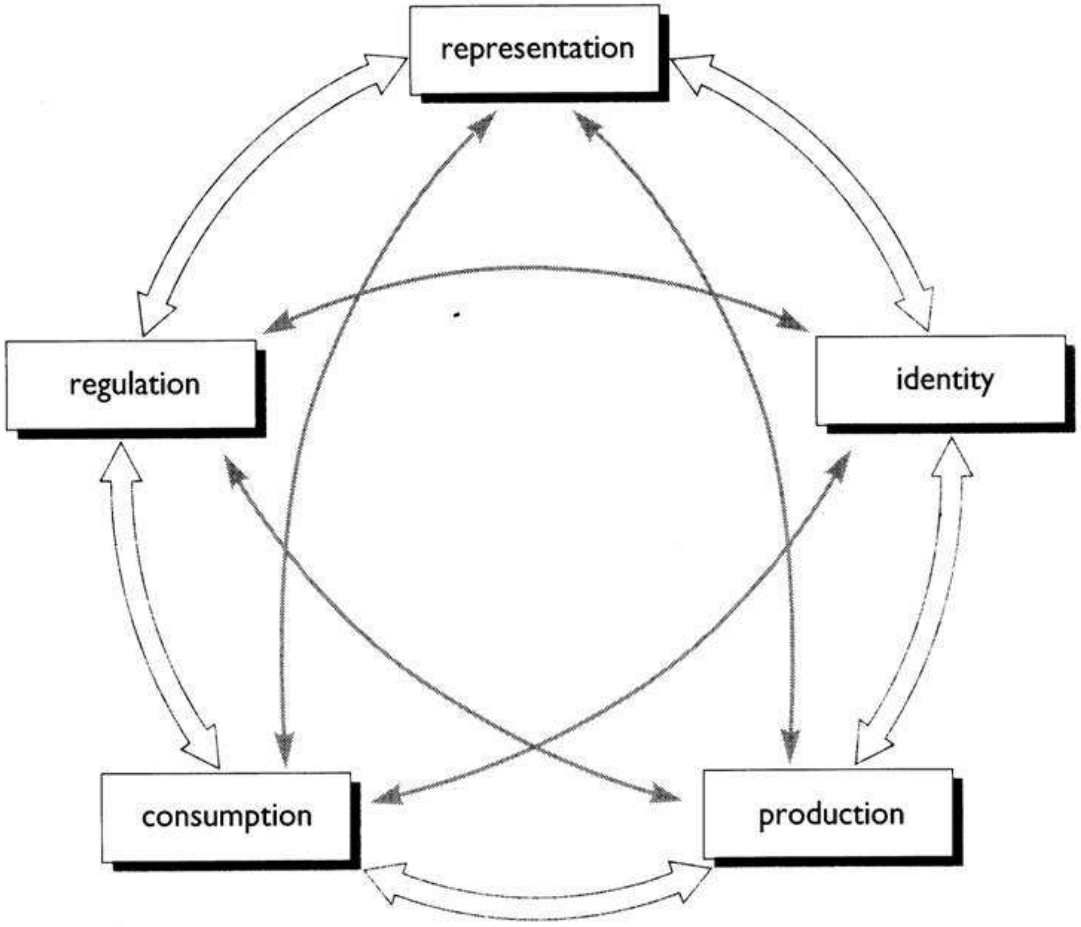
Before and After the Big Three

Dark Knight Returns, Watchmen, and *Maus*

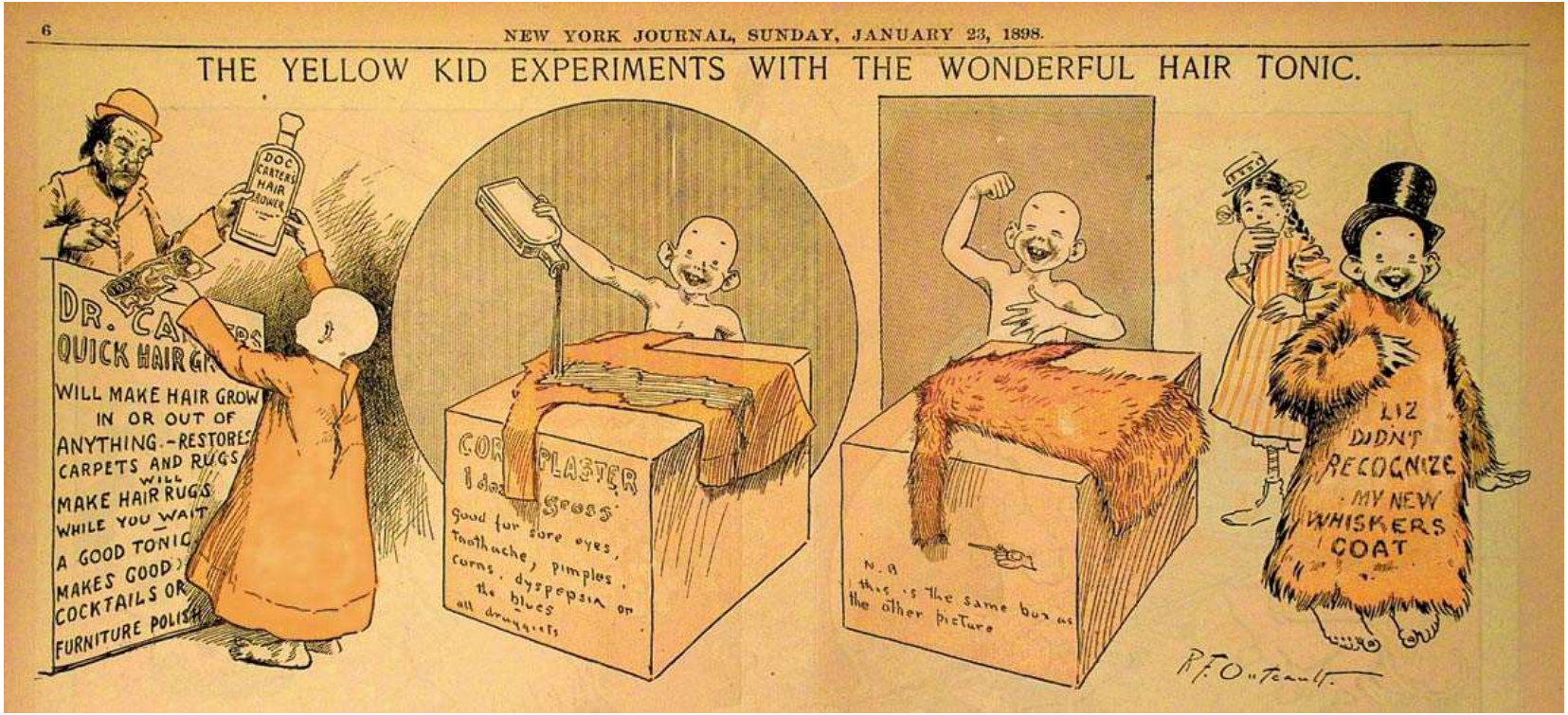
joseph.turner@louisville.edu


representation
regulation
identity
consumption
