematic Universe or the DC Extended Universe. Popular shows have also been inspired by comics, such as *Riverdale*, inspired by the Archie comics, and *Smallville*, inspired by the Superman comics. Comics have also spread to cover more areas. Not only can you find comics in print at your local comic book shop, you can also



Lore Olympus Volume One Cover

find them online in the form of webcomics. Webcomics tend to be self-published and made by a crew of one person, but can end up having a massive cult following on the internet, such as *Lore Olympus* by Rachel Smythe. Such comics, if they become big enough, can have the opportunity to be published in graphic novel form, making sure fans can have a physical copy of their favorite comics, and new fans that wouldn't have read the comic in website form can have access to the story.

Today, traditional comics are still clearly being produced, with expanded topics and characters, now more diverse and more free to explore their own stories, no longer being under the thumb of the Comics Code Authority. While typical comics, such as Marvel's *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, *Avengers* comics, and DC's *Batman*, *Superman*, *Wonder Woman* comics are being made with new runs and new diverse characters are being introduced, these companies, among others, are creating new stories as well, even stories that wouldn't fit their usual mold. For example, in 2016, DC released a short run of comics that were a He-Man and Thundercats crossover, in which the titular heroes had to defeat a team-up between villains Skeletor and Mumm-Ra.



He-Man Thundercats No. 1 Cover

Gone are the days of comics just being for the troublemakers to sneakily read behind another book or in the dark corners of their room. Now, once again, comics are for everyone.

Other Arts Influencing Comics

Comics have always been influenced by art that has come before them. Batman, for example, was highly influenced by gothic literature, among other things. Batman's first villain that he fought in *Detective Comics* No. 31 was known as The Monk, and was highly influenced by Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. There were scenes within that issue inspired by the *War of the Worlds* broadcast. Clayface, first appearing in *Detective Comics* No. 40, was inspired by *The Phantom of the Opera*. In *Batman* No. 1, Prof. Hugo Strange lets loose monsters into Gotham that are inspired by *Frankenstein* and *King Kong*. Two Face's story, beginning in *Batman* No. 3 is highly influenced and inspired by *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Even the character of Batman himself was originally influenced by a combination of mystery films, horror films, and Douglas Fairbanks Sr.'s role in *The Mark of Zorro* in 1920. (Andrae 20-29) You can still see these influences and inspiration in the comics and movies about Batman to this day, as they are now baked into the very essence of the character and his stories.

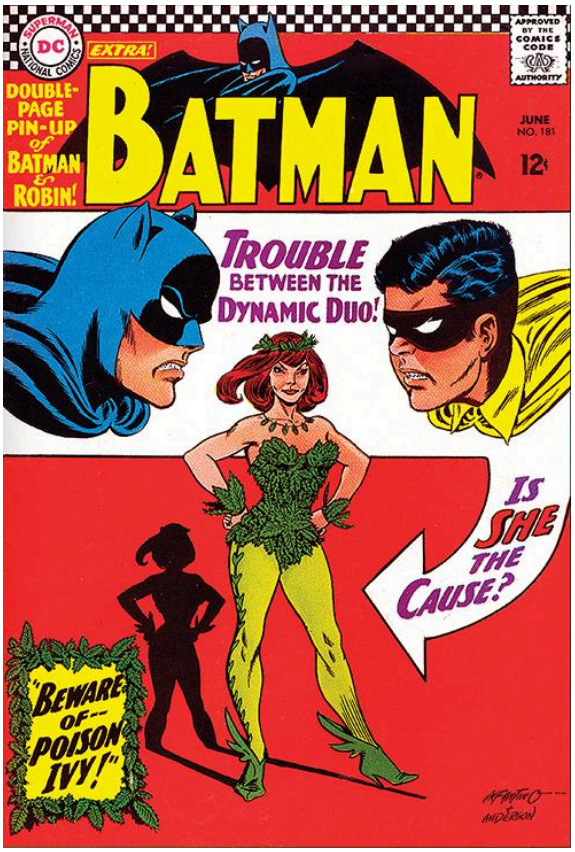
In the 60's, the Pop Art movement gained footing. Artists like Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol were getting the spotlight, and the lowlight. According to Hugo and Frey:

> "To recall the chronology, Lichtenstein's new works were first exhibited in 1962, while by 1964 *Life Magazine* broke pop as a national scandal with its 'Is this the Worst Artist in the World?' provocative intervention. One year

later the tone changed to enthusiastic advice for pop fans, when Gloria Steinem informed readers of the same magazine on the 'Ins and Outs of Pop Culture'." (131)

From this point, Pop Art was used everywhere. Advertising, fashion, interior design, graphic design, even in comics.

