The New Superheroes: A Graphic Transformation

By Arlen Schumer

Comic-book art has always been graphic design. Converting an already unique form of verbal-visual communication—the comic strip—to book form, comic books created their own graphic design vocabulary with symbols, styles, and structures born of that form: page-turning, sequential graphic storytelling. The American comic book as we know it turned 50 last year, having gone through an extensive refining and extension of that vocabulary. In the process of refining its hybrid of story and illustration, it has made a significant contribution to the art of book and publication design.

It has produced the graphic novel, itself a hybrid made by hybrid creators: writer/artists, artist/designers, designer/illustrators, draftsmen/painters, etc. These new artists are in fact comic-book iconoclasts, tearing down previous notions of what comic-book art should look like, how comic-book art should tell stories, and the signs and symbols it should use to tell them.

Among this new breed of artists, who include practitioners partial to quirky humor and graphic styling in short takes and those who prefer to express their visions in extended, psychologically searching personal narratives, are writer-artists devoted to the resurrection and renovation of the superhero.

Superheroes have always been a staple of the medium; their development and growth as a genre paralleled that of the comic book itself in the 1930s and '40s. The first comic book, a package of newspaper comic-strip reprints, appeared in 1933; it wasn't until publishers began running out of strips to reprint that the first comic book of original material on a single theme—Detective Comics #1—was published in 1937 by National Comics (later known by the initials of its fledgling experiment, DC Comics). During this same period, by a coincidence that was to have glorious consequences for DC, two Cleveland teenagers—writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster—began creating an adventure comic called Superman which they intended for publication as a strip in leading newspapers. After four years of rejection by all the major syndicates, however, they sold it in 1937 to National Comics, which was eager for a successor to Detective Comics #1. Siegel and Shuster's Superman presentation strips were pasted up in the new comic-book form and debuted in Action Comics #1 in June 1938. The rest is comic-book, and pop-culture, history.

Batman, co-created by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, appeared a year later in the pages of Detective Comics #27, and like Superman, was an instant success, solidifying National's position as industry leader. Taken together as symbols, Superman and Batman represent the two sides of the superhero coin: one light, one dark; one a god, one a man; one with powers inherited, the other self-made.

The third archetypal superhero, Captain America, created by writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby, and published by Timely (later Marvel) Comics in April 1941, embodied the fervent patriotism that was building even before the U.S. entered World War II. The co-opting of the superhero as super-soldier cemented the superhero's popularity; other superheroes went to war, too, and sales soared into the millions.

After the war, however, superheroes fell out of favor as the comic-book audience turned to other genres: romance, funny animals, crime, and horror. U.S. Senate hearings in the mid-1950s linked...
crime and horror comics to juvenile delinquency and sounded the death knell for those genres, a circumstance which indirectly led to a superhero revival by DC Comics in the latter part of the decade. For to fill the gap, DC took their “retired” heroes from the war years and updated them to fit newly developing science-fiction and pseudo-futuristic story lines.

DC’s success with these revampings pressured the competition, Marvel Comics, to follow suit. Writer/editor Stan Lee, who had been with Marvel since the early ’40s, was entrusted to come up with a version of DC’s Justice League of America, a team including all the revived superheroes. Lee began to develop superheroes who talked and behaved more like realistic, believable adults. The result, The Fantastic Four, appeared in 1961 and ushered in what Lee called “the Marvel Age of Comics.”

Lee combined soap-opera-influenced story structures and breezy light comedy to counter the rather solemn self-righteousness of the DC superheroes, effectively making Marvel’s the first comic-book anti-heroes. Spiderman, who debuted in 1962, was the epitome of this approach.

Providing a counterbalance to the pseudo-realism of Lee’s writing was the power-packed, dynamic artwork of Jack Kirby, who went on to create, with Lee, the basic stable of Marvel Comics heroes. Kirby’s were heroic figures of mythic proportions (and origins) such as
Thor and Hercules, who battled against mural-like backdrops of the cosmos, the Kirby universe exploded with concepts and characters that appeared to leap off the page. By the time he left Marvel in 1970, he had created a house style that endures to this day.

