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An alternative by any other name: genre-splicing and mainstream genres in alternative comics

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Alternative comics are typically defined by the supposed absence of superheroes and other mainstream genres, yet these genres have appeared repeatedly in key examples of alternative comics, including works by Chris Ware, Daniel Clowes, Charles Burns, Art Spiegelman, and Jaime Hernandez. These cartoonists' use of mainstream genres takes the form of what I call 'genre-splicing,' the combination of two or more genres in a way that fragments the fictional reality of the work or violates the norms of the genres employed. Genre-splicing provides a vehicle for many effects and aims, including thematic development, narrative pleasure, self-reflexivity, and disjunctive disruption. Alternative cartoonists' use of genre-splicing not only punctures the myth that alternative comics are defined by mainstream genres' absence, it also challenges the description of alternative comics as adult, literary, and artistic, in contrast to the juvenile and commercial nature of most mainstream comics. Despite their contradictions, however, alternative and mainstream are nevertheless useful terms whose ambiguities and contradictions mirror those of the cultural practices they describe.

Keywords: alternative comics; mainstream comics; graphic novels; genre-splicing; superheroes

Chris Ware's 'Thrilling Adventure Stories', first published in Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly's experimental anthology *Raw* in 1991, provides a paradigmatic example of American alternative cartoonists' use of mainstream genres through the technique of genre-splicing,[1] the combination of two or more genres in a way that fragments or contradicts the fictional reality of the work or violates the norms of the genres employed. Contradicting the often-repeated notion that alternative comics are defined by the absence of mainstream genres, alternative cartoonists' use of genre-splicing demands a more complex understanding of the relation between the problematic terms 'mainstream' and 'alternative'. Ware's story contains two different, seemingly unrelated narratives, one told through the story's images, the other through its text. The visual narrative is in a style approximating that of American comics' so-called Golden Age,[2] while the textual narrative, which flows without a break through text boxes, speech balloons and thought bubbles, is a confessional autobiography of a troubled boy wounded by loss, betrayal, and intimations of physical and sexual violence (Figure 1). While a tenuous link between the text and the images is made later in the story when the narrator discusses his fondness for superhero comics, no direct correspondence between the two is ever established.[3]

Like many genre-splicing alternative comics, 'Thrilling Adventure Stories' transforms and critiques the values and conventions of the genre it appropriates. Many of Ware's
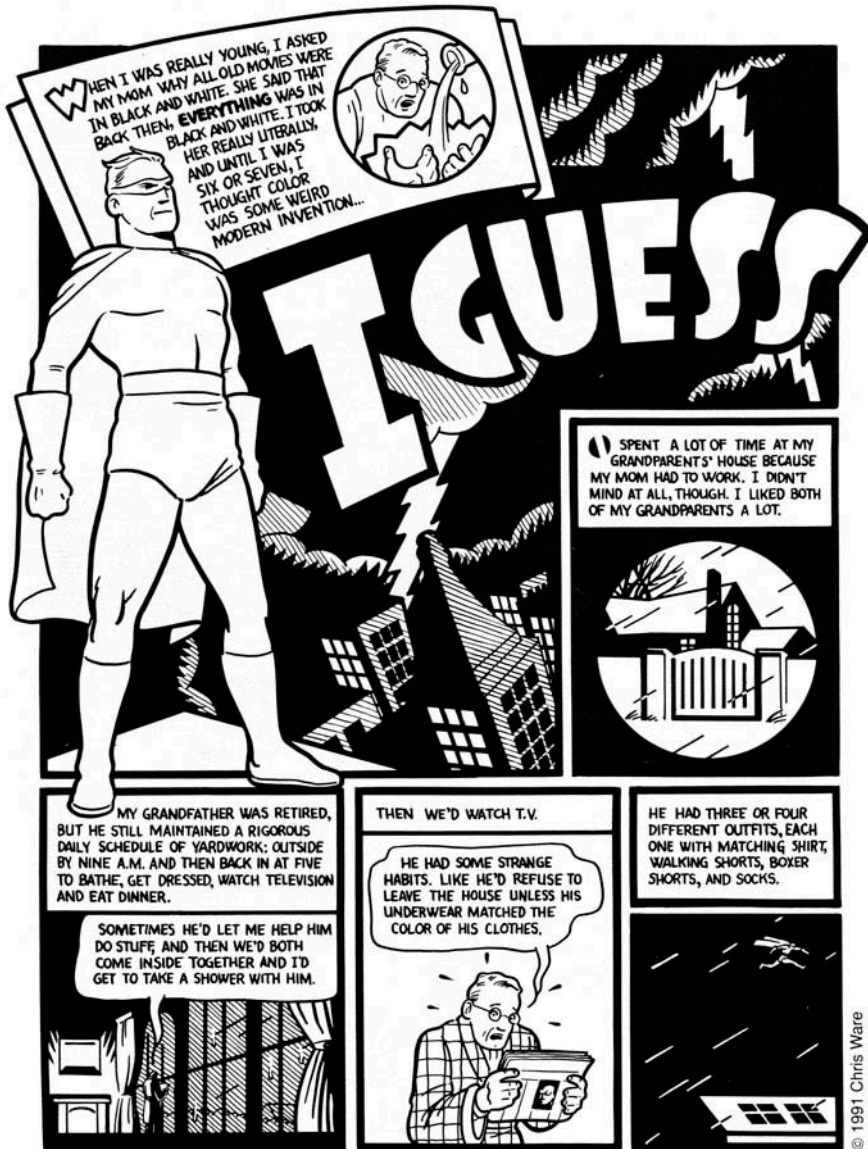

Figure 1.   Chris Ware, 'Thrilling Adventure Stories', *Raw* vol. 2, #3 (1991), page 76. © 2014 Chris Ware, image courtesy Fantagraphics Books.

early comics, including this one, draw heavily on the theme of lost father figures in superhero comics, their resulting psychological trauma, and their role as motivations for superheroes' missions, as in the origins of Superman, Batman and Spider-Man, to name a few.[4] The autobiographical account told in 'Thrilling Adventure Stories' obliquely recalls the childhood traumas of the superhero genre through the suggestion of physical or sexual abuse, for instance when the narrator relates that:

> My grandfather was retired, but he still maintained a rigorous daily schedule of yard work: outside by nine a.m. and then back in at five to bathe, get dressed, watch television and eat

dinner. Sometimes he'd let me help him do stuff, and then we'd both come inside together and I'd get to take a shower with him. (Ware 1991, 76)

The grandfather's excessive gardening appears eccentric but harmless, but the shared showers, which the narrator seemed to regard as some kind of reward, seem inappropriate for a child who appears to be about 13 years of age and suggest the possibility of sexual abuse, although the narrator does not seem to feel traumatized by it in any way. The ambiguity of this passage is typical of the narrator's story, in which much is implied and incongruous but little is spelled out. The juxtaposition of sensitive and disturbing passages with the anodyne and blandly virtuous images of Golden Age superheroes is unsettling and casts a dark shadow on the seemingly innocent superhero origin stories. Unlike most superhero stories, however, the childhood traumas in 'Thrilling Adventure Stories' do not result in the provision of compensatory powers or an ethical quest to the narrator, thereby emptying the genre of its cathartic and redemptive power.

'Alternative' and 'mainstream' as social objects

Mainstream American comic books since the 1960s have typically been defined by their portrayal of superheroes – the genre has dominated them during this period – while alternative comics have conversely been defined by the absence of superheroes. For instance, alternative cartoonist Peter Bagge has said that '[i]n the comic book industry, anything that ISN'T superheroes is considered "alternative" since that one genre so completely dominates' (Sabin and Triggs 2004, 100); while comics scholar Roger Sabin (1993, 177) has written that '[i]t is difficult to generalize about the new alternatives because they were so diverse. The best way to define them is by contrasting them to the mainstream. First, and most obviously, they were not about superheroes.' The most sustained analysis of alternative comics is Hatfield (2005), which does not provide a conclusive definition of alternative comics since, as Hatfield correctly notes, alternative and mainstream are 'imprecise and loaded terms' (31). Hatfield thus does not explicitly exclude mainstream genres from alternative comics but does tend to overlook their presence, writing that 'alternative comics skirted those shopworn [mainstream] genres' (x) and focusing heavily on autobiography and other more or less realistic genres, despite the fact that he uses Ware's 'Thrilling Adventure Stories' as a key example in his discussion of the experience of reading comics (32–39). One result of the fact that alternative comics are typically defined negatively by their difference from mainstream comics rather than positively by some shared feature or features is that the category includes a heterogeneous collection of works that do not necessarily have much in common with each other. While some alternative comics actually are free of superheroes and other mainstream comics genres, many others feature these genres in central roles, a fact that has been largely ignored by scholars. Alternative comics can thus be divided into two groups: on the one hand, those that make use of genre-splicing and, on the other, various forms of realism, including autobiography, contemporary fiction and historical fiction.[5] Paul Lopes is one of the few scholars to recognize the presence of mainstream genres in alternative comics, but his analysis of them is less than satisfactory. Lopes divides alternative comics into a 'pulp-strategy' and an 'alt-strategy', writing that:

> The alternative pulp-strategy … remained wedded to exploring the boundaries of traditional pulp fiction, but rejected any commitment to the narrow genres or aesthetic realism of mainstream rebels. The alternative alt-strategy, on the other hand, was wedded to what Ken Gelder calls the 'literary' in fiction. The alt-strategy rejected the pulp genre tradition and

followed a path similar to what we call 'fine literature' as opposed to 'popular literature'. (Lopes 2009, 126)

While Lopes is right that there is one group of alternative comics that uses pulp genres and one that does not, his description of them is misleading. For Lopes, comics that follow the pulp-strategy are limited to those that use pulp genres without radically transforming them, while those that follow the alt-strategy aspire to the level of literature. The problem with this description is that most genre-splicing alternative comics both radically transform the genres they appropriate and do so in pursuit of 'literary' qualities. In fact, the radical disruption of generic conventions through the use of genre-splicing is responsible for many of the highest 'literary' achievements of alternative comics.

Just as the category of alternative comics suffers from definitional incoherence and contradiction, so too does that of mainstream comics. As film scholar Michael Newman has written:

> I consider 'mainstream' to be a category that niche cultures or subcultures construct to have something against which to define themselves and generate their cultural or subcultural capital. I do not believe that there is a mainstream that exists independent of this process of classification. (Newman 2011, 5)

Despite this lack of clear definitions, 'alternative' and 'mainstream' nevertheless describe differences in cultural practice: even when alternative comics use mainstream genres, they radically transform those genres' formulas and meanings. The categories of mainstream and alternative should be understood as what literary scholar Samuel Delany has called 'social objects'. According to Delany, social objects

> resist formal definition, i.e., we cannot locate the necessary and sufficient conditions that can describe them with definitional rigor. Social objects … exist as an unspecified number of recognition codes (functional descriptions, if you will) shared by an unlimited population, in which new and different examples are regularly produced. Genres, discourses, and genre collections are all social objects. And when a discourse (or genre collection, such as art) encourages, values, and privileges originality, creativity, variation, and change in its new examples, it should be self-evident why 'definition' is an impossible task (since the object itself, if it is healthy, is constantly developing and changing)…. (Delany 1999, 239)

Social objects cannot be rigorously defined since they are constituted *a posteriori* through practice, not *a priori* through definition.[6] In the case of mainstream and alternative comics, what allows the categories to function is not any stylistic or other feature of the comics themselves, but rather the discourse in which they participate. Newman's comments about film again apply to alternative comics: what makes them 'cohere as a cultural category is not only a set of industrial criteria or formal or stylistic conventions. It is most centrally a cluster of interpretive strategies and expectations' (Newman 2011, 11).[7] In the case of comics, the agents of these interpretive expectations are critics, fans, cartoonists, publishers, distributors, retailers and scholars. The discourse that has put forward the flawed definitions of alternative and mainstream is paradoxically the very practice that constitutes these categories through its operation. The terms 'alternative' and 'mainstream' are thus productive contradictions that describe real networks of social practice yet remain partial and contradictory.