In 1965, the company Marvel rebranded themselves, giving themselves a new logo, which gave them the name 'Marvel Pop Art Productions' and put a long rectangle on the left side of the comic cover. The company also began to call their series 'Marvel Masterpieces', as if they were trying to appear more artistic or intellectual. DC quickly followed suit, giving themselves a rebrand as well, creating the 'Go Go Check' design to go across the top of all of their comics. Seeing this, Marvel thought of something else.



Batman No. 181 Cover, with the Go Go Check Logo and CCA Seal



The X-Men No. 14 Cover, with the Marvel Pop Art Productions Logo and CCA Seal

The company took popular series, such as Daredevil and The Mighty Thor, and compiled them into paperback books, making sure the covers fit into the Pop Art aesthetic. According to Hugo and Frey:

> Each of their covers employed intense, clear images of eponymous comic heroes, reminiscent of the core strategy of pop: the magnification of iconic imagery, while also removing or minimizing anything surplus to value. In addition, the blurb on the back covers framed the works as being part of a wider multi-media cultural trend by frequently using buzzwords such as 'groovy', 'hip', and 'cool'... (133-135)

These were obvious ploys to try and sell even more comics, taking advantage of the popularity and talk about the Pop Art Movement. If people could see these designs, and point to a specific popular cultural moment, there was a higher chance that those people would buy the comics. Obviously, these trends didn't last, as these elements are no longer part of Marvel and DC's branding, but it clearly worked for the time, and influenced how comics were seen and how comics continue to be seen.

Comics Influencing Society

Comics, since their beginning, have been influencing society. They're the reason we see images and color in our newspapers now, why images were added to the news in the first place. They're also the reason we have advertisements in the news as well. They influenced society enough in the 50's that people felt the need to censor them for 60 years. They influence the media we see, especially popular movies and tv shows, such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe starting with *Iron Man* in 2008, and the many iterations

we have so far of Batman and Superman stories. They also influence advertising, propaganda, allegories and metaphors, and much more.

They've also influenced society in terms of creating debate. What are comics? Are they art? Are they literature? Are they both? Neither? People have been debating this for years, with no concrete conclusion. There are some people who believe that comics should be their own category within media, not fitting nicely into any other group well.

As mentioned previously, the National Cartoonists Society hosted many events. One of these events was in April 1965, where pop-artist Roy Lichtenstein was in attendance. At this event, he gave the following speech:

> I am honored and very much amazed that you are feeding me in[stead] of stringing me up. I think a good part of the art-world beli[eves] I am polking [*sic*] fun at cartooning rather than at art - which is much closer to the truth. Cartooning is in touch with American life - with modern life.
>
> The kind of cartooning, as you can see, that I am most concerned with, for my own work, is not the kind which looks like art - and often <u>is</u> art - Thurber and Steinberg. But comic book cartooning which is often looked down upon - but which I find interesting and a solution to the problem of wedding painting and poetry. Now I find that intellectuals everywhere have always been great comic book fans. Of course Picasso himself loved the American comics - particularly the Katzenjamer [*sic*] Kids. The reason I <u>copy</u> the cartoons is that, being a <u>fine</u> artist, I don't know how to draw anything.
>
> It's also strange that the only hint of a law suit in this connection has come from a fine art source and not from a cartoonist. Instead, William

> Overgard [*sic*], who does Steve Roper, noticing the striking similarity of one of our works, sent me an original strip which I prize highly.
>
> Of course, what I am trying to establish here is that anyone who sues me is a fink.
>
> But really, I want to thank you for this gratious [*sic*] gesture. (qtd Hugo and Frey, 143)

According to Hugo and Frey, the speech shows that Lichtenstein, in part, is acknowledging comics as their own independent art-form that deserves their own critical acclaim. (144) It shows that even the big artists of the time were recognizing that comics were something else entirely, just waiting to receive their recognition and rewards.

