

Film Reviews

Ron Mann's **Comic Book Confidential**

The art of comic illustration developed almost simultaneously with the art of the motion picture at the turn of the century. They are inexorably linked by notions of image-making, storytelling, framing, movement through time and space, editing, and both are, of course, responsive to the whims of popular taste.

Georges Méliès' comical shorts were little more than magically moving comic strips. American Winsor McCay, the innovative illustrator of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created the first animated film, *Gertie The Trained Dinosaur*, to accompany his vaudeville act in 1910. Comic strip heroes such as Zorro came to life on film while cinematic creations like Chaplin's sublime Tramp became the subject of popular comic strips.

There is a great film to be made of this symbiotic relationship. Ron Mann's *Comic Book Confidential*, however, is not that film. Nor, to be fair, was it intended to be, which is more the shame.

Mann has limited his scope to the development of the American comic book form, from the *Famous Funnies* of the '30s to the present. The film moves chronologically through this narrow frame of reference, placing the greatest amount of emphasis on the most contemporary of comic artists working today. This framework not only excludes the contributions made by the Europeans, British and Japanese to this much-maligned form of popular entertainment, but also completely ignores the larger, and arguably more interesting relationship that has developed between the cinematic and comic art forms.

What Mann offers instead is a respectful and lighthearted tribute to a handful of American artists who made a difference in their chosen field. *Comic Book Confidential* begins with an interview with William F. Gaines, publisher of the seminal *Mad* magazine and author of many of the '50s' most lurid and unrestricted comics, such as E. C.'s celebrated *Weird Science*, *Tales From The Crypt*, and *The Vault Of Horror*. Next up is Will Eisner, the celebrated creator of *The Spirit*, with his groundbreaking moody, cinematic style.

From the '40s and '50s, when the comic book was despised and reviled by parents and educators alike, the film moves into the breakthrough years of the '60s. The hyper-imaginative and prodigious storytelling abilities of Marvel Comics' Stan Lee, combined with the distinctive, powerful style of illustrator Jack Kirby, attracted a whole new readership to comic books. The kids who had read their *Tales*



Scary stuff kiddies: that despised but worthy art form, comic books

From the *Crypt* in secret, away from their parents' disapproval, now turned to a dizzying array of titles with names like *Spiderman*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Dr. Strange*, *The Silver Surfer*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and many, many more. Comics became acceptable reading for baby-boom college students.

The film then moves to the underground style of *Zap Comix*, with its psychedelic graphics and brilliant satirical talents of Robert Crumb (*Felix The Cat*), Bill Griffith (*Zippy*, *The Pinhead*) and Gilbert Shelton (*The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*). Mann concludes with a look at the postmodern comics such as *Raw* and *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, which is a novel-length comic set during the Holocaust. In the words of Sue Coe, *Raw* artist and politically committed painter who exhibits in galleries, comics now have become "precious art".

Comic Book Confidential is strongest with this later material. Robert Crumb and the other *Zap* artists give the film its off-beat humour and insight into the temper of the times when comics were an important part of the Underground Movement. Crumb, who left a steady but boring job drawing greeting cards in Cleveland, began

selling his own *Zap Comix* from a baby carriage in the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco during the height of the "psychedelic revolution". He created *Mr. Natural* and coined the phrase "Keep on truckin'" which the Grateful Dead turned into a generational anthem. In fact, the Dead might very well have been the inspiration for Shelton's *Freak Brothers*, those wonderful, wacky, stoned icons of the '60s. However, Mann spends a disproportionate amount of time with the postmodern artists who run limited editions of very specialized comics for the collector and connoisseur. These are generally well out of the range of the average pre-teen, who still makes up the greatest readership for comic books.

The film is weakest in covering the so-called "straight" commercial artists of Marvel and D. C. Short shrift is given to Jack Kirby, surely the most influential comic artist of the '60s, and Neal Adams, whose cinematic style revolutionized the *Batman* series for D. C., receives no mention at all. Indeed, it was Adams who forced D. C., after intensive lobbying, to give credit to Spiegel and Shuster, the original creators of *Superman*, an act which brought

dignity to all the illustrators and artists who toil in the million-dollar business of selling comic books. *Comic Book Confidential's* biggest omission is Carl Barks, the prolific talent behind the Disney comics of the '40s and '50s, *Donald Duck*, *Mickey Mouse*, and especially his brilliant creation, *Uncle Scrooge*.

Mann frames his documentary with footage from a '50s black and white television show which is much like the *Reefer Madness* of comic books. An earnest commentator warns parents about their children going blind and committing violent acts, concluding that "there ought to be a law against them". Scenes are shown of comics being burnt by kids, just like the religious right burned copies of Beatles albums when John made his famous pronouncement about Christ. Mann has even come up with footage of a young, crew-cut William Gaines defending his comics during a Senate Committee Hearing on Juvenile Delinquency. Subsequently a National Code was adopted which effectively put an end to the gory cycle of comics and gave rise to the bland, but approved titles like *Archie* and *Millie The Model*.

Comic Book Confidential is, without question, a slick and well-produced documentary. Mann's thesis that comic books - though they might have been a despised form - have had an undisputable impact as popular entertainment and satirical commentary, is well taken. He combines the original covers with original animation and bold graphics, thereby creating a cinematic equivalent to the style of comics. It, along with *Imagine The Sound* (1981) and *Poetry In Motion* (1982) form what Mann refers to as a trilogy of works on North American culture. It is slicker than the previous two, but lighter and less interesting. His historical approach makes the film more accessible to the uninitiated, but leaves too many gaps for the film's best audience, the fans of great comic art.

Paul Townend •

COMIC BOOK CONFIDENTIAL p. Ron Mann co-p. Martin Harbury exec. p. Don Haig d. Ron Mann prod. exec. Charles Lippincott ed. Robert Kennedy, Ron Mann asst. to p. Sue Len Quon art d. Gerlinde Scharinger d.o.p. Robert Fresco, Joan Churchill sound record. David Joliat, Tod A. Maitland, Brenda Ray filmograph design Steven Lewis, Gerlinde Scharinger, John Halpenny, David McIlvaney, Ellen Besen, Marjorie Reemeyer, Chris Armstrong filmograph camera Meta Media, Film Effects comic book consultants bpNichol, Mark Askwith additional consultants: Art Spiegelman, Dennis Kitchen sound ed. Steve Munro supervising eds. Bruce McDonald, Gordon McClellan, Peter Wintonick asst. ed. Sue Len Quon original music Shadowy Men On A Shadowy Planet, Keith Elliott, Gerard Leckey and Nicholas Stirling of Strange Nursery, Dr. John asst. to the d. Robin Brown, Marina Jimenez, Eden Ashley, Jessica Forman, Monika Spudas stock footage research Michael Tompane, Mary Dore, Aleen Stein, Jeff Sheftal rock 'n roll input Elliott Lefko consultant Emile de Antonio narrative captions written by bpNichol lettering by Let'er Ring! Graphics processing Medallion Labs optical blow up Film Effects post production Film House Group; produced by Sphinx Productions with financial assistance from The Swann Foundation, The Ontario Arts Council, The Canada Council, Telefilm Canada, The Ontario Film Development Corporation, City TV, Cineplex Oden Films.