If Kirby’s approach to anatomy is the ultimate in larger-than-life, dynamic exaggeration, Neal Adams’s style is the opposite. Adams came to DC Comics in 1967 after honing his talents on Ben Casey, a comic strip based on the television show. His prior experience in magazine illustration and creating comics for advertising also helped develop realistic rendering techniques: his pen-and-brush inking style made Adams the true successor to Milton Caniff, who had set the previous model for inking in his comic strip Terry and the Pirates. When applied to the fantasy world of superheroes, Adams’s techniques served to make them visually believable in ways that comic-book characters had never been before. He endowed his characters with a full range of facial expressions and emotions; his command of perspective and foreshortening, combined with a respect for accurate anatomy, allowed his heroes to leap and fly in smooth, flowing movements. Adams once remarked that if superheroes really existed, they would have to look like the ones he drew.

Adams applied his style to a range of DC heroes, but his crowning achievement was in single-handedly rescuing Batman from the fallout of the campy TV version of the strip (1966-68) and returning him to his original conception as a Shadow-like creature of the night.

By the early 1970s, Adams’s style had become the model for younger artists seeking to break into the comics field; ironically, his style is responsible as
much for the bad as for the good in today’s comic-book art. The new comic-book artists, in reaction to his model, are breaking free from the shackles of “realism” and creating new drawing and illustration styles.

Walt Simonson was one of the first artists to introduce an unorthodox drawing style to mainstream superhero comics in 1973 with *Manhunter*, a backup feature in Batman’s Detective Comics. A graduate of Rhode Island School of Design with a degree in illustration, Simonson couldn’t throw off his academic influences; his line was looser, sketchier, more graphic. His lettering of sound effects had a typographic feel and was carefully designed into his panel compositions, unlike the customary oversized, Pop-art pows and zaps. The influence his work in *Manhunter* had on the rest of the field was in inverse proportion to that feature’s second-string status.

Their liberating effect was not lost on Bill Sienkiewicz, who shares with Chaykin a preference for distancing himself from comic-book influences and for digesting and regurgitating styles and techniques of illustrators past and present. Sienkiewicz launched his career ten years ago drawing *Moon Knight*, a Marvel-Comics version of *Batman*, in an uncanny line-for-line Neal Adams style that fit the character but trapped Sienkiewicz in Adams’s shadow. He knew he had painted himself into a corner; years later, he observed, “In American comics, you’re expected to develop a style at a very early age and you can’t deviate from it. If you take from other sources, you’re indicted for ‘swiping.’ But I wanted to try something different and go on learning.”

Among those who drew inspiration
from Simonson's stylized line was Howard Chaykin, one of the young comic-book artists who followed in the wake of Neal Adams. His divergence from Adams’s path led him, in the late 70's, to become among the first to experiment with the fully painted graphic-novel format. One of these projects was an adaptation of a novel by science-fiction writer Michael Moorcock, The Swords of Heaven, The Flowers of Hell (1979). Years later, in an introduction to a collection of Chaykin’s other works, Moorcock recalled Chaykin’s having “benefited from the discipline of the standard comic-book format the way some of us benefited from learning our trade as magazine or newspaper writers and others gained, like the Beatles, say, from the ‘tyranny’ of the old two-and-a-half minute single.”

Chaykin’s works from this period displayed an enthusiasm for pushing pen-and-ink-based comic-book art into mixed-media.

He was clearly inspired not only by Golden-Age illustrators like Leyendecker and Robert Fawcett, but also by the painterly influences of such contemporary illustrators as Bob Peake. Chaykin’s compositions spread across bindings, overlapped captions and panels with purely graphic, design-oriented backgrounds, and often used typeset type in lieu of hand-lettered word balloons. He eventually abandoned the medium to devote most of his time to advertising art and illustration (he returned to mainstream newsprint comics with fresh inspiration in 1983). But his trailblazing painted comics, Empire (1978) and an adaptation of Alfred Bester’s The Stars My Destination (1979), had left their mark.