In *Comics and Cartoons: A Democratic Art-Form*, J. Maggio goes over how comics and cartoons are made for creativity in a democratic society, since they are so individualistic. They go through many quotes from other experts in the field of comics, relating them to this concept they stand by. Maggio then states:

> If democratic individualism is fueled by our ability - as sovereign agents - to create our own lives, then comic art is a perfect compliment to such a society. Hence, if liberal-democratic society is based - as Richard Rorty suggests - on our ability to move past the "Greek distinction between appearance and reality," then an art-form with constantly shifting - almost Derridean - notions of meaning is perfect for modern democracy… Traditional literacy is exactly what comic art challenges - and with it whole notions of hierarchical understandings of society and art. Comics - hence - are just one of many keys to breaking down conventional society's

> standards of meaning. Therefore, comics/cartoons are aesthetically supportive of cognitive democratic individualism, and they work as an exemplar of contemporary art in liberal society. (238)

Here, Maggio states that comics change society by challenging norms in art and society, providing a perfect medium to represent our democratic society in the modern era, if people just realize this capacity and accept that comics are the current peak of democratic, individualistic art.

Meanwhile, at the end of her essay *The Bastard Child of Art & Literature: The Graphic Novel's Appeal to High Art*, Anna Bobok states:

> Perhaps trying to fit the graphic novel into either of its parent mediums is a fruitless search because neither has the capacity to fully accept its legitimacy in either of their cannons [*sic*]. Perhaps it is time for the graphic novel to chart its own path as the legitimate and prestigious medium it is on its own. (12)

While this sentiment is about graphic novels, which some people may consider as different from comics, the statements reflect sentiments also about comics and comic books.

Comics Aren't Art

While there are people arguing that comics are highly influential in all aspects of society, and saying they belong in their own category of media, the opposite is also true. Since their invention, there have been people who have argued against the existence of comics. As previously stated, people used to gather comics and burn them, argue against their existence, and claim they were bringing literacy rates down and delinquency rates

up, among other things. The most infamous incident of this is the publication of the book *The Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. But there have been other public instances of the degradation of comics, such as the photo from the Vancouver Herald in the Comics History section of this essay, which shows Len Wynne gleefully throwing horror comics into a bonfire. Another one of these instances, though lesser in intensity, is an interview with the infamous Roy Lichtenstein. According to Hugo and Frey in *Comics Culture and Roy Lichtenstein Revisited: Analysing a Forgotten 'Feedback Loop*':

> When [David] Pascal asked Lichtenstein if he was a comics fan, the artist replied that he had not been and he had only recently discovered how people appreciated them so much. He added that he was not an expert, but he found himself reading the comics and was often 'completely absorbed by them'. In the same interview Lichtenstein underlined that he did not see comics as the same as art but rather as constituting a different form of visual stimulation - one that he found exciting. Comics offered him something interesting even if they were not a fine art form. (145,146)

Here a popular fine artist of the time, whose work's backbone is the work of comic artists, states that comics are merely a form of visual stimulation, like short videos on social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube today.

There are also just specific problems about the language of comics that conjure up specific thoughts when those things are brought up. According to Katherine Roeder in *Looking High and Low at Comic Art*:

> The classification "comic art," for example, is problematic because it carries the implication that humor is an essential component of the work. Clearly, there is a strong tradition of satire and slapstick in comics, but

> there is an equally robust thread of action and adventure serials... The issue is further complicated by the distinctions made between comic books and graphic novels. The term "graphic novel" suggests a self-conscious distancing from the world of comics; it implies a more elevated and serious endeavor.

In thinking about the terms 'comic book' and 'graphic novel', one realizes their words mean essentially the same thing, one is just using words that conjure an image of something more sophisticated. You assume a comic book will be short and funny, easily digestible, while assuming a graphic novel will be long and serious, needing time to fully understand what is happening within the story.

Issues of what comics are also come up from the origins of comics and what the medium really is in its bones. Roeder continues:

> Clearly tensions arise when they [comics] are approached with a critical eye. The juxtaposition of word and image results in a hybrid medium that is rarely treated in its entirety by scholars embedded in their respective fields of literature or art. Thoughtful analysis of comic art requires attentiveness to both its visual and verbal modes of address, two distinct languages that may at times work against each other.

