

Comics and Graphic Novels in the Classroom

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1. Preparations

Comics are fun. This alone should qualify them for use in the classroom, if they still need to be legitimised. However, it seems that this is no longer the case. Over the last few decades, the image of comics as "The Seduction of the Innocent" (the title of a book by Fredric Wertham from 1954, which blamed comics for juvenile delinquency, sexual perversions and racism, cf. McCloud 2000: 86) has faded, and the use of this medium in school has gained in importance. With generations of teachers and parents who grew up reading comics, the previously almost unanimous rejection of 'juvenile trash' has given way to a more permissive perspective, and several studies have explored the possibilities that comics offer for the classroom (e.g. Pforte 1974, Burgdorf 1976, Grünewald 1996, Schüwer 2005). The blame for adolescent aggression and deviant behaviour has moved on to computer games, Marilyn Manson, and other more recent forms of juvenile entertainment.

Moreover, the potential of comics and graphic novels as serious art has been increasingly recognized and new works are regularly reviewed in the culture section of newspapers and journals. *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Art Spiegelman's highly critical response to the terror attacks of 9/11 and the reaction of the Bush government, was first published in such prestigious newspapers and journals as *Die Zeit* and *The London Review of Books*, while his works were exhibited in the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin in 2003. Moreover, in the summer of 2005 the *FAZ* launched a series of books with classic comics, indicating that the medium has finally found grace in the eyes of the establishment. In the academic world the importance of this segment of popular culture has also been recognized; Will Eisner, the creator of *The Spirit* and author of *Comics and Sequential Art*, for 15 years taught at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and Scott McCloud, comic artist and author of *Understanding Comics* and *Reinventing Comics*, regularly gives lectures at various universities.

In particular McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (2000), written in comic form, may serve as a useful introduction to this medium. Teachers would be well advised to consult this book, as it offers the necessary tools for analysis. As it is very accessible, it may also be possible to select passages for discussion in the classroom. For the following very brief survey of some of the most important aspects of comic art I will also draw on McCloud.

Following Will Eisner, McCloud defines comics as "Sequential Art". In order to exclude all neighbouring art forms like film, which also consists of a sequence of pictures, his – tongue-in-cheek – comment adds a more comprehensive definition: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." (McCloud 1993: 9) Sequential art, of course, has a long pedigree, including mural paintings or frescoes from various cultures since antiquity, the Bayeux Tapestry, stained glass windows depicting biblical

stories or the lives of saints, the serial engravings of William Hogarth or the drawings of Wilhelm Busch. In many of these examples the pictorial content is supplemented by written text, sometimes in the form of narrative comments on the image, but sometimes also 'spoken' language similar to the later speech balloons.

As reception theory has taught us, all literature contains indeterminacies or gaps, and a dynamic reader response is required in order to arrive at a coherent story. The text can, of course, challenge or frustrate the reader's expectations and conjectures and thus create an awareness of its own form, but also of the culturally contingent patterns and stereotypes that guide our interpretations. Even more radically, sequential art requires the creative interaction of the audience for the construction of the story. As the story is broken down into single images with different degrees of temporal distance between the pictures or panels, as they are called in the context of comics, it becomes necessary to fill in the gaps in order to recreate the fractured action as a continuous one, to resolve the parts into a whole. The time between the different pictures can span months or years, as in the case of Hogarth, but can also border on the minute difference between film frames, and thus a single movement can be presented over several panels. Finally, seemingly unrelated images can be juxtaposed, playing on the reader's desire for closure and challenging attempts to arrive at some formal unity (for a more detailed account of this aspect and a statistical analysis of various comics cf. McCloud 1993: 60-93). Be that as it may, the 'empty space' between the panels, the so-called 'gutter', is an integral part of the comic. In the classroom, this may offer itself for various tasks like telling what may have happened between temporally distant panels or adding one's own panels with additional dialogue in order to fill the gaps.

The internal relationship between the panels is, of course, important to the construction of time. However, even the single panel frequently does not show only a single moment like a movie frame or a photograph, but extends in time – as for example in the case of a dialogue or a continuous movement indicated by speed lines. Moreover, the size of the panel or the introduction of borderless panels may influence the experience of time (and space) of the reader. In some comics, a single figure will appear simultaneously in various places within a panel, or the movement of one subject can be presented through a succession of images akin to a motion study within one panel indicating dynamic action – e.g. the tiger Hobbes in *Calvin and Hobbes* or fast-moving superheroes like Flash – or, conversely, extended time is compressed into a single panel.

But then the sequence need not move in time at all, as the panels also establish the space of the narration. Apart from the simple movement in space and time, we find a shifting focus, presenting different details within a larger space, turning the page into a puzzle to be pieced together by the reader. Unusual perspectives, frames or styles may, in addition, indicate unusual states of mind, and in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* the grinning mouth of the schizophrenic Joker is at one point split up over two panels.