production

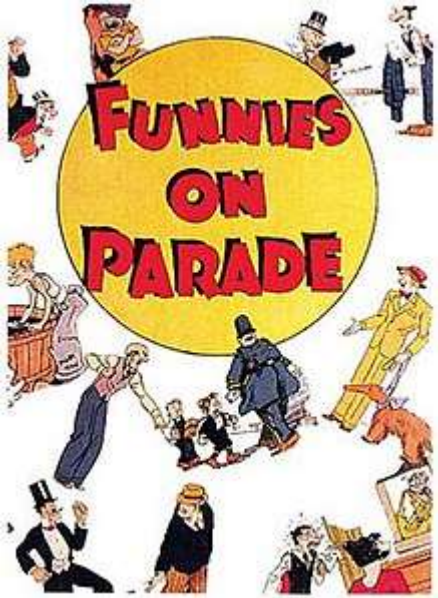
A Rake's Progress (1735)

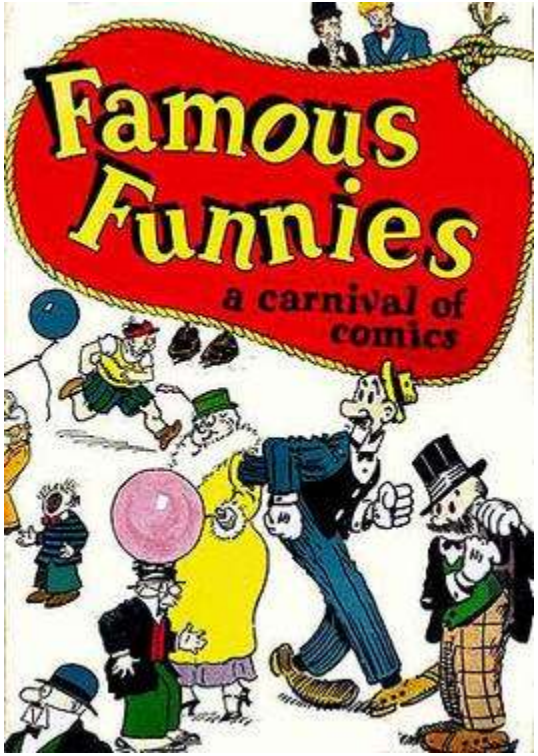
Rodolphe Töpffer, *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck* (1837-42)

The Yellow Kid (1895-98)