A theory of genre-splicing

Genre-splicing is one particular method of mixing genres, a practice that is not a new phenomenon but has a long past throughout literary history. Literary scholar Heather

Dubrow's description of the different ways that genres can be combined helps to contextualise the technique of genre-splicing by situating it within the larger history of literary genres. Dubrow writes that:

> A particular work of art may conform to a single, clearcut generic pattern and in so doing resemble, as it were, a primary color. Or it may participate in a genre like pastoral romance that is in fact a combination of literary forms, much as the secondary colors – orange, green, violet – are but mixtures of adjacent hues. Or it may move between distinguishable but related genres … and hence remind us of intermediate colors like yellow-green. But certain works … dazzle and disturb us with a kaleidoscopic array of hues in which it is difficult to discern a dominant one, a single genre with whose name we can confidently label the work. (Dubrow 1982, 28–29)

Examples of genres that are what Dubrow calls 'secondary colors' that are 'mixtures of adjacent hues' can be described as blended rather than spliced genres. The superhero genre is an example of one such blended genre that has been formed from elements of the crime, science fiction and adventure genres that have been 'digested', rendering their 'seams' no longer (easily) visible. Genre-splicing, on the other hand, consists of those 'kaleidoscopic' works that 'dazzle and disturb us', in which the different colours remain unblended (or only partially blended) and are juxtaposed side by side, creating alternately harmonious and clashing combinations and often leaving behind 'undigested fragments' that fracture the coherence of the narrative's fictional reality. Genre-splicing can be subdivided into two types, weak and strong; the former disrupts the conventions of one or both genres, while the latter goes further, disrupting the coherence of the fictional reality itself. These two forms of genre-splicing are not mutually exclusive but can be used together in a single work.

The effects of genre-splicing are not purely formal or stylistic. Dubrow notes that an author's 'doubts about the ethical values' of a genre 'are manifested in the way he twists some of the conventions of his literary form and ignores or downplays others' by 'playing off one literary form against another', a process that can be clearly observed in Ware's 'Thrilling Adventure Stories' (Dubrow 1982, 23, 25). Dubrow also points out that the choice to work within a genre 'at the very least indicates some involvement with its values, some interest in what previous writers have achieved in it', although in the case of alternative cartoonists and mainstream genres this involvement is often highly ambivalent (24). Genre-splicing appeals to this contradictory attitude by allowing cartoonists simultaneously to critique and enjoy mainstream genres. At one extreme, Chris Ware and Daniel Clowes are known for their extreme distaste for superhero comics, yet they have repeatedly used them in fascinating and insightful ways (Singer 2010, 34–35; Burns et al. 2005; Parille and Cates 2010, 13). Charles Burns, on the other hand, has cited *Mad, Dick Tracy* and *Tintin* as influences, the latter of which he drew on heavily in his 2010 alt-horror comic *X'ed Out*, and has said that he does not think there should be a tension between superhero and alternative comics (Burns et al. 2005; Burns 2008, 49–50, 62). Similarly, Gilbert Hernandez has said that he and his brother Jaime absorbed all kinds of comics books, including the work of Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko and *Archie*, and that they disagree with critics who think they should not work in 'lesser' genres (Hernandez and Hernandez 2012). Whatever their attitudes towards their source genres, however, alternative cartoonists radically transform them in the course of their genre-splicing, using these genres' thematic tropes in new and unfamiliar ways.

Genre-splicing overlaps with two influential concepts in cultural theory, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and Frederic Jameson's dual concepts of parody and

pastiche. These terms all describe the presence of multiple modes of discourse within a single text, but each has a somewhat different meaning and purpose. Bakhtin's heteroglossia, for instance, is a broader category than genre-splicing, in keeping with its role as part of a universal theory of signification. The attempt to compare the two terms is complicated by the fact that Bakhtin uses heteroglossia in at least two distinct senses. In Bakhtin's broadest use of the term, heteroglossia is not so much a type of discourse as a condition of it, present to a greater or lesser degree in all discourses, as when he writes that 'Every utterance participates in the "unitary language" (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)' (Bakhtin 1981, 272). In a narrower sense, heteroglossia is a specific trait belonging to some literary texts and not others, as when Bakhtin describes the novel as the quintessential example of heteroglossia, in contrast to texts that use what Bakthin calls a 'unitary language', such as religious texts, epics and other forms of poetry (286–288, 342–344). Even in this more limited use of the term, however, heteroglossia is a broader concept than genre-splicing. Genre-splicing refers only to literary texts, but heteroglossia can be used to describe a much wider type of phenomenon, including everyday speech, the contexts of utterances, and relationships between utterances. In addition, heteroglossia is not necessarily disjunctive, whereas genre-splicing describes combinations of genres that disrupt each other's consistency or coherence. While these two terms overlap, 'genre-splicing' is useful because it isolates a more specific practice than heteroglossia.

Similarly, Jameson's concepts of parody and pastiche resemble genre-splicing in a broad sense but differ from it in their specifics. Jameson defines pastiche as a completely neutral form of mimesis, in contrast to parody, which always has a critical edge, and identifies the former with the postmodern era and the latter with an earlier period that is not precisely defined but that includes modernism as well as unspecified earlier eras. According to Jameson:

> Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter or of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. (Jameson 1991, 17)

Based on this definition, neither of these terms is entirely applicable to genre-splicing in alternative comics. Alternative cartoonists' use of genre-splicing cannot be considered pastiche since it is never devoid of ulterior motives, satire or laughter. It also does not fit the definition of parody very well since, although most genre-splicing alternative comics include some element of parody, this only accounts for a small part of their treatment of their source genres. While Jameson's division of works into pastiche and parody can plausibly be applied to the avant-garde, it breaks down when applied to popular culture, both as a categorization of periods and of individual works, since these two cultural fields have evolved along rather different (albeit occasionally overlapping) tracks.