Following Simonson’s lead, Sinkevich...
wicz loosened up his drawing and stylized his line; images became less representational and more symbolic. He took pen-and-ink as far as he wanted to go, and then, with Chaykin as inspiration, began painting his pages. Though he has gone on to become the most prolific painter in the comic-book field, creating covers, posters and pages for a variety of publishers worldwide, he is perhaps best represented by two fully painted graphic novels created in collaboration with writer Frank Miller—*Daredevil: Love and War* (1986) and *Elektra: Assassin* (1986-87), both published by Marvel. In these works, Sienkiewicz interprets the narrative by furiously juggling a variety of styles, often on the same page. Miller observed that Sienkiewicz was “in a struggle with mixed media, developing a way to use all the illustration techniques at his disposal, to bend them all to the purpose of cartooning, that is, to express emotion and story content, using an orchestra of technique.” That orchestra is comprised of illustrators Ralph Steadman, Gerald Scarfe, and Bob Peak, painters Egon Schiele and Francis Bacon, and animators Tex Avery and Chuck Jones. “I try not to have a style,” Sienkiewicz was quoted in an ad for Eclipse Comics in 1988. “I want to have what I’m working on be designed with all the elements that will get the idea across—so my pieces are sometimes cartoonier, sometimes darker, grimmer, sometimes slick—it depends on what the piece really calls for.”
kieczwcz often uses collage, pasting up pages with the help of Xerography. For example, a character from *Elektra: Assassin*, a yuppie demagogue presidential aspirant named Ken Wind, is given the same photocopied head throughout the novel, no matter what direction his body faces.

The use of collage in comic-book art was taken even further last year by artist John Totleben, whose intricate, engraving-like inking style in DC's *Swamp Thing* first called attention to his work in the mid '80s. Exploiting the new laser-scanned printing methods, Totleben combined paper swatches, photography, sculpture, and assorted visual scrap—one page weighed over 30 pounds—for a precedent-setting, all-collage issue of *Swamp Thing*, with overlaid typeset captions. "I wanted to do comics that didn't really look like comics," Totleben recalled. "I have more of a painter's way of thinking, where I use all the elements and basic theories of art and put them together in whatever ways I want to."

Indeed, new technologies as much as the inventiveness of contemporary artists have helped create the new graphics of comic-book art. Comic-book colorists, for example, used to work with a limited palette of mechanically-separated screened color—those infamous dots!—but now, methods like blue-line, which duplicates the black line art onto illustration board in non-reproducible blue-line, allow for any number of hand-rendered, full-color techniques, from concentrated watercolor dyes and airbrush to colored pencil and pastels. By their exploration of these techniques, artists like Lynn Varley, Steve Oliff, John Higgins, and Bill Wray have elevated the former credit of "colorist" to "color artist."

At the opposite end of the spectrum
from hand-painted work are computer graphics. It is a testament to the vitality of comic-book art that it can support experiments in two such disparate media. The primary exponent of computer graphics in comic-book art is Michael Saenz, creator of Shatter (1984), the first comic book drawn on a computer (the Apple Macintosh). In Shatter, a Blade Runner-influenced science-fiction story, Saenz digitized hand-drawn images and backgrounds and combined them with computer-generated type to produce black-and-white line art that was then hand-colored. Though the achievement was impressive, many critics cited the too-large dot matrix and the repetition of imagery as drawbacks; they debated whether computer graphics even had a place in comic books. Saenz ironed out most of Shatter’s bugs with this year’s Crash, a trade paperback published by Marvel under its upscale-quality Epic imprint. Working this time exclusively on the computer, Saenz took full advantage of its richly varied store of colors and its three-dimensional drawing systems. The resulting illustrations are rendered in a tighter, smaller dot to give Crash a state-of-the-art look—a look which fits the story of Iron Man set in a technologically advanced future. In the course of their work on the project, Saenz and producer/programmer William Bates created new software (Lithographer) that is now commercially available from Apple.

Typography, long neglected in comic books because of the tradition of hand lettering, has also made a distinguished appearance during the last decade. Varied with numerous photo-optical effects, type has changed the look of the comic-book title page, traditionally referred to as the “splash” page because it was the
opening page and often the only one in the book with a full-page illustration. At one time, it carried just a diminutive credit box if it carried one at all. But today, for example, Dean Motter’s double-page (inside front cover and first page) title pages for Vortex Comics’ Mr. X, a series he conceived, writes, and art-directs, make the credits the star of the “splash.” Motter, whose design sense was honed during a stint as art director for CBS Records in Canada, mixes optically-altered display and text type with photographic backgrounds, spot-varnishes, and starting color combinations that set his title pages apart from others, and have been widely imitated.