As stated, professionals and scholars tend to have focus on one area: art or literature. The fact that the medium is, inherently, both, causes confusion and resistance from groups who prefer to work within the confines of categories. It must be one or the other, it can't be both. This causes people to feel that they must categorize comics into one or the either, meaning that there are going to always be people who feel that comics are not, and will never be, art.

Comics Influencing Art?

But wait, what about comics influencing art? Well, surprise! There has never been a paper or study published about this topic. Super helpful for research purposes. Even though I - as an untrained non-professional artist - can see the influences, nothing has been said about the topic. There is clearly a gap in the study of art and art history that someone could look into and fill in.

But now the question is: Why hasn't this topic been covered? Within my research, I've come up with the following hypothesis. Comics are not traditionally associated with art, therefore the idea of them influencing visual arts isn't the first thought that comes to mind. But, why is that? The 60 years of censorship from the Comics Code Authority, for starters. The Comics Code Authority made sure that comics could only follow specific rules to be certified and published, and made sure that these rules made comics kid-friendly. This infantilization and degradation of comics and comic stories made sure that comics were looked down upon, and not allowed to realize their full potential. It's also made sure that comics are associated with children, and therefore associated with poor storylines, similar to how Hollywood elites treat animation.

This has also led to comics being separated from other mediums. Within the Spokane County Library District, or SCLD, according to Collection Services Specialist Natalie Murphy, comic book issues fall under 'serials', which are placed with magazines and handmade zines. Comic compilations, such as volumes of *Peanuts*, are categorized under non-fiction with a Dewey Decimal number in, specifically, the 740 range. All other non-fiction books about fine arts are elsewhere in the range between 700 and 800. Graphic novels are specifically labeled with a sticker that states that they are, in fact, graphic novels, no matter if they're fiction or non-fiction, and are kept separate from all

other genre fiction, no matter what genre the graphic novels actually are. This means a graphic novel set in a fantasy realm with a fantasy storyline will not be placed with other fantasy books, simply because it's a graphic novel. The same thing happens in book stores, such as Barnes & Noble or Spokane local ones such as Auntie's and Wishing Tree.

We've been without the Comics Code Authority for roughly 15 years at this point, and comics have finally been allowed to flourish and expand into more adult stories, having adult themes like they had before 1954. Public opinion has been coming around on comics, exemplified by my own mother's opinion going from 'you can't include comics on your reading log because they're lesser and not literature', making my experience with comics as a child reminiscent of having to hide your comics in other books, to 'I'll fully support your career choice to create your own comics', making my experience with comics now based in enjoyment and inspiration. However, professional opinions are slower to change on these sorts of things. Art historians are still having a hard time writing about comics influencing things outside other comics, though they're more than happy to write about 'fine' arts and literature influencing comics. In the words of Eric Smoodin, "It seems as if, in the early stages of writing about comic strips, comic books, and cartoons, many historians are still working toward a suitable language and an appropriate critical methodology." (131) Toshio Watanabe also speaks on this in *Art History and Comics*, though he speaks mostly of Japanese manga, he goes into how art historians and professionals within the art field must begin to adapt to include comics, cartoons, graphic novels, and manga in their research, figuring out the language to speak on these mediums fully and respectfully. (19)

Hopefully, with continued freedom in the realm of art and comics, there will continue to be expanded creation and study of the medium. But, this might not end up

being the case without public support. The series of events that happened in the 50's is the same series happening currently about many books and libraries that carry them around the United States, in places like Idaho, Tennessee, Alabama, Louisiana, and Florida. If someone told me *The Seduction of the Innocent* was published today, I wouldn't be surprised. And as a reminder, the moral panic in the 50's resulted in the creation of censorship mechanisms such as the Comics Code Authority and the Hayes Code, which was a similar set of rules for movies. If we don't stop history in its tracks soon, we'll likely end up with similar codes, once again suppressing creativity and diverse stories, even though we've only had 15 years of freedom from censorship codes in the comics-verse.

I'm older than the voiding of the Comics Code Authority. I don't want to be older than the creation of a new Comics Code Authority. A new Comics Code Authority will also stunt the growth of the study of comics, which will prevent information about their influences from being realized and spreading once again.

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