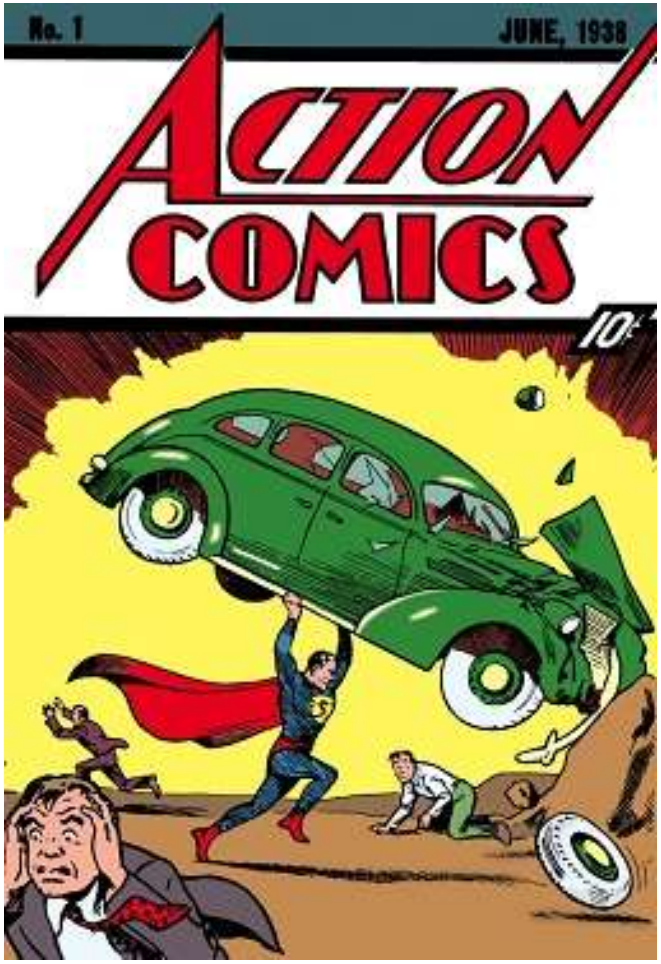


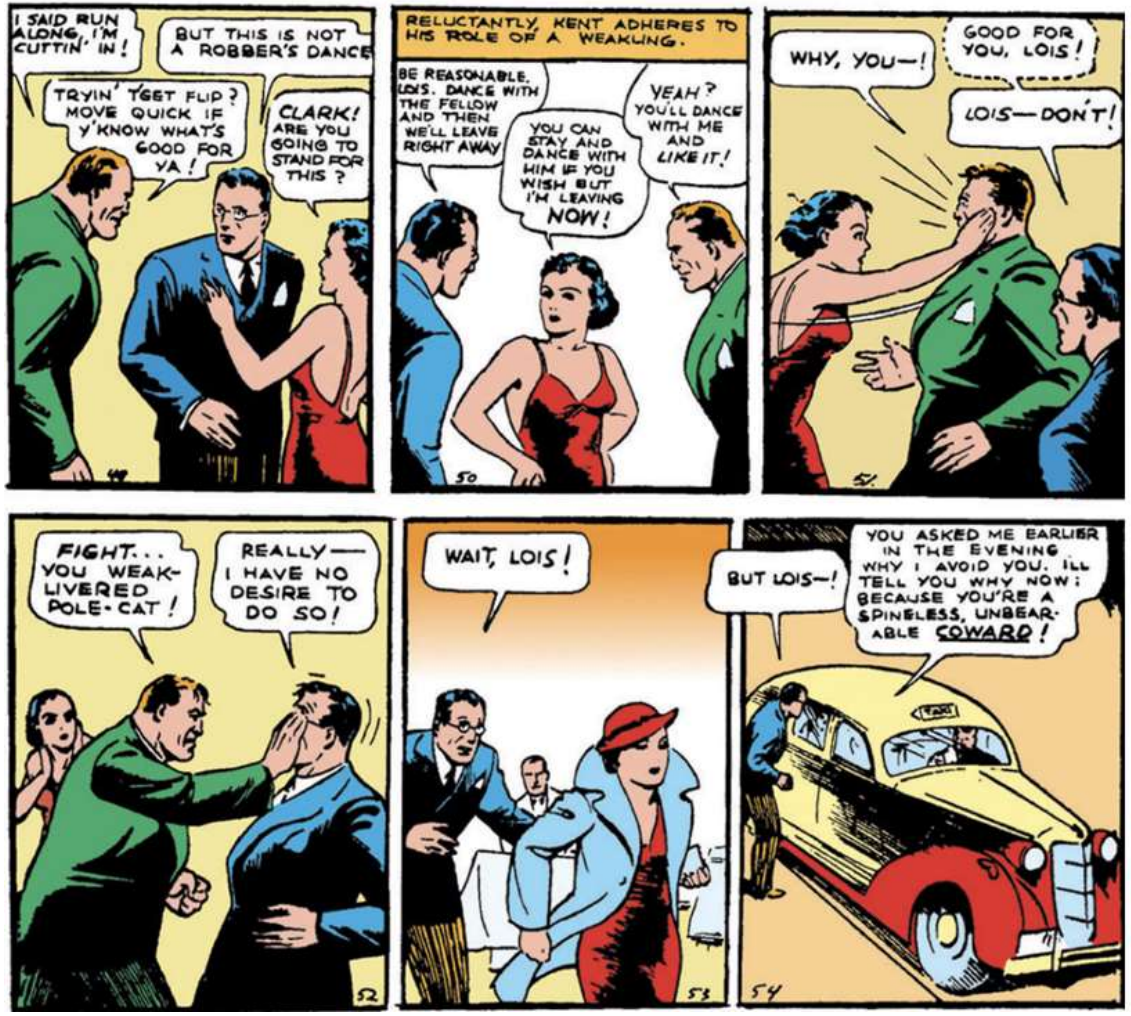
Funnies on Parade (1933)



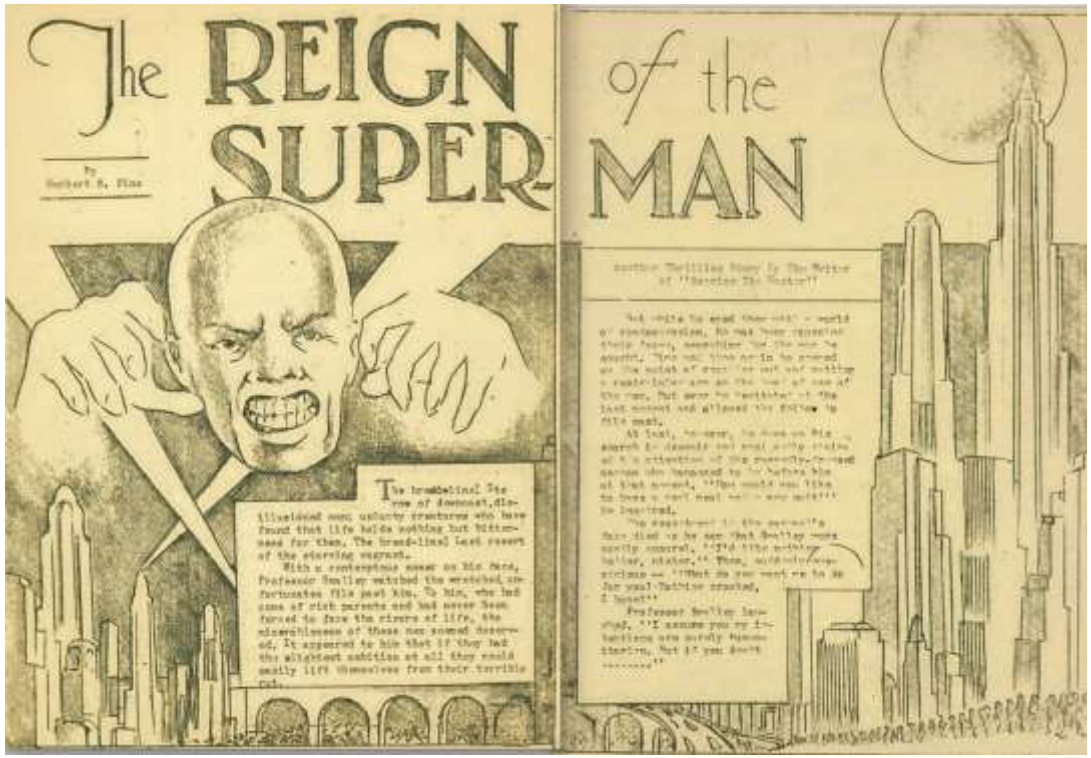


Superman (1938)