Traditionally, the narrative proceeds from one clearly defined panel to the next, moving from the left to the right and from the top of the page to the bottom in the way we read texts (Mangas follow the Japanese direction of reading, and even in German editions the stories run from the 'back' of the book to the 'front' and from the right to the left). This style is still very much dominant in comics for a younger audience. However, the borders can, as already mentioned, be dissolved or the action may cross bor-

ders even from one panel to the next to produce the effect of dynamic action. In *Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again*; Frank Miller frequently uses borderless full-page pictures into which small panels are set irregularly, sometimes indicating simultaneity within a larger context or a non-causal relationship between different parts of the action.

In most comics the images are decidedly non-realistic. The figures are very much stylized – to the point where a circle with two dots for the eyes and a line for the mouth serve as a head, and the face of Charles M. Schulz's Charlie Brown is hardly more than that. McCloud argues that this 'cartoony' abstraction increases the potential for the reader to identify with the characters. However, the background is frequently more realistic, and the combination of iconic figures with a more realistic setting "allows the readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world" (McCloud 1993: 43).

Over the last century comics have developed an iconography to express emotions or states of mind, motion, smell, sound, etc. This iconography differs in the various comic cultures from Europe to America and Japan, but then, of course, cultural cross-overs are not uncommon. However, the imagery is usually easily decoded and often hardly noticed any longer, but in analysis it should receive due attention, as new modes are constantly introduced as part of the creative transformation of the medium.

Some of the characters have themselves become cultural icons (e.g. Superman and Batman, the major Disney figures, the characters of Peanuts, etc.). The development of these characters shows a dialectics of stability and mutability; always recognizable and firmly embedded in fixed patterns, they are nevertheless adaptable to ever new demands and cultural environments. Moreover, they lend themselves to parodies or iconoclastic re-interpretations – for example some of the twenty tales by various artists collected in *Batman: Black and White* (ed. Brian Bolland) are distinctly funny or irreverent.

Comics come in all different sizes from the three- or four-panel funnies to extended graphic novels which are mostly published first in serial form and later as the complete work – Dave Sim's eccentric and parodistic *Cerebus: Church and State*, published in two volumes, is 1200 pages long. Graphic novels are rather expensive, which may restrict their use in the classroom. However, the individual instalments are frequently reprinted as well. This could offer the opportunity to let pupils work on different parts of the larger work and then bring together their results for the discussion of the complete text in the classroom. New technology like scanners and beamers will help to introduce particularly interesting images to the class for analysis, and thus the topic will also offer an opportunity to raise the awareness of the possibilities of the new media and their use in presentations. Books with selections of three/four-panel comics from the funnies pages – plus the eight-panel sequences from the Sunday papers – are comparatively cheap. Most of them are directed at a younger audience and offer the chance to use original texts fairly early, but there are also series like *Doonesbury* by Garry Trudeau which address a more mature readership and focus on political, social and cultural issues and thus are suitable for elder pupils. Moreover, comics are occasionally published online and can be accessed either free or for a minimal charge. For example, www.onlinecomics.net and www.comicwindows.com have huge selections, Scott McCloud's website www.scottmccloud.com offers links to a variety of graphic novels, and www.coconino.fr is a magnificent site with old comics and their predecessors mostly from the 19th century.

As already mentioned, comics share some characteristics with movies. Various successful films have been published as 'photo novels' in book form presenting sequences of screenshots and the complete dialogue, and the 'photo story' is, of course, almost a genre of its own. Moreover, the terminology of film analysis (shot, montage, frame, high or low angle shot, panning, etc.) is also employed for the exploration of comics. Consequently, comics can be used to introduce the pupils to this terminology. But while movies offer a stream of images and thus require a reconstruction of particular scenes in the discussion, the panels of comics can be analysed more easily as they are fixed on the page and it is always possible to return to earlier pictures if this should be necessary.

Finally a few words need to be added on the quality of comics. As a medium they hardly ever live up to their potential. Similar to other popular media, the majority of the works are directed at a mass audience and thus based on repetitive basic structures, stereotypes and rather crude stories. In America, the genre of superheroes with its strong focus on violence and a frequently questionable political and social agenda dominates the market of comics for adolescent readers. However, within every form of popular culture there are those artists and authors who experiment with the options and explore new forms; their works frequently rise above the level of average products and also influence future developments. For the classroom both varieties may be useful. Trivial genres usually transport traditional cultural values or the values of the readership addressed in order to find a large audience and thus lend themselves to the investigation into these aspects, while aesthetic innovation and experiment more often than not also goes hand in hand with a more serious and critical content, equally suitable for discussion in the EFL classroom.