Typesetting and hand-lettering coexist quite peacefully in calligrapher Ken Bruzenak’s work for a number of Howard Chaykin projects. Chaykin, influenced by Walt Simonson’s typographic hand-lettering, first worked with Bruzenak on American Flagg, the title that brought Chaykin back to comics in 1983. With Chaykin as art director, Bruzenak designed sound effects and other verbal data—the background signs, symbols, and logotypes that were so much a part of the Flagg milieu—so prominent that an additional layer of textures was laid over Chaykin’s already dense visual track. Bruzenak is today considered the top hand-letterer in the field.

In the past ten years, every facet of the structure of comic books has undergone intensive re-evaluation. Outdated, formulaic cover design—like placing the title at the top of the book so it could be readily identified in a rack of comics, or the necessary inclusion of the title character—has been abandoned. Today, abstract designs, painted illustrations, typeset logotypes, and occasional embossing or other printing effects have
made comic-book covers resemble mainstream book covers more than ever. Now that they find it profitable to print higher-quality comic books for a smaller, more discriminating audience (with higher disposable income), publishers, once beholden to advertisers, can eliminate most of the ad pages. Unhampered by advertising, covers are free to wrap around; inside front and back covers, once the province of X-ray specs and 1001 toy soldier novelty ads, now serve as graphically dynamic endpapers.

Nowhere are these innovations more apparent than in the two giants of contemporary superhero adventure, Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*.

Writer/artist Frank Miller entered the field in the late '70s as a penciler, and proceeded to turn it on its ear with a near-total reworking of Daredevil. In revamping this second-string Marvel superhero, Miller cannily combined a film noirish atmosphere from Adams's *Batman* and Will Eisner's *The Spirit* with classic Marvel slam-bang action. But the key new ingredient Miller added was an emotional depth to the writing of the character that gave another dimension to Daredevil's role as a vigilante.

This theme was later played out fully in *Dark Knight* (1986), a four-volume, serialized graphic novel published by DC Comics that postulated a 50-year-old Batman coming out of retirement to save a Gotham City ravaged by street crime. At first, Miller's near-alcoholic Bruce Wayne, aging in the manner of Clint Eastwood, wrestles with his dark side, suppressing it, until circumstances provoke the Dark Knight's return in all his former glory. Dedicated to original Batman creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger,
as well as animators Max and Dave Fleischer—for Miller’s Gotham City is
the Metropolis of the classic Fleischer Superman cartoons of the ’40s—Dark
Knight contains lengthy sections of nar-
ritive interspersed with full-page illus-
trations that embody the more mythic
aspects of the Batman character: crea-
ture of the night, guardian of the people,
and heroic model to the young, particu-
larly to Robin, who is recast by Miller as
a girl, an East-Village punk with 3D
glasses.

More importantly, Miller restored
Batman’s original outsider status as a
vigilante, and a murderous one at that,
much to the chagrin of the Gotham City
Police Department and various Left-
leaning pillars of society who see Bat-
man’s vigilante tactics provoking crime
rather than preventing it. As Micael Gil-
more observed in Rolling Stone, “In
Miller’s hands Batman is bigger than a
comics icon: He is a violent symbol of
American dissolution and American ide-
alism.” Miller dug even deeper for his
inspiration; like the legendary Golem
Judaic myth, brought to life from clay to
protect the ghetto, Miller’s Batman is an
almost elemental force, summoned as
much by a society in need of heroes as
by Bruce Wayne’s need to feel young
again. “Dark Knight is a serious effort to
make a contribution to the whole idea of
the superhero,” Miller has said, “to keep
all of the history but at the same time
move it all into the present.”

The success of Miller’s revamped
Daredevil had won the artist wunderkind
status, and, consequently, DC’s carte-
blanche to toy with other established
characters. * It also encouraged the
publisher to increase the budget for Dark
Knight’s production. Perfect-bound and
covered with heavy stock, the volumes

* Since the overnight success of Superman in a variety of
pop media spawned literally hundreds of eped instan-
tions, the major comics publishers strictly protected their copy-
rights, prohibited stylized portrayals of licensed charac-
ters, and permitted only “official” versions. After the
comics sales boom of the late ’60s, the commercial licens-
ing of superhero characters for merchandise other than
were printed in four-color process (blue-lined by Lynn Varley) on quality paper, and instituted what has become known as the "prestige" format. On completion of the serialization, the separate volumes were collected in hardcover and trade paperback editions co-published by DC's parent company, Warner Communications, with an eye toward penetrating mainstream bookstore chains. The success of Dark Knight in this arena is evidenced by a growing number of similarly produced editions, not only from DC but also from Marvel, Eclipse and First Comics.