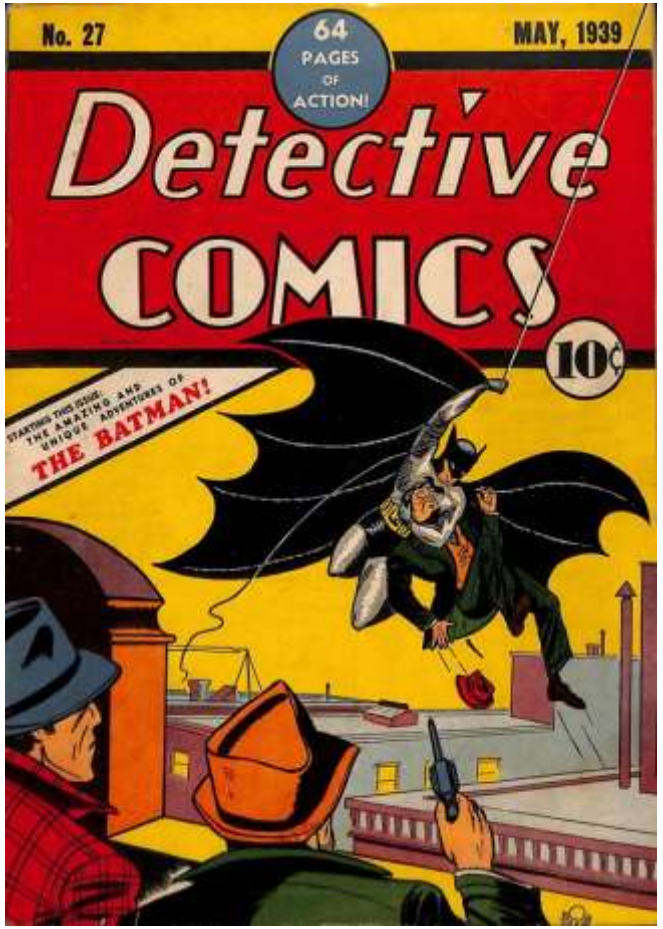



I SAID RUN ALONG, I'M CUTTIN' IN!
BUT THIS IS NOT A ROBBER'S DANCE
TRYIN' TGET FLIP? MOVE QUICK IF Y'KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YA!
CLARK! ARE YOU GOING TO STAND FOR THIS?
RELUCTANTLY, KENT ADHERES TO HIS ROLE OF A WEAKLING.
BE REASONABLE, LOIS. DANCE WITH THE FELLOW AND THEN WE'LL LEAVE RIGHT AWAY
YOU CAN STAY AND DANCE WITH HIM IF YOU WISH BUT I'M LEAVING NOW!
YEAH? YOU'LL DANCE WITH ME AND LIKE IT!
50
WHY, YOU—!
GOOD FOR YOU, LOIS!
LOIS—DON'T!
FIGHT... YOU WEAK-LIVERED POLE-CAT!
REALLY— I HAVE NO DESIRE TO DO SO!
52
WAIT, LOIS!
53
BUT LOIS—!
YOU ASKED ME EARLIER IN THE EVENING WHY I AVOID YOU. I'LL TELL YOU WHY NOW: BECAUSE YOU'RE A SPINELESS, UNBEARABLE COWARD!
54

“The Reign of the Super-Man” (1933)



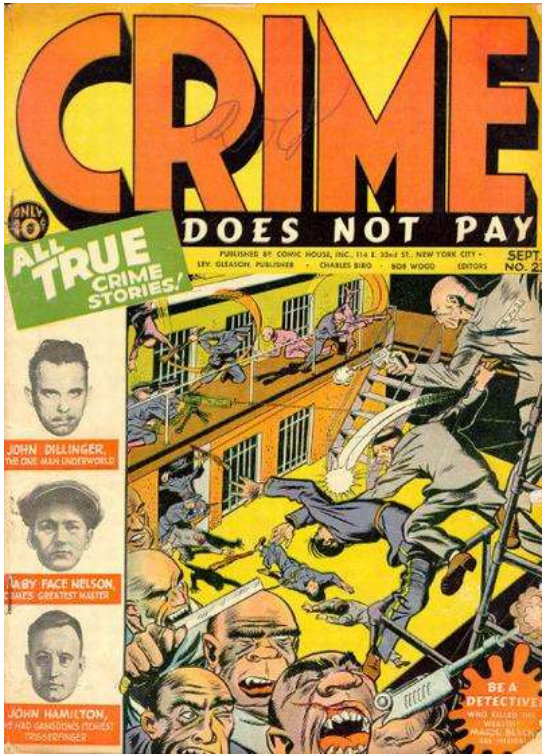
Detective Comics #27 (May 1939)