Genre-splicing and alternative comics

Genre-splicing is a technique that performs many roles: as a vehicle for self-reflexivity, thematic development, narrative pleasure and as a monkey wrench for the disruption of generic norms. One of the simplest forms of genre-splicing is the use of 'undigested

fragments' that destabilize a story both narratively and thematically. These fragments typically do not make literal sense within the context of a narrative, unmooring its narrative and thematic foundations while introducing suggestive thematic associations into it. In Charles Burns's 'Teen Plague', for instance, a caption on the first page informs the reader that the protagonist, a young boy named Tony Delmonto, is known as 'Big Baby', although he is only addressed as Tony within the story.[8] Tony's physical appearance is normal except for his head, which is a hairless, smooth, nearly spherical orb with long, thin, arching eyebrows, tiny eyes and a button nose (Figure 2). Tony's abnormal head is apparent to the reader but goes unremarked by the other characters, who do not appear to perceive him as disfigured, raising the question of whether Tony's abnormality is 'real' or simply a visual stylization on the part of the artist. In either case, both Tony's head and his name disturb the fictional reality of the story, early indications of the more severe narrative disruptions to come. One example of this can be found in Jaime Hernandez's 'Mechanics' storyline in *Love and Rockets*, a series he created with his brother which consists of multiple ongoing storylines. In 'Mechanics', the enigmatic billionaire H. R. Costigan is depicted with two small horns protruding from his forehead, which the other characters in *Love and Rockets* do not appear to perceive and the origin and meaning of which are not explained at all until much later in the series, in Hernandez (1997) and Hernandez (2002), and even then the explanation is only partial. Because *Love and Rockets* incorporated many science fiction elements during this period the horns are

Figure 2.　Charles Burns, 'Teen Plague', *Raw* vol. 2, #1 (1989), page 19. © 2014 Charles Burns, image courtesy Fantagraphics Books.

not completely out of place, but while they remain unexplained they represent a loose thread within the storyline's already sprawling narrative. Like most undigested fragments, the horns are ambiguous and suggestive rather than explicit or clear-cut symbols.

Meta-narrative is a natural extension of genre-splicing and, because of the nature of the technique, is at least implied in any use of it. However, some works go beyond this bare minimum, explicitly thematizing the constructed nature of the narrative. In 'Teen Plague', for instance, the narrative begins with Tony reading a horror comic called *Monster* about an alien named Kaballa-Bonga who has come to Earth to create an army of teenage 'love slaves'. Several sequences of *Monster* are inserted side by side into the panel grid alongside 'Teen Plague', situating both of them on the same level of fictional reality. This situation of equivalence is disrupted later, however, when a series of panels from *Monster* is interrupted when Tony's teacher takes the comic away from him, in the process placing her hand over the panel Tony is reading (Figure 2). This palimpsestic relationship is enacted on a narrative as well as a visual level, beginning when Tony notices a hickey on the neck of Joyce, his babysitter, and becomes convinced that she has been enslaved by Kaballa-Bonga. Joyce is in fact infected, but not by Kaballa-Bonga. She has contracted a sexually transmitted 'teen plague' that causes rashes, nightmares and bleeding, from her boyfriend, Jeff. The story thus contains two science-fiction infections, one 'real' and one 'fictional', which the narrator confuses with each other. Tony repeatedly attempts to alert his teacher and parents to the threat he believes Kaballa-Bonga poses, using Joyce's actual infection as evidence. The authorities soon discover the existence of the teen plague and claim to have it under control, but Tony continues to believe that her illness was caused by Kaballa-Bonga, a view that at the story's conclusion seems unlikely but not impossible. It thus leaves open a sliver of possibility that the narrative hierarchy of 'Teen Plague' and *Monster* may be overturned.

A similar but even more complicated use of meta-narrative takes place in Dan Clowes's (2000) *David Boring*. The metanarrative in this case centres on a fictional comic called *The Yellow Streak and Friends Annual*, which was created by David's father, a cartoonist who abandoned David and his mother when David was a child, and the comic thus serves in David's mind as a proxy for his father. *The Yellow Streak* first appears on the initial page of *David Boring*, the entirety of which is devoted to an image of the fictional comic's cover that recreates with naturalistic precision the creases in the cover and the pastel colours and atmosphere of trivial melodrama of many 1960s superhero comics. As in 'Teen Plague', the primary means by which Clowes integrates *The Yellow Streak* into *David Boring* is by periodically interspersing panels from the former into the panel grid of the latter. Unlike the rest of *David Boring*, which is composed in flat tones of black, white and grey, the panels from *The Yellow Streak* are printed in colour and feature artificial Ben-Day dots (i.e. the dots are deliberately inserted by Clowes, not produced as a result of the printing process, and they do not appear in the 'normal' *David Boring* storyline). The use of colour invests these panels with a higher, more vivid degree of reality than the more literally 'real' contents of the panels around them, while the Ben-Day dots have an opposite effect, simulating the printing technique used in comic books prior to the 1990s and thereby emphasizing their status as second-order representations. Thus, while the *David Boring* and *Yellow Streak* panels are seemingly merged into one narrative, they are also marked as separate through an apparent but artificial difference. The Ben-Day dots also serve as a marker of implied cultural status, evoking the cheap printing of early superhero comics or pulp magazines in contrast to the more expensive printing technique of *David Boring* itself, which suggests the literary aspirations frequently attributed to alternative comics.[9] In contrast to those instances in which the *Yellow*

Streak panels are inserted into the panel grid of *David Boring*, in other instances the *Yellow Streak* panels are presented as physical objects within the fictional reality of *David Boring*, as when David is shown arranging and rearranging the surviving *Yellow Streak* panels (Figure 3a). Another group of panels occupies a position somewhere between these two modes, showing *The Yellow Streak* panels in damaged condition (Figure 3b), emphasizing their physicality and their identity as one particular copy, the damaged one owned by David, while still placing them within the same panel grid as *David Boring*. Yet other *Yellow Streak* panels are similarly damaged but are not aligned squarely with the panel grid of *David Boring* (Figure 3c), implying that what the reader is seeing is a close-up of the *Yellow Streak* panels as David manipulates them. By turning the *Yellow Streak* panels

Figure 3a.   Daniel Clowes, *David Boring* (2000), page 74. © 2014 Daniel Clowes, image courtesy Fantagraphics Books.