2. *Beginnings*

Children usually approach literature first via stories that combine pictures with a written text, facilitating thereby the access to, and understanding of, the narration. This, of course, is also a valuable asset for the EFL classroom, and the visual images will assist the reading and guide the pupils in their comprehension of the text.

Of course, it will prove useful to start with the short three-panel comic-strips which are intended for this audience. As many of these series have successfully made their way across the Atlantic, chances are that the pupils will already be familiar with the characters – e.g. the characters of Peanuts, Garfield or Calvin and Hobbes. Less well known, but equally suitable are the Baby Blues series by Rick Kirkman and Jerry Scott or Foxtrot by Bill Amend. Some comics have websites with downloadable day-to-day strips and archives with further examples (e.g. <http://www.unitedmedia.com/comics/peanuts/>, <http://www.garfield.com/>, <http://www.ucomics.com/calvinand-hobbes/>, <http://babyblues.com/>, <http://www.foxtrot.com/>), and thus interesting strips can be found without any cost. It has to be noted, though, that some of the funnies occasionally use a highly abstracted language – Calvin may not be able to do simple sums in the classroom, but he is good with a pseudo-philosophical jargon – and thus suitable examples have to be selected.

Be that as it may, comics like these describe a world that is familiar to their intended readership. Recurring topics are school and home work, leisure time, festivities like Christmas, Halloween or Valentine Day, sports, quarrels with parents, teachers and

friends, vacations (or summer camp in Peanuts), and quite a few fantasies which lend themselves to visualization in this medium. In particular Calvin's inner life and the clash between his daydreams and reality is one of the most important recurring topics of the strips (cf. Gubesch & Schüwer 2005 for a detailed four lesson unit of Calvin and Hobbes in the sixth grade classroom).

Of course, there are also longer stories that are suitable for EFL teaching in the lower forms. Art Spiegelman's and Francoise Mouly's *It Was a Dark and Silly Night* is a collection of twelve short comics (from one to eight pages) by various artists, among them Neil Gaiman, Lemony Snicket and Barbara McClintock. Each story begins with the sentence "It was a dark and silly night", consequently they are all fantastical, but nevertheless embedded in the culture of their American audience.

British Comics are far less popular abroad and thus also more difficult to obtain. *The Beano* was first published in 1937 by D.C. Thompson and is still popular enough to be sold widely in the UK. The comic book contains various strips like "Rodger the Dodger" and "Dennis the Menace". It seems as if the world was ripe for the latter character, as, coincidentally, only three days before the first appearance of the British strip in 1951, the better known American *Dennis the Menace* was launched by Hank Ketcham. Dennis and Roger are havoc-wreaking kids, with Rodger being more creative but similarly mischievous in his perennial attempts to avoid work. The strips are between one and four pages long, crude, if not primitive, and they regularly arrive at stereotypical results like self-inflicted injuries or punishment by the parents.

On a far higher qualitative level there are the works of Raymond Briggs, and they have been used in schools for a long time. *The Snowman*, a comic book without words, has been published as the "Original Storybook with Activities for Young Learners of English", edited by Gail Ellis, at Cornelsen, and *Father Christmas* and its sequel *Father Christmas Goes on Holiday* are also proven winners for the classroom. As this particular Santa is a very worldly character who frequently uses language that is not quite respectable, they are highly entertaining and will certainly attract the interest of their audience. Once more, the language of the comics will have to be checked against the proficiency of the classes, and some of the stories may only be suitable for older pupils.

Of course, it will not be possible to discuss the cultural background of the strips with pupils in their first years of language acquisition and probably not even up to the ninth form. However, they will learn about aspects of the foreign culture, and differences or similarities with their own experience may be addressed in class.

One of the assets of comics for teaching is that most of the information is non-verbal. As every re-telling of the brief stories will necessarily have to be accomplished in the pupils' own words, it may help learners acquire new language.

Children, and occasionally also adolescents, are usually fond of drawing and will readily copy and adapt comic characters, sometimes with amazing talent. Thus it may prove worthwhile to tap into their creative potentials and let them produce their own strips based on the characters they have encountered – always keeping in mind that the stories are supposed to be set in the foreign cultural environment.