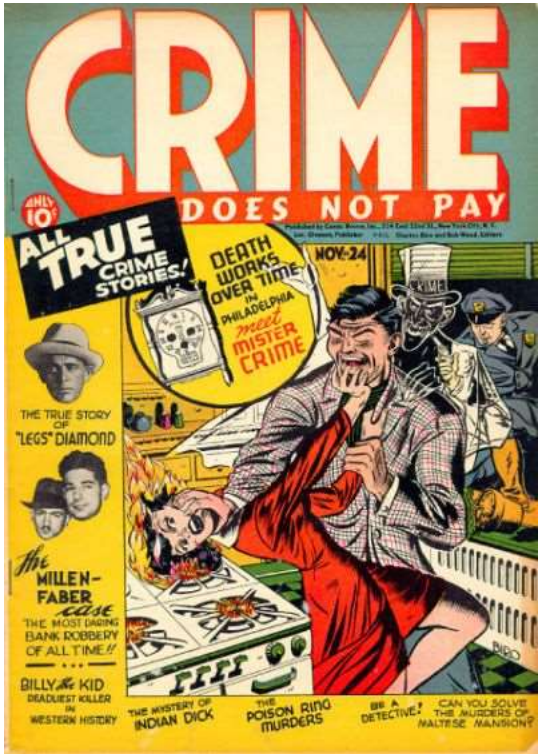


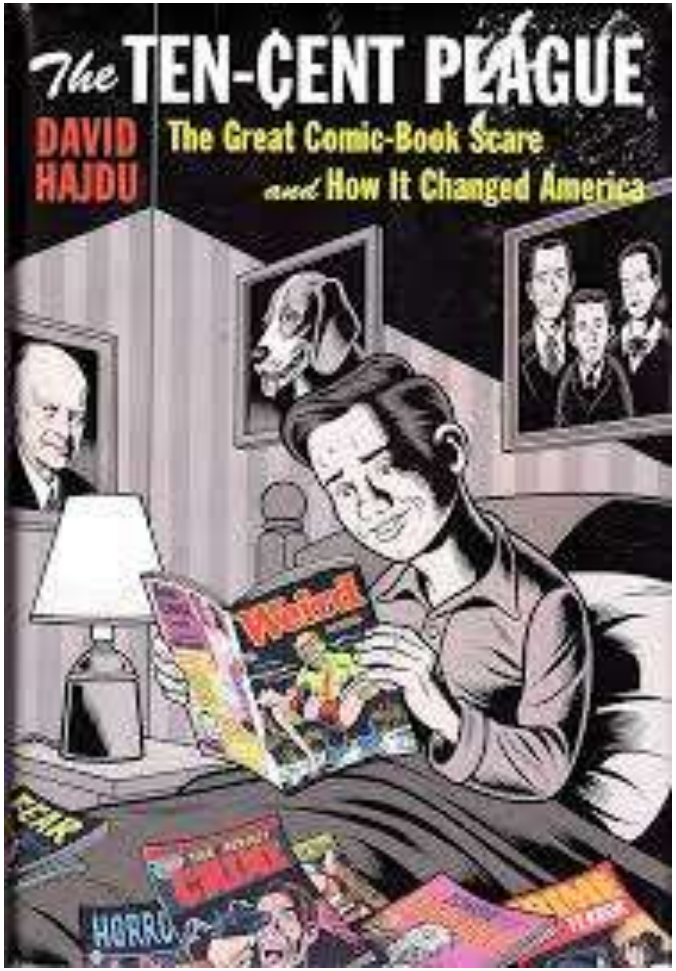
From Grant Morrison, *Supergods* (25-26)

“Batman was born of the deliberate reversal of everything in the Superman dynamic: Superman was an alien with incredible powers; Batman was a human being with no superhuman abilities. Superman’s costume was brightly colored; Batman’s was grayscale and somber with mocking flashes of yellow. In his secret Clark kent identity, Superman was a hardworking farmer’s son who grew up in small-town kansas, while Batman’s Bruce Wayne enjoyed life as a wealthy playboy—an East Coast sophisticate descended from old money. Clark had a boss; Bruce had a butler. Clark pined after Lois; Bruce burned through a string of debutantes and leading ladies. Superman worked alone; Batman had a boy partner, Robin, who wore green briefs, a black mask, and a yellow cape. Superman was of the day; Batman was of the night and the shadows. Superman was rational, Apollonian; Batman was Dionysian. Superman’s mission was the measured allotment of justice; Batman’s, an emotive two-fisted ask-questions-later vendetta.”

Crime Does Not Pay (1942-55)





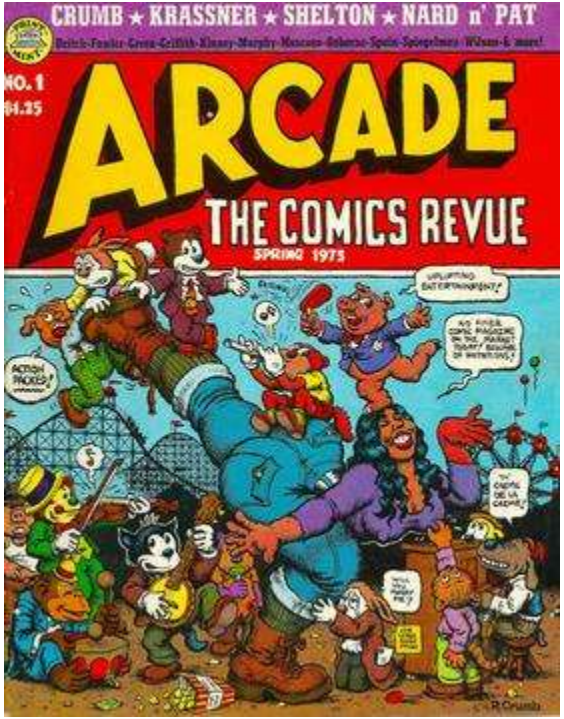


“In 1948, the 80 million to 100 million comic books purchased in America every month generated annual revenue for the industry of at least $72 million … Hardcover book publishing, by comparison, brought in about $285 million”

Association of Comics Publishers Code (1948)

1. Sexy, wanton comics should not be published. No drawing should show a female indecently or unduly exposed, and in no event more nude than in a bathing suit commonly worn in the United States of America.
2. Crime should not be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy against the law and justice or to inspire others with the desire for imitation. No comics shall show the details and methods of a crime committed by a youth. Policemen, judges, Government officials, and respected institutions should not be portrayed as stupid, ineffective, or represented in such a way to weaken respect for established authority.
3. No scenes of sadistic torture should be shown.
4. Vulgar and obscene language should never be used. Slang should be kept to a minimum and used only when essential to the story.
5. Divorce should not be treated humorously or represented as glamorous or alluring.
6. Ridicule or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible.

