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' comic 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 while cinematic creations like Chaplin's subtle 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 much 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 a comic like 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 From the Crypt in secret, away from their parents' disapproval, now turned to a dizzying array of titles with names like Spider-Man, The Fantastic Four, Doctor Strange, 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 Mass: 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 gave the comic its off-beat humour and insight into the tempo 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 "psychelic 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 inspired by Shelton's Shelton's Fresh 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 Siegel 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 Reeper 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 burnt 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 were made of this 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 Porty in Motion (1982) form what Mann refers to as a trilogy of works on North American culture. This is slicker than the previous two, but lighter and less interesting. His historical approach makes the film more accessible to the uninstructed, but leaves too many gaps for the film's best audience, the fans of great comic art.

Paul Townsend