3. *Moving on*

While younger pupils will find it difficult to respond to the specific cultural background and its representation in the strips and stories, this will turn out to be an important topic once they have become more proficient in the language and some aspects of the American and British way of life have been explored. Their knowledge can now be utilized for a more serious analysis of the world as presented in a popular form of art. Examples from the same strips – selected now for a slightly higher and more complex linguistic level – can be used to investigate stereotypes and clichés or to discuss the values conveyed in the strips. For example, the world of American funnies usually ignores all aspects of life that may interfere with entertainment, and, even if there are some minor problems, is almost a middle-class utopia. There are no single parents, no poverty, no racial tensions (there are very few Afro-Americans in the first place; Franklin joined Peanuts in 1968, but rather serves as a token Black than as a full-blown character, which is not uncommon in this medium which in the past was often unabashedly racist), no injustice that cannot be resolved within the strip itself, only very mild or otherwise absurd forms of aggression and no realistic cruelty (the bully in Calvin and Hobbes is an exception, but then he is also mentally retarded and Calvin's superiority remains unchallenged. Moreover, the violence usually remains at the level of threats). Thus the comics may serve not only as an introduction to aspects of American culture but also for a discussion about the way of life constructed as 'normal' within this culture.

For the discussion of cultural stereotypes in an adolescent environment the series about Archie Andrews, Jughead, Betty and Veronica may prove to be useful. This comic has been very successful in America ever since it was launched in 1941. Originally created to counterbalance the first surge of superhero comics, the characters are ordinary teenagers and the stories deal with their perennial school problems, love interests and pranks, but also touch lightly on issues like class differences – Veronica's parents are extremely wealthy, while Archie has to work to earn some extra money. For the old-fashioned teacher at Riverdale High School the proverbial name Miss Grundy was adopted, and the clash between her moralistic concerns and the teenagers' rather mild flirtations or practical jokes is a recurring topic. This comic was published in the usual daily three- or four-panel strips, but also in booklets with slightly longer stories. The official website (<http://www.archiecomics.com>) offers not only an archive, but also some other features that will be useful in class, e.g. a 'complete-the-comic' strip with the punch line missing.

Many mass-produced comics have had an undisguised affirmative political agenda. In particular in times of national crisis they have tended to support the common cause. Of course, there are the war comics in Britain and America – frequently very crude and cruel stories in which the enemies are stereotypically depicted as depraved sadists (for covers of war comics see http://www.samuelsdesign.com/comics/asuper_war.html) – and many popular series from Superman to Donald Duck were used for propagandistic purposes. However, the patriotic motif survived in the times of the cold war. Captain America, for example, was created in 1941 as a war comic. The series ended in 1954 but was revived in the sixties, during which time the superhero occasionally faced villains from the Soviet Union or other, sometimes imaginary, communist countries.

Some British comic-strips are set in a working class environment and deal with problems of unemployment, low income or alcoholism, but also typical working class

forms of pastime or entertainment. Best known is probably Reg Smythe's Andy Capp (for day-to-day strips see http://www.creators.com/comics_show.cfm?comicname=capp), with the perennial quarrels between the lazy, drinking husband and his hard working wife, his quests for a few shillings to finance his daily extended trips to the pub, his attempts to dodge work, to avoid the rent collector and to flirt with barmaids, his discussions with similar-minded friends and his pastimes like billiards, darts, soccer, fishing, and breeding pigeons.

A far more serious comic set in a working class environment is Raymond Briggs' *Ethel & Ernest*, a graphic novel about the life of his parents from the time of their first romance in 1928 to Ernest's death in 1971. In their detailed presentation of a lesson unit on *Ethel & Ernest*, Sabine and Wolfgang Hochbruck (2005) point out that this graphic novel offers useful insights into the class structure of the British society of the 1930s, touching upon the role of the labour unions and contemporary politics as well as on the living conditions of the working class. However, pupils will probably be unfamiliar with some of the historically and socially contingent language, and thus the book may be only suitable for classes with a higher proficiency in English language and culture.

4. The higher levels

For older pupils there is an enormous range of comics and graphic novels, but also funnies, which address a more mature audience and lend themselves to exploration in school. It is, of course, impossible here to touch upon every suitable example. However, I will introduce a variety of widely different works suitable for equally different approaches in the classroom, rather than focus on a few comics only.

Foremost among the funnies for adolescents and adults is the satirical Doonesbury series by Garry Trudeau, which gained a cult status in the seventies and eighties (for daily strips and archive cf. <http://www.doonesbury.com/strip/dailydose/index.html>). Published in the four-panel/eight-panel format, the episodic stories extend over several days and sometimes weeks following the lives and careers of various characters since their university days in the early seventies. Almost every aspect of American culture has been addressed. Politics is among the most important topics, and like all good satirists Trudeau has frequently drawn fire from those who are in power or want to get there. But the strip also deals with the mass media, the legal institutions, art and music, journalism, computer culture, gay and gender issues, education, celebrities, sports and the drug culture – the character Uncle Duke is based on the journalist Hunter S. Thompson, author of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. It may prove useful to get acquainted with the characters' past – the website cited above offers brief biographies of the cast which can be presented by members of the class, and the Doonesbury book *Flashbacks* contains selected strips from 1970-1995 and may thus serve as a source for background information and also for episodes to discuss in class. However, as the comic deals with day-to-day politics and cultural events, it may be useful to search the website for interesting strips about recent issues. The following example from February 2005 focuses on the war trauma of the Iraq veteran BD, known to the audience since the seventies as a hard-core conservative and Vietnam volunteer, who has lately returned to the army in order to fight in Iraq. In the face of the daily event of this war, the army psychologist has to admit that nightmares and reality have become indistinguishable, and even the most