At the same time that Miller was re-making Batman, two Englishmen across the Atlantic—writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons—were working on similar themes in Watchmen, a complex, densely-textured story of a group of aging superheroes outlawed as vigilantes in an America where Nixon is still President after winning the Vietnam War. A 12-issue serialization published by DC in 1986-87, Watchmen is a philosophical mystery-adventure story about the collapse—and eventual rebirth—of society that suggests Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged with superheroes; but Watchmen is also writer Moore's affectionate wink at the myths of superheroes and how they might actually operate in the real world.

Moore's key character, The Comedian (whose murder sets off the novel and whose life is told in flashbacks), is a cross between Jack Palance and G. Gordon Liddy playing Captain America as black comedy: the patriotic hero gone to seed, still singing with the band as the ship of state goes down. He wears a "Have a Nice Day" smiley-face button, the pervasive symbol of modern times, as much a representation of the mid-decade '70s as the peace symbol was of comic books generated more income than the sale of the books themselves. However, because Daredevil was a second-string hero with sagging sales and no real commercial potential, Marvel gave Miller free rein to experiment. The revitalized Daredevil's success paved the way for the renovations of other superheroes and the loosening up of strictly licensed portrayals.
the '60s. To this circular face, Moore and Gibbons have added a drop of blood splattered in the vague shape of a watch hand, perhaps suggesting the fatal toll that idealism-turned-cynicism extracts from its bearer. This image became a kind of logo for *Watchmen*, a graphic novel built around symbols and the numbers one through 12.

The back covers of each of the 12 issues carried the nuclear clock ticking away the last 12 seconds, underscoring the running backdrop of looming nuclear war; each front cover was an extreme close-up of the first panel on page one. And if you line up all 12 sets of encappers end to end, they spell out the *Watchmen* logotype. “What we did when we approached *Watchmen* was to design it as a novel,” Moore recalled. “We knew what was in each of the 12 chapters. We knew the various design elements, so that we could work upon it as a coherent whole. One of the things that we’ve done with *Watchmen* is to try and come up with a work of comic art that has effects in it which no other medium could successfully duplicate.”

Discussing his approach to page and panel design, designer/illustrator Gibbons explains: “What we wanted to do with *Watchmen* was to make the story the paramount thing, and it seemed to me that if all the pictures were the same size, you’d get the same effect that you’d get in the theater or at the cinema or even watching TV. Because the frame or the proscenium arch is always the same, you block it out, and get sucked into the picture that much more quickly.”

Gibbons’s work is deceptively simple-looking because he applies this ordered discipline to his panel compositions, and subordinates his artistic ego to the primacy of the story. ‘I try to make the
pictures read as almost abstract compositions, and then put all the details in as a secondary thing so the picture isn’t swamped by detail,” Gibbons continues. “It isn’t just an agglomeration of detail; it’s detail subordinate to the storytelling aspect of the picture. Although this might work against my being regarded as a really great artist, I actually am quite happy if the reader gets so involved in the story that he almost forgets that they are drawings, if that’s possible.”

Gibbons’s collaboration with Moore redefined the relationship between word and image in comic-book art. Moore, a writer/artist (he has a comic strip syndicated in England called Maxwell the Cat), functioned with Gibbons as an advertising copywriter who also art-directs. A typical Watchmen caption is a pun on the action pictured or vice-versa, like an ad headline combined with a dynamic visual, each meaning nothing without the other supporting it. As Frank Miller remarked about one of his own collaborations with Bill Sienkiewicz, “The illustrations are not really illustrations of what’s going on. The narration isn’t really describing what’s going on; either. There’s a gap there, and somewhere in that gap is reality.”

That gap is the subtle interplay between word and image that is the core—and the challenge—of comics. And it is this challenge which precisely defines the new graphics of comic-book art.

59. First panel of Watchmen No. 1 from which a detail was taken for front cover of issue (Fig. 56). Art director: Richard Brunning; designer: Dave Gibbons; writer: Alan Moore; colorist: John Higgins; © 1986 DC Comics, Inc.


7. Ibid., page 100.