Comix


CRUMB ★ KRASSNER ★ SHELTON ★ NARD n' PAT
NO. 1
$1.25
ARCADE
THE COMICS REVUE
SPRING 1975
ACTION PACKED!

1986-87: Times are a-changing

- Creators influenced by the comix movement
- Decline of Comics Code
- 1970’s direct market sales model and rise of comics shops
- Shift to adult consumers

DD

HIS MASTER, A MEMBER OF THE MYSTERIOUS FOOT CLAN, WAS FORCED TO FLEE TO AMERICA...

CHRISTMAS EVE--HOW CAN IT BE CHRISTMAS EVE WHEN IT'S SO HOT--
--CHRISTMAS IS SNOW AND FIRE-PLACES AND LOVED ONES AND PRESENTS--
--IT ISN'T THE MEXICAN SUN AND QUAKING FROM HEAD TO TOE FROM HEROIN WITH-DRAWAL--
--IT ISN'T ROBBING A BLIND MAN--THE SECOND I'VE ROBBED, THINKS KAREN PAGE--
--MATT--I ROBBED MATT TOO--SOLD HIS SECRET IDENTITY FOR A FIX--
--AND NOW I NEED ANOTHER FIX AND I NEED TO GET TO NEW YORK AND I NEED MATT TO SAVE ME FROM MEN WHO ARE TRYING TO KILL ME-- I NEED MONEY--

THE SHOCKING TRUTH ABOUT DRUGS!
DC GREEN LANTERN
GREEN ARROW
GREEN LANTERN
CO-STARRING
GREEN ARROW
ONLY 25¢ bigger & better
NO. 85 SEPT. 30210
YOU ALWAYS HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS, GREEN ARROW! WELL, WHAT'S YOUR ANSWER TO THAT--?
MY WARD IS A JUNKIE!
DC ATTACKS YOUTH'S GREATEST PROBLEM... DRUGS!
DC GREEN LANTERN
BRIGHT AND BETTER 25¢

DAY 12
I...AWAKEN...
I AM STRIVED... BY THE SOMETHING... OF LATE AFTERNOON. ABBY... WILL BE HERE... SOON...
SHE IS... REMARKABLE...
ADAPTING... SO QUICKLY... TO A SITUATION... EVEN I... AM ONLY SOMETIMES... TO COMPREHEND...
I HAVE... REGENERATED... USING PLANT TISSUE... UNTOUCHED... BY THE BIO... RESTORATIVE FORMULA...
I DO NOT... NEED IT... ANYMORE...
I AM LEARNING... SO MUCH... ABOUT WHAT I AM... AND THE KNOWLEDGE... IS GRADUALLY... CHANGING ME...
BUT WHAT... IS IT CHANGING... ME INTO?
WHAT... AM I... BECOMING?
I WILL BE AT TIME... IN THIS PLACE... UNTIL I AM GROWN...
...AND I CONSIDER... THIS CATASTROPH... THAT I AM.
SOMETIMES... I AM IN AWE... AT ITS STRANGENESS... AND COMPLEXITY...
SOMETIMES... I AM ALMOST FRIGHTENED...
...BY MY OWN POSSIBILITIES

Kids Grow Up

- Turn to thematic and iconic realism
- Thematic realism: reflects more on the “real world”
- Iconic realism: artistic styles shift toward realism
- Limited but increased diversity of characters

JAWS

TWENTIETH CENTURY-FOX Presents A LUCASFILM LTD PRODUCTION STAR WARS
Starring MARK HAMILL HARRISON FORD CARRIE FISHER
PETER CUSHING
and
ALEC GUINNESS

STAR WARS

Written and Directed by
GEORGE LUCAS

Produced by
GARY KURTZ

Music by
JOHN WILLIAMS

PANAVISION® PRINTS BY DE LUXE® TECHNICOLOR®

Making Films Sound Better
DOLBY SYSTEM®
Noise Reduction - High Fidelity

Original Motion Picture Soundtrack on 20th Century Records and Tapes

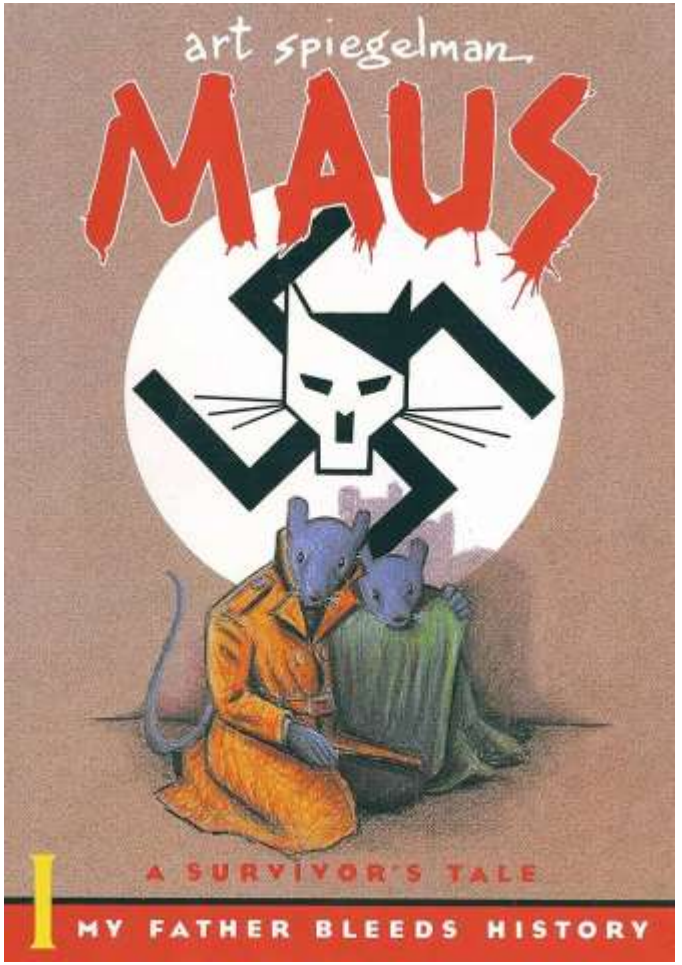
Dark Knight Returns and *Watchmen*

- Gritty realism reflecting social anxieties, such as nuclear war
- Flawed heroes and meta commentary
- Experimental in form (esp. *Watchmen*) and with established characters
- Aimed at adult audiences

Batman's Chest

Rorschach's Shoes

Maus (86-87)


art spiegelman
MAUS
A SURVIVOR'S TALE
I
MY FATHER BLEEDS HISTORY

Maus

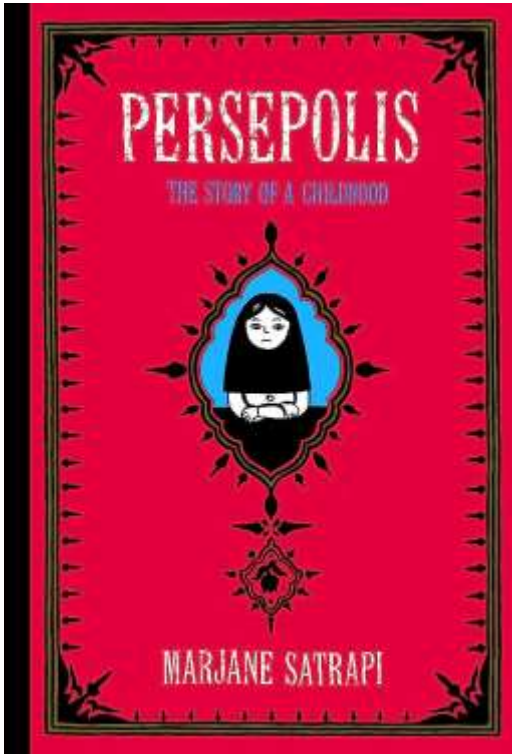
- Gritty historical or (auto)biographical realism, but stylized
- Comics' image-text form creates opportunities for bearing witness
- Biography, memoir, photography

-AND ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1939, THE WAR CAME. I WAS ON THE FRONT, ONE OF THE FIRST TO
ACH!
SO. TWICE I SPILLED MY DRUGSTORE!
IT'S MY EYES.
EVER SINCE I GOT IN MY LEFT EYE THE HEMORRHAGING AND THE GLAUCOMA, IT HAD TO BE TAKEN OUT FROM ME. AND NOW I DON'T SEE SO WELL.
AND NOW I HAVE A CATARACT INSIDE MY ONE GOOD EYE. YOU SEE HOW I HAVE TO SUFFER?
I TOLD YOU ABOUT THE BIG-SHOT SPECIALIST WHAT WAS GOING TO OPERATE ME?
UH-HUH.
HE LAST YEAR PUT ME INTO THE HOSPITAL FOR AN IMMEDIATE OPERATION...
AND THEN HE JUST LEFT ME.. HE WENT SOMEWHERE AWAY TO GIVE LECTURES ON THE TELEVISION!

Maus – witnessing, documentary

- Draws attention to history and to the “real” world
- Levels of iconicity or realism
- Iconic – bears some relatively unambiguous relationship to reality
- Investigates the boundaries of what comics can do

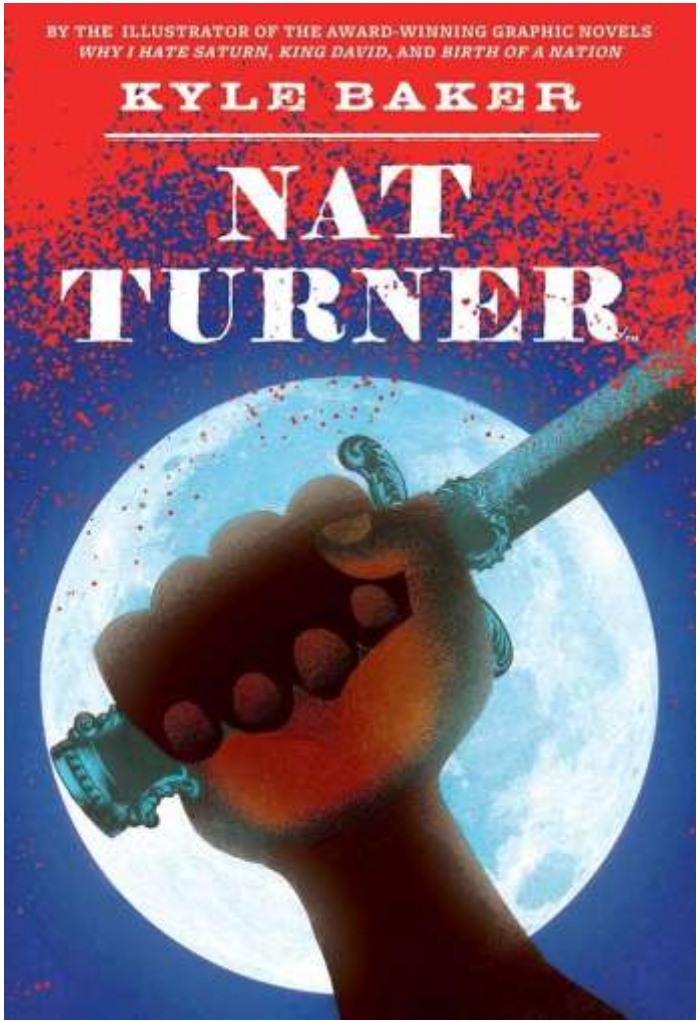
Persepolis (2000)



THE KEY TO PARADISE WAS FOR POOR PEOPLE. THOUSANDS OF YOUNG KIDS, PROMISED A BETTER LIFE, EXPLODED ON THE MINEFIELDS WITH THEIR KEYS AROUND THEIR NECKS.
MRS. HASEINE'S SON MANAGED TO AVOID THAT FATE, BUT LOTS OF OTHER KIDS FROM HIS NEIGHBORHOOD DIDN'T.

MEANWHILE, I GOT TO GO TO MY FIRST PARTY. NOT ONLY DID MY MOM LET ME GO, SHE ALSO KNITTED ME A SWEATER FULL OF HOLES AND MADE ME A NECKLACE WITH CHAINS AND NAILS. PUNK ROCK WAS IN.
I WAS LOOKING SHARP.

Nat Turner (2005)



R. H. Gaskins
Heathville

THE

CONFESSIONS

E. M. Wiley or A. S. Wiley

OF

NAT TURNER,

THE LEADER OF THE LATE

INSURRECTION IN SOUTHAMPTON, VA.

As fully and voluntarily made to

THOMAS R. GRAY,

In the prison where he was confined, and acknowledged by him to be such when read before the Court of Southampton; with the certificate, under seal of the Court convened at Jerusalem, Nov. 5, 1831, for his trial.

ALSO, AN AUTHENTIC

ACCOUNT OF THE WHOLE INSURRECTION,

WITH LISTS OF THE WHITES WHO WERE MURDERED,

AND OF THE NEGROES BROUGHT BEFORE THE COURT OF SOUTHAMPTON, AND THERE SENTENCED, &c.

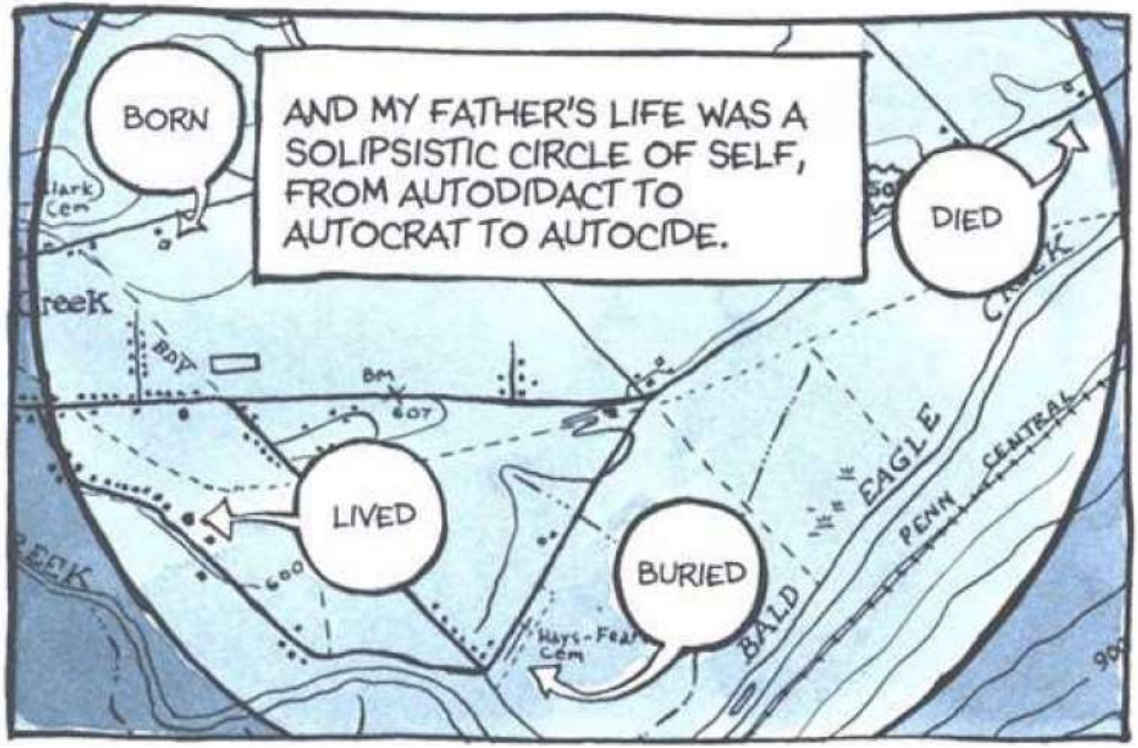
Baltimore:
PUBLISHED BY THOMAS R. GRAY.
Lucas & Deaver, print.
1831.

FROM THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

"My father and mother strengthened me in this, my first impression, saying in my presence I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on my head and breast.... My grandmother, who was very religious, and to whom I was much attached—my master, who belonged to the church, and other religious persons who visited the house, and whom I often saw at prayers, noticing the singularity of my manners, I suppose, and my uncommon intelligence for a child, remarked I had too much sense to be raised, and if I was, I would never be of any service to any one as a slave..."

Fun Home (2006)

Fun Home (2006)



Displacement (2020)

Sandman

- Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* should also be considered alongside the Big Three
- Overtly literary, mythopoetic, and experimental with form and panels
- Recent Audible adaptation

You have come then, Will Shakespear.
It is all ready?
I WROTE IT AS YOU TOLD ME, LORD. IT IS THE BEST THAT I HAVE WRITTEN, TO THIS DATE.
I am sure it is.
SO... WE ARE HERE ON YOUR COMMAND, MY LORD, ON MIDSUMMER'S EVE, BY THE LONGMAN OF WILMINGTON. AN ODD CHOICE OF A PLACE FOR US TO PERFORM...
Odd? Wendel's Mound was a theatre before your race came to this island.
BEFORE THE NORMANS?
Before the humans.