devoted advocate of American military intervention now suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome. The dead-pan juxtaposition of real atrocities and terrifying dreams points at the problem of the satirist that even the most horrible products of our imagination are sometimes realized or exceeded by reality.



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Among graphic novels, Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (I. *My Father Bleeds History*, II. *And Here My Troubles Began*) has probably been most often used in school. Even though *Maus* is primarily concerned with the horrors of Auschwitz – with the Jews depicted as mice and the Nazis as ferocious cats – the books are nevertheless also interesting in the context of American cultural studies. The autobiographical frame story, set in contemporary America, is a self-reflexive narrative about a cartoonist mouse named Art Spiegelman who questions his father Vladek, a holocaust survivor, about the life of Polish Jews during World War II. The relationship between son and father is occasionally tense; one reason is that Vladek destroyed his wife's, i.e. Art's mother's, diary when she committed suicide in 1968. This frame story is also concerned with the situation of the immigrant in America, with the inability of the holocaust survivor to overcome the trauma and to settle into some kind of normalcy, with life in the American suburbs and generation conflicts, but also with the problems of the comic artist whose book on the holocaust (i.e. *Maus* vol. I) has become a success and who now has to face not only the media and their greed for some story or statement they can sell to their audience but also the demands for commercial exploitation like movie rights or licensing deals. The style of the images is reminiscent of the works of Frans Masereel and thus links the graphic novel to a socially and politically informed artist who was banned by the Nazis, but whose 'novels in woodcuts' are also regarded as highly influential on the development of comics (another quite different graphic novel that is reminiscent of Masereel is Alan Moore's *From Hell*). It would, of course, be highly useful to link the discussion of *Maus* with the curriculum of history and the topic of Nazism and the holocaust.

Art Spiegelman in his persona as a mouse reappears in some panels of *In the Shadow of No Towers*, a very complex and artistically demanding comic on 9/11 and the response of the Bush administration up to the war against Iraq. With the family living in the vicinity of the World Trade Center, Spiegelman's daughter had just started school three days before in the shadow of the towers, and the fears of the parents and

their desperate search for their child dominate the first few pages. However, the recollections about the immediate experience of the terrors give way to frustration and almost paranoid anxieties about a government that tries to make political capital out of the horrors and drown the memories in patriotic kitsch. The first part of the book consists of ten pages of highly fragmented narration in the oversized two-page-spread format of some of the earliest American comics like Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* or Lionel Feininger's *The Kinder-Kids*; the second part offers "The Comic Supplement", i.e. sample pages of these early comics with an introduction from the author (for a few pages of Spiegelman's comic and his essay on early American comics cf. <http://www.randomhouse.com/pantheon/graphicnovels/towers.html>). In reminiscence of the final panel of each and every *Little Nemo* comic, the mouse persona turns up in some of the final panels of the pages as a kid that has fallen out of bed, indicating the wish to wake up from reality which appears as a world turned upside down and to return into the lost world of a secure childhood. However, even this wish has been infected, and on one of those panels the mother wears a gas mask; on the other, the crying child is threatened with 'liberation' by a police officer. The reappearance of the mouse image of course also signals the return of the survivor motif. The form that was used by Spiegelman to transport the story of the holocaust, i.e. the comic, now seems to offer some solace in the face of the catastrophe. In the following detail from one of the complex oversized pages, the comic figures on Spiegelman's desk certainly appear more sane and comforting than the global warmongers who seem to delight in the present developments; however this also marks once more a form of regression, and the cartoonist temporarily withdraws into the world of his childhood reading and into his comic-strip persona rather than facing himself or reality.