Figure 3b.   Daniel Clowes, *David Boring* (2000), page 98. © 2014 Daniel Clowes, image courtesy Fantagraphics Books.
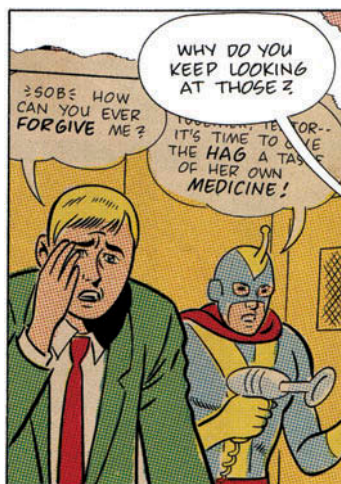
Figure 3c.   Daniel Clowes, *David Boring* (2000), page 95. © 2014 Daniel Clowes, image courtesy Fantagraphics Books.

into physical objects within *David Boring*, Clowes positions them on multiple levels of representational reality, drawing attention to the constructed nature of the superhero genre and the materiality of comics.

While metanarrative is a frequent part of genre-splicing, the richest use of the technique is to advance a story's thematic development. In Burns's 'Teen Plague', for instance, the vulnerability and awkwardness of teenagers' sexual awakening is explored through the manipulation of the horror and science-fiction genres. The central trope of the series is the metaphor of teenage sexuality as a disease, with Kaballa-Bonga's 'love slaves' spreading the infection to other teens by seducing and then biting them and the 'teen plague' being transmitted by sexual intercourse, while other horror motifs in the story represent the sexual and other anxieties experienced by adolescents. The unsightly bleeding rash that progressively covers the bodies of Jeff and Joyce as a symptom of the teen plague expresses a sense of shame about their bodies, while a recurring plague-induced nightmare Jeff suffers conveys feelings of isolation and alienation. In the dream he wanders the halls of his high school but the students seem uncannily both familiar and unfamiliar, simulating the social awkwardness associated with this period of social development. He then finds himself in a classroom where his fellow students are taking a test he is unprepared for, after which the ceiling turns into oozing flesh, the room begins filling up with blood and the other students become ghouls. In addition to the horror genre, 'Teen Plague' also references the romance genre, one of the most popular comics genres from the 1940s to the 1960s, in the treatment of the relationship between Joyce and Jeff. The time period of 'Teen Plague' is never defined, but a number of details, such as a scene that takes place in a drive-in, point to a setting in the 1950s, which coincides with the peak in popularity of both the horror and romance genres. Burns continued to explore the parallels between the horror genre and teen sexuality and identity in his later *Black Hole* (2005), although he largely abandoned the self-reflexivity he had employed in the earlier story.

The Yellow Streak also plays an important thematic role in Clowes's *David Boring* as David's only link to his lost father. As David tells the reader, 'I allow myself to read only

two panels a night, very closely, with an eye for uncanny parallels and traces of my father' (Clowes 2000, 45). As time passes, David becomes more and more obsessed with the comic. After his mother destroys his copy of *The Yellow Streak*, David vows that 'Now more than ever I must strain to wring meaning from these disembodied frames' (64), a level of close reading that is reminiscent of both scholarly and fan activity. David never succeeds in deciphering any clues about his father from *The Yellow Streak* and so, as in 'Thrilling Adventure Stories', the fictional superhero fails to redeem the protagonist's childhood trauma. However, this only transfers David's obsession from his father to *The Yellow Streak* itself:

> The *Yellow Streak Annual* has at this point been reduced to an envelope of disembodied frames: 9 or 10 waterlogged survivors… … I don't really care about what happened to my dad (he really is dead, by the way – I checked), but I can't shake my fascination with the Yellow Streak. What are the Yellow Streak's powers? How does he know Testor? Is Florence really the Hag in disguise? What other adventures have they had? What do they do between panels? Where are they now? (Clowes 2000, 73–74)

While David does not succeed in discovering anything about his father through his scrutiny of *The Yellow Streak*, the character's name does yield a number of symbolic insights into David's father, replicating the conventional connection between a superhero's name, costume, identity and origin story.[10] The Yellow Streak's name and its visual representation in his costume indicates cowardice, both in its colloquial meaning (a 'yellow streak') and its suggestion of a stream of urine, the opposite of the bravery usually associated with superheroes but appropriate for a character created by a father who abandons his family. David's name similarly possesses symbolic meaning, albeit by negation. His surname suggests that he is an ordinary, even dull person, when in fact he is quite unusual and eccentric, a trait to which both the narrative and the character himself repeatedly draw attention. His sensitivity, intelligence, timidity and awkwardness evoke the traditional personality of the superhero's alter ego, especially the archetypal Clark Kent, although, unlike Kent, David is an alter ego without a superhero, again undercutting the redemptive power of the superhero genre.

Clowes's use of *The Yellow Streak* as a symbolic and meta-narrative trope converge in the repeated invocations of ghosts in *David Boring*. While attempting to use *The Yellow Streak* to establish a connection with his father, David consults a comics expert named Gerry Bishoff to unearth more information about his father. Bishoff tells David that *The Yellow Streak* 'kind of stands out in your dad's career…. Mostly I think he was just a "ghost"' (Clowes 2000, 74), meaning a cartoonist whose work is uncredited, but with clear resonances with his father's spectral presence in David's life. David's father's spectral character is echoed within *The Yellow Streak* when the hero's sidekick, Testor, uses a '2-D ray' to transport the Yellow Streak into the 'second dimension', thereby transforming him into a ghost, an event depicted on the cover of *The Yellow Streak*. As a ghost, the Yellow Streak attempts to warn Testor of danger, unlike David's father, who is a negligent rather than a protective spirit. This incident equates two-dimensionality, the material condition of comics (along with all other visual and textual media) with ghostliness, thereby repeating David's sublimation of his longing for his father into the two-dimensional medium of comics.