Art Spiegelman. *In the Shadow of No Towers*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2004, p. 2 (excerpt)

Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical *Persepolis* (I. *The Story of a Childhood*, II. *The Story of a Return*) has frequently been compared to Spiegelman's *Maus*. Of course, the context here is not British or American but Iranian; however, for intercultural studies these graphic novels are undoubtedly suitable as an introduction to a foreign culture. The first volume depicts the childhood of an Iranian girl in the final years of the Shah-regime, the Islamic revolution and the war with Iraq; the sequel describes her adolescence in Europe while she is separated from her family, the return to Iran, her marriage and divorce, and the final departure for France. Once more the style is reminiscent of woodcuts, but in particular in the first volume the images are rendered far more naively than Spiegelman's, as they present the perspective and experiences of a child trying to understand the radical changes within her country, the path from one oppressive regime to another one, the imprisonment, torture and death of family members and friends, and the necessary contradictions between private and public life. Writing about her work, Satrapi pointed out that the information and news on Iran as presented by Western media did not represent her own experience, and thus she tried to tell her own story in an appropriate form (cf. <http://www.randomhouse.com/pantheon/graphicnovels/satrapi2.html>). The result is a deeply political, humane, frequently desperate but also affectionate plea for tolerance and the open-mindedness she found within her own family and among friends, facing adversity and religious or political indoctrination in Iran and abroad. Again, it may be very useful to synchronize the reading of *Persepolis* with the discussion of similar topics in religious studies or ethics (e.g. Islam, fundamentalism, totalitarianism, but also intercultural contact and exchange) to widen the approach.

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In Britain, Raymond Briggs' *When the Wind Blows* has been one of the most momentous graphic novels for an adult audience, and it has been used in schools ever since it was first published in 1982 as his contribution to the protest against nuclear armament. It describes the life of an old couple before and after a nuclear attack on England. The artistic style is taken over from his books for children and *Ethel & Ernest*, and the juxtaposition of the apocalyptic catastrophe with the cosy small world in a rural English environment and the faithful, but pathetic attempts of the dodderly couple to meticulously obey an official leaflet with inane governmental guidelines for self-preservation in the face of radioactive radiation and fall-out create an enormous impact. The unwavering confidence in the authorities, frequently referred to as 'the powers that be', leads the protagonists to the construction of an improvised homemade fall-out shelter from some unhinged doors, and, reading that they are supposed to lay in food supplies for 14 days, they put out a notice for 28 pints of milk. After the strike they still try to follow the recommendations for the improvement of morale like telling stories or playing games, waiting for normalcy to return, for the mail to arrive and for the milkman to bring fresh supplies. The final pages of the graphic novel are truly hard to stomach, with radiation sickness and gum bleeding setting in, and the book ends with an attempt to pray, closing with a mixture of Psalm 23 and the famous line from Alfred Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade": "Into the valley of the shadow of death rode the six hundred." Indeed, "Some one had blunder'd."

All the comics for elder pupils presented up to now deal with actual or hypothetical historical events in the real world. However, the difference in their degree of realism is

enormous. Briggs opted for the most realistic style, possibly to emphasize the very real danger of a nuclear war that was felt by many people at the time. On the other extreme, Spiegelman's response to 9/11 is by far the most imaginative and fantastic visualization of his personal experience – while Briggs brings the possible catastrophe into the real world, Spiegelman depicts a world that has become unreal and is incompatible with any normal frame of mind. It is one of the common features of magic realist literature that the seemingly most fantastic and unbelievable horrors are actually taken from reality, indicating that the normal human imagination cannot fathom the terrors and atrocities that are indeed committed by mankind. I would like to suggest that this is also an important aspect in Spiegelman's work. The adaptation of old comics for this work once more enhances the defamiliarization, but also draws on an almost lost tradition which was politically incorrect to the extreme, frequently iconoclastic, and anarchic rather than well-mannered. The decision to present his account of his father's life in Poland under the Nazi regime and his survival in Auschwitz in the form of *Maus* indicates a similar displacement which made it possible to approach the 'unrepresentable'. In *Persepolis* the 'naïve' style helps to emphasize the intrusion of rigid dogmatism, political indoctrination and violence into the world of a child which tries to understand the changing forces shaping its daily experiences.

However, not only these highly acclaimed graphic novels are valuable for the discussion in the context of cultural studies in the EFL classroom, mainstream comics and their adaptation for more artistic and sophisticated approaches also contain ample material for the investigation of the foreign culture. As already mentioned above, popular media usually try to fulfil their respective audiences' expectations and offer a perspective on society and culture which is compatible with their readers' demands. Of course, in the most successful comics we cannot find a realistic image of American or British society. In particular in America, the dominant genre of superhero comics with its high content of fantastic and science fiction elements presents a world that is incompatible with its audience's experience and rather tries to fulfil dreams of omnipotence. But the protagonists' supernatural powers are usually accompanied by less heroic features in their secret identities – e.g. Clark Kent (Superman), Peter Parker (Spiderman), Donald Blake (Thor) and Matt Murdock (Daredevil) are for various reasons never able to start a relationship with their respective love interests and frequently have to suffer humiliation at work and in their mediocre private lives, while the Silver Surfer is tormented by loneliness and his inability to return to his native planet. Once in a while this pattern is reversed, and, in analogy with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a brilliant and/or socially adept character undergoes a transformation into a kind of monster – e.g. the test pilot and astronaut Ben Grimm is turned into 'The Thing' (The Fantastic Four) or the nuclear scientist Bruce Banner involuntarily changes into the Hulk whenever a confrontation with violence or any other excitement leads to a release of adrenaline. Superpowers are accompanied by some handicap, similar to the mythic hero who frequently has some sort of Achilles' heel. In general, the superheroes of the comics are late descendants of the mythical heroes, and their perennial strife against more recent forms of evil or their fights against modern variants of dragons and monsters reflect the cultural perception of inherent dangers, social fault lines or contradictory aspects of communal life which are now solved with the help of the supernatural.

In this respect, one of the major shifts in the depiction of crime and its impact on the community is of particular importance. As in crime literature in general, the superhero originally battled villains who stood outside the norm and threatened the normal flow of social life. With the victory of the hero, the equilibrium was restored. However, this pattern has changed over the last decades; now crime seems to be the norm rather than the exception, and victory only marks a brief pause in the never-ending fight against an evil that, akin to the Hydra, constantly grows new heads once one is severed. In crime literature this change took place as early as the 1930s with the stories and novels by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. The comics followed this lead only in the eighties, probably because they were directed at an adolescent audience and a thoroughly bleak image of American society was not acceptable for the mainstream juvenile market. Now, the criminal enemy is frequently no longer the low-life hoodlum or solitary mad scientist, freak or evil genius; instead the mastermind may well be an honoured member of a society that is corrupted to its very core, an economic tycoon with a secret agenda or a power-crazed politician with a recognizable agenda.

Consequently, the development of mainstream comics shows the change in the perception of society as sold to a mass audience. A comparison between the imagery employed in comic stories of different eras will offer suitable material for the discussion about the presentation of the city, social and cultural institutions, violence, racism, sexuality and also the changing depiction of adolescence.

More often than not, mature and serious comics tend to be dystopian, and thus they lend themselves also to a discussion in the context of satires and more traditional dystopian literature. This is also true for the re-interpretation of popular comic characters and superheroes that began in the 1980s and still spawns ever new revisions, which have themselves begun to form something of a subgenre of their own. Arguably, the most momentous work for this development was Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986, illustrated by Frank Miller and Klaus Janson, coloured by Lynn Varley), set in a world that resembles ours in many ways, e.g. many real characters make their appearance and Ronald Reagan is the president of the United States. Gotham City has become a nightmare controlled by juvenile gangs, and crime has become ubiquitous, but the worst villain may well be the self-righteous greedy citizen who joins the marauding mob and goes plundering when a catastrophe causes a blackout – and later he tries to sue Batman for assault, arguing like an SS-guard of a concentration camp: "I did what everyone would've." However, Batman himself has turned into an obsessed borderline mental case, haunted by his secret alter ego and the monstrous bat that, when he was a kid, claimed him as his own. He is wanted by the police as a vigilante, and a psychologist argues in the media that he is actually to blame for the crimes committed by the sociopaths Harvey Dent (Two Face) and the Joker. The comic ends with a fight almost to the death between Batman and Superman, who has become a god-like figure but also serves as an agent of the government. It needs to be mentioned here that the depiction of violence has also changed considerably, and while the fights in previous Batman stories mostly resembled neatly choreographed boxing matches, Miller's book contains a heavy dose of graphic violence¹ (for a more extended analysis of the graphic novel and a com-

¹ The even more excessive violence in Miller's famed series *Sin City* renders these comics as well as the film unsuitable for school.

parison with the re-interpretation of the other famed bat of mass culture, Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*, cf. Vanderbeke 1994).

In Britain, Alan Moore has infused the vigilante/superhero genre with new ideas in his graphic novels *V for Vendetta*, *Watchmen* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. While some of his major works like *Watchmen* (1986/1987, illustrated by Dave Gibbons, coloured by John Higgins) are indistinguishable from American graphic novels, *V for Vendetta* (1988, illustrated by David Lloyd), *From Hell* (1999, illustrated by Eddie Campbell) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (vol. I 1999/2000, vol. II 2002/2003, illustrated by Kevin O'Neill, coloured by Ben Dimagmaliw, lettered by Bill Oakley) are undoubtedly British, even if the latter books were published in Moore's own series *America's Best Comics*. *V for Vendetta* is a dystopian comic, set in a fascist Britain of the late 1990s which bears aspects of Orwell's *1984* and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. The hero V is an anarchist who wears a Guy Fawkes mask and other theatrical costumes and conceals his identity throughout the book. His actual frame of mind has been described as unstable, though he is not necessarily what one would call 'mentally challenged'. Being the former victim of obscure medical tests while imprisoned in a concentration camp, he is after personal revenge. However, his cause goes beyond the personal to touch upon issues of the dignity and integrity of the whole human race. His rebellion against the deceitful totalitarian regime is fully justified. Well aware of the accusations that superhero comics frequently tend towards a fascist imagery in their presentation of the specially gifted and superior heroes who act as benevolent guardians, but also as hardly legitimized spokesmen for the weak masses and even as rulers over the social and political status quo, Alan Moore now undermines this pattern, and the anarchic hero stages a rebellion against the fascist state.²

The two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* are probably the works by Alan Moore which are most suitable for cultural learning in the EFL classroom. Once more the stories are set in late Victorian England, and the superheroes are characters from various contemporary novels: Mina Murray from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (she is the honorary 'gentleman' and leader of the group), H. Rider Haggard's Allan Quartermain, H.G. Wells' Invisible Man, Jules Verne's Captain Nemo and Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde. Together they form a team that is reminiscent of Marvel's Avengers or DC's Justice League of America, but far more heterogeneous and quarrelsome. The graphic novels are densely packed with literary allusions and historical detail; however, they challenge the stereotypical notion of a hypermoralistic Victorian era with imagery chiefly concerned with the underbelly of society, but also based on the fantastic literature that frequently transgressed social norms and, possibly for that reason, was cherished at the time. The second volume is based on H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* with the depiction of explicit violence being not quite as graphic as in the first volume, and thus it may be advisable to use this book for classroom exploration.

Of course, there are far more comics and graphic novels that would lend themselves to cultural studies, but to mention them all would certainly explode the scope of this paper. However, one more genre needs to be mentioned, the adaptation of literature to the comic form. A wide range of literary works have been transformed into graphic

² I would like to thank Susanne Peters for her help in assessing this graphic novel which I have not yet had the chance to examine myself.

novels – for example, Engelbert Thaler (2005) explores the possibilities for the use of Shakespeare comics in school. Here I only want to mention the adaptation of a text which has already occasionally been used in EFL teaching, Paul Auster's *City of Glass*. The project was launched by Art Spiegelman, and originally the idea was a collaboration in the course of which some serious novelists would provide suitable scenarios for the comic artists to work on, the goal being "not to create some dumbed-down 'Classics Illustrated' versions, but visual 'translations' actually worthy of adult attention" (Spiegelman 2004: n.p.). When it proved to be impossible to find willing authors, Paul Auster suggested the adaptation of one of his books; it was then realized by Paul Karasik and David Mazzuchelli with Auster looking over the drafts and offering suggestions. The result is a new version of the story which employs a multitude of different styles, changing between realistic passages, an occasionally highly abstract iconography and frequent allusions to other works of art. Ideally, it should be read together with Auster's novel with specific attention given to the different formal approaches to the story and the alternative strategies of the graphic artist in the presentation of the complex material in a form that has traditionally be seen as juvenile. However, it may well also prove worthwhile to follow up on the original idea and to try to transform other suitable literary works or selected passages into comic form, either in the context of cultural studies or else in the context of a project on literature adaptations to new media.

5. Conclusion

There is an anecdote from World War II about some German spies who were detected in the American Army. They became suspect because they were strangely unfamiliar with funnies and comic strips which, of course, each and every one of the G.I.s knew from earliest childhood onward and many still read as adults. Truth or fiction, the anecdote shows that comics have a long pedigree in American, and also British, culture, and while they were almost unanimously rejected in Germany until the beginning of the 1970s they met with a much more favourable response abroad, if occasionally interrupted by anti-comics campaigns like Wertham's attack in the 1950s. In this respect, comics are a suitable subject for cultural studies, not only because they embody particular perspectives on the culture, which they do, but because they are an integral part of the culture. For more than a century now, comics have been present in everyday culture in Britain and America, and for some decades their potential to be or become serious art has been recognized even by the cultural establishment. It would indeed be a great loss if this potential was neglected in school.

In this paper I have tried to present a multitude of comics and graphic novels that may be not only read, explored and discussed but also enjoyed in the context of cultural studies in school. As it was impossible to reproduce extended sequences for an in-depth analysis – copyright laws are particularly stiff when it comes to comics and illustrations – and as I assume that I cannot rely on the audience's familiarity with the material for an exemplary close reading of a particular graphic novel, I have instead chosen to show the variety of possible texts and approaches in the hope that every teacher will be able to find something suitable for every level of language proficiency and many different topics. Moreover, I hope that the addition of comics and graphic novels to the curriculum will not only lead to interesting and lively discussions of a medium that adolescents

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relish, but also offer the opportunity to tap into the creativity of the pupils and their willingness to experiment with this art form, either in the EFL classroom or in the context of school projects – and once in a while, drab classrooms have been improved by self-made posters based on images from various forms of sequential art.

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