The range of themes that can be explored through genre-splicing is vast, limited only by the cartoonist's imagination, as can be seen by taking a brief look at Art Spiegelman's (1997) *Maus* and Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* (1982–). Spieglman's

comics uses the 'funny animal' genre, one of the most popular genres in American comics and cartoons from the 1930s to the 1960s, an idea that he first developed while working on a story for the underground comic *Funny Aminals* [sic] (1972).[11] While viewing old animal cartoons, Spiegelman recognised an affinity between them and the tradition of blackface minstrelsy, and began work on a comic about the 'Ku Klux Kats' which would explore the historical relationship between racism and the funny animal genre (Loman 2006, 551). However, he quickly decided that his lack of personal experience of racism would prevent him from effectively portraying it. Instead he chose to adapt the animal metaphor to the Holocaust, with which he had a personal connection through his father, a Holocaust survivor, and which also resonated with the 'funny animal' genre since, as virtually all commentators on *Maus* have noted, the use of animal characters plays on both the inter-species relations of the funny animal genre and on the racist rhetoric of the Nazis. In American animal comics, a mouse often appears as a protagonist who must outwit a larger and stronger but less intelligent cat, sometimes finding an ally in a canine character, a situation that echoes the role of the Americans as the Nazis' adversaries and rescuer of their victims. Many writers have commented on the complications created by Spiegelman's use of animal characters, such as the potential for reinforcing the stereotypes represented by the animals, although most agree that by drawing attention to the holes in the animal metaphor Spiegelman avoids a too-literal reliance on and reinforcement of the stereotypes represented (Witek 1989, 109–114; Charlson 2001, 97–101; Cioffi 2001, 116–121; Mandaville 2009, 227; Shannon 1995, 6–13; Loman 2006, 564; Geis 2003, 2). Also, it has also been argued that the medium's lack of visual realism allows Spiegelman to comment on the unimaginable tragedy of the Holocaust using genre-splicing and the comics medium in a way that would not be possible with realistic narrative or another medium (Cioffi 2001, 116–121). Spiegelman's use of animal characters also resonates with the Nazis' descriptions of Jews as vermin, parasites and carriers of a social disease (Doherty 1996, 74). The epigraph to Volume 2 of *Maus*, a quotation from a German newspaper article from the mid-1930s, demonstrates the connection between Nazi ideology and animal characters:

> Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed.… Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honorable youth that the dirty and filth covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal…. Away with the Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika cross! (Spiegelman 1997, 164)

The use of the funny animal genre for the representation of deeply tragic and weighty historical events displays a rather different set of possibilities for the technique of genre-splicing than those explored through the use of superheroes, demonstrating the potential range of the technique.

While symbolic significance is an important part of genre-splicing's appeal, the sheer pleasure of genre is also a factor. Pleasure is present to some extent in all uses of genre-splicing, but it is especially important in the early years of Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez's *Love and Rockets*, especially Jaime Hernandez's 'Mechanics', which in its early years featured superheroes, robots, monsters, aliens, dinosaurs and spaceships, among other sci-fi and adventure motifs. In addition, both brothers created shorter pieces that also used mainstream genres, all of which took considerable delight in the appropriation and transformation of mainstream genres. While the importance of mainstream genres declined continually from the series' inception, they never disappeared entirely. The use of mainstream genres in *Love and Rockets* is nicely encapsulated in the iconic
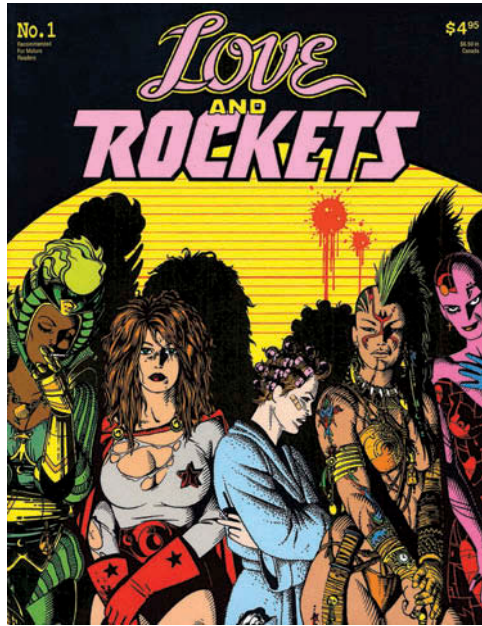
Figure 4. Pencils and inks by Jaime Hernandez, colour by Peppy White, cover of *Love and Rockets* #1 (September 1982). © 2014 Jamie Hernandez, image courtesy Fantagraphics Books.

cover of the series' first issue, in which the four tall, exotic women can be read either as superheroes or as elaborately costumed partygoers (Figure 4). The ordinary woman in a bathrobe and hair curlers is an incongruous presence, another undigested fragment, marked off from the four larger-than-life figures by her ordinary dress, smaller stature, defensive posture and 90-degree rotation, as though she were trying to block out her surroundings or had been grafted into the scene from somewhere else.[12] The bandage on her cheek suggests an incident of domestic violence, contrasting her victimization and defensive posture with the confidence and implied physical power of the superheroic women around her, although the exact relationship between them remains undetermined. The tension between the mundane and the extraordinary seen in this cover is also evident in the one-page story 'Penny Century, You're Fired!!' (1981), which is part of Jaime Hernandez's 'Mechanics' storyline (Figure 5). In the story's first panel, Penny is lost in a daydream as she imagines herself as the superhero Atoma, a scene that the viewer witnesses depicted as a thought balloon. Penny is then shown in a waitress's uniform sitting at a diner counter as she is rudely awoken from her reverie by her boss, who hits her on the back of the head with a wooden spoon. In the next panel Penny appears wearing a black cocktail dress and talking to the mysterious billionaire H. R. Costigan, depicted here for the first time. In these three panels Penny rapidly transforms from superhero to waitress to femme fatale, in the process juxtaposing, merging and contrasting the related but distinct modes of wish fulfillment that are characteristic of the superhero and romance genres. At the end of the story, Penny pulls back the curtains in the room, revealing an army of superheroes flying through the air, their forms collectively echoing that of Atoma in the first panel, playing on the vast pantheons of superheroes in the Marvel and DC universes while neatly enclosing the page within matching superhero bookends (Hernandez 1985a, 58).

Figure 5.   Jaime Hernandez, 'Penny Century, You're Fired!,' in *Love and Rockets* (1985), page 58.
© 2014 Jamie Hernandez, image courtesy Fantagraphics Books.

One of the most versatile figures in the series in terms of genre is Rena Titañon, a wrestler, dinosaur hunter, revolutionary and adventurer. Rena is first introduced as a championship wrestler, evoking the minor comics genre of sports stories, but her generic associations widen when she is kidnapped and taken to Zymbodia, a third-world country in the throes of a civil war. The country's dictators make her the queen as a homage for

her wrestling skill, but she turns against them and joins the Black Fist Liberation Army. While fighting with them she falls in love with a rocket ship captain whose ship is later shot down in the jungle, where it eventually sinks beneath along with a dinosaur that was trapped alongside it (Hernandez 1985b, 103). Rena's story represents a reworking of the heroic adventure genre, exemplified by H. Rider Haggard's Allan Quatermain novels, written from 1887 to 1926, and by newspaper comics such as *The Phantom* (1936–) and *Terry and the Pirates* (1934–1973). The adventure hero's typical activities include treasure-hunting, exploration and the dispensing of vigilante justice, and it is not uncommon for these white heroes to become leaders of the native population, purportedly to safeguard the latter's interests, thereby providing a paternalistic justification for the occupation and exploitation of native land and labour. Jaime Hernandez gives this scenario a radical twist by making the leader a woman of colour and the movement she leads a revolutionary and black radical one.

It is often claimed that *Love and Rockets* did not reach its full artistic potential until it shed its use of pulp genres with issue 13 (August 1985), when Jaime Hernandez reintroduced the key characters in the 'Mechanics' storyline (Figure 6; (Groth 1989, 61; Wolk 2007, 194–195). While it is true that the Hernandez brothers' use of pulp genres is most intense in the series' early years and diminished gradually but continually from its inception, this was not a clean break. Pulp genres continued to form part of the texture of the series after this date, recently reappearing in Hernandez (2008–2009). In fact, pulp genres frame the very sequence that Wolk identifies as initiating a new direction in *Love and Rockets*, which is introduced by a cartoony character named Roy Cowboy who tells the reader, 'Hi! I'm Roy Cowboy! And I'd like you to meet six friends of mine! They are the women of tomorrow today! They are wild! They are crazy! They are … Locas' (Hernandez 1988, 58). This motif of a host narrator is drawn from EC Comics' horror titles of the 1950s, which displayed the hosts of the series on the left side of the cover inside circular frames like the one in which Roy Cowboy is located. Inside the cover, the host typically provided the introduction to the issue's first story, as Roy does in 'Locas'. The *Love and Rockets* page is split between the genre-based upper section and the realist lower section, replicating the dual nature of *Love and Rockets*' generic influences. Roy's identification of these characters as the 'women of tomorrow' also recalls the description of Superman as the 'man of tomorrow' but reverses the gender and ethnic identity of the phrase.[13] In the story that follows, it is made clear that the earlier continuity – in which superheroes, dinosaurs and spaceships played a major role – has not been written out, as Maggie tells her friend Isabel, 'It seems like ever since I got back from Chepan, Hopey's been acting … well, different' (Hernandez 1988, 66). It is true that *Love and Rockets* increasingly moved away from pulp genres as a central element of its narrative after issue 13, but they were not disavowed entirely, becoming part of the series' backstory; and, as the examples discussed above show, the early genre-splicing stories are quite interesting in their own right.

The mythology of alternative comics

The comics analysed above are just a few of the many examples of genre-splicing in alternative comics, but they are sufficient to demonstrate the importance of mainstream genres within alternative comics. In addition to the examples discussed above, other genre-splicing alternative comics include Daniel Clowes's *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron* (1993) and *The Death-Ray* (2011), Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000), Burns's *Black Hole* (2005) and *X'ed Out* (2010), Kim Deitch's *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (2002) and *Alias the Cat!* (2007), and a substantial portion of the material published in *Raw*
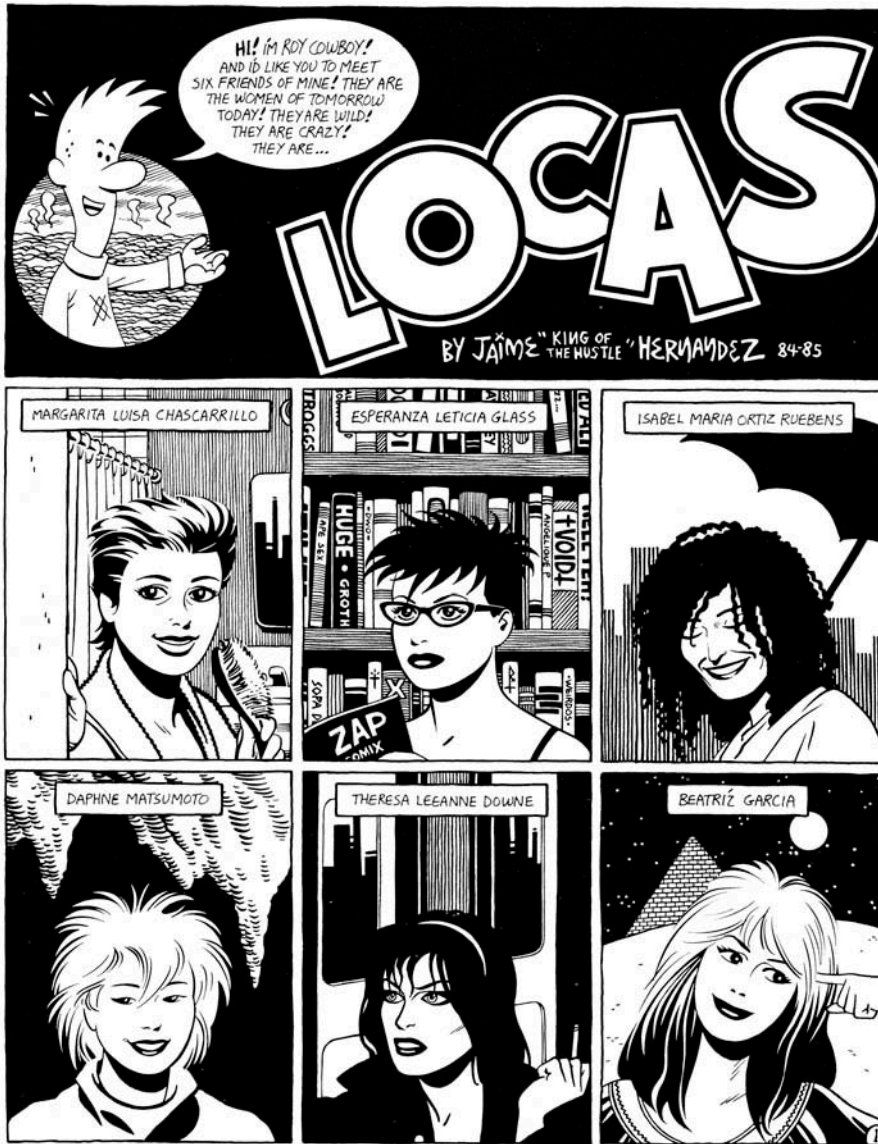
Figure 6.   Jaime Hernandez, 'Locas', in *House of Raging Women* (1988), page 58. © 2014 Jamie Hernandez, image courtesy Fantagraphics Books.

(1980–1991).[14] Besides genre-splicing, the other main type of alternative comics consists of various forms of realism. The distinction between the two groups is not a hard and fast one, however, with a number of comics operating in the gap between the two, including *Jimmy Corrigan, Maus* and *Love and Rockets*. Other alternative comics do not fit within either of these groups, such as David Lapham's *Stray Bullets* (1995–2005), which uses the mainstream crime genre but takes a realistic rather than genre-splicing approach to it.

   Although 'alternative' and 'mainstream' are not mutually exclusive, as is commonly assumed, and the latter is in fact a key element of the former, these terms nonetheless remain useful. Samuel Delany's description of social objects emphasizes that genres are

formed through practice rather than derived from a definition, making them ambiguous and contradictory formations. The ambiguity and contradictions of the terms 'alternative' and 'mainstream' thus reflect the practices that they describe, which can best be understood not by dispensing with these terms but by analysing them and their historical development. While this essay has described what I take to be some of the key issues in examining the meaning and use of these terms, much more work needs to be done to understand how these terms came into use, how their meaning has changed over time, how they have been applied at different times and contexts, and how the cultural practices they describe have likewise changed.

The use of genre-splicing in alternative comics not only disproves the idea that they are defined by the absence of superheroes, it also punctures other commonly held myths about alternative comics, which are exemplified by Paul Lopes's description of a transformation that he sees taking place in both mainstream and alternative comics in the early 1980s:

> The stage was set … for artists to see comic books as a medium of self-expression, not simply an industrial product they crafted for a mass market. Artists and fans also treated comic books more seriously and looked to expand comic books toward broader and more mature content. The comic book was beginning to be viewed as an art form with a history, an aesthetic, a potential to be as 'mature' as other forms of popular entertainment. What was emerging was a new North American subculture of comic books that would become the foundation for a new revolution in this medium. (Lopes 2009, 103)

Because of the clarity and succinctness with which Lopes expresses this perspective, I have used his work as a representative example of a viewpoint that is widespread in comics studies and criticism. However, these same views can be found in other accounts as well, for instance in Will Eisner's preface to the first edition of *A Contract with God*, written in 1978 at the beginning of the alternative comics era. While Eisner is not speaking specifically of alternative comics, a term that was not yet in common use when he wrote this passage, the terms of his discourse are nearly identical to those adopted by later writers, and indeed played a major role in the formation of that discourse. Eisner writes that in the 1930s, at the medium's birth,

> to openly discuss comics as an art form – or indeed to claim any autonomy or legitimacy for them – was considered a gross presumption worthy only of ridicule. In the intervening years, however, recognition and acceptance had fertilized the soil, and sequential art stands at the threshold of joining the cultural establishment. Now, in this climate warmed by serious adult attention, creators can attempt new growth in a field that formerly yielded only what Jules Feiffer referred to as junk art. (Eisner 2006, xviii)

Other studies in which these views can be found include Sabin (1993, 1996), Weiner (2003), Wolk (2007), Krensky (2008), Lopes (2009), and Duncan and Smith (2009). The consensus that emerges from these studies is that alternative comics represent the maturation of the comic-book form out of its derivative, commercial childhood and into artistically independent adulthood. Alternative comics are described as having established the autonomy, legitimacy and expressive potential of the comics medium, elevating it to its rightful place alongside literature, visual art, music and film. This vision, while satisfying the comics medium's need for cultural legitimation, is riddled with contradictions and half-truths.

One of the most frequently repeated assertions about alternative comics is that they established or helped establish comic books as Art (characteristically spelled with a capital

A), a classification that is never precisely defined but that indicates some combination of heightened quality and cultural status.[15] As Lopes has written:

> Alternative rebels certainly tried to transform the perception of comic books as just lowbrow entertainment. These rebels attempted to develop a new 'literary' appreciation for comic books and position comic art as Art. They attempted to generate a new criticism for comic art for hopefully a new connoisseur of the medium. (Lopes 2009, 129)

Similarly, Charles Hatfield has written that 'the comic book was overwhelmingly a commercial proposition from the outset, and only later developed into a distinct artistic medium' (2005, 9). While it is true that commerce played a major role in comics from the outset, this does not diminish its status as a distinct medium, leaving only the problematic word 'artistic' to differentiate the two types of comic that Hatfield describes. Another closely related way of establishing the artistic legitimacy of alternative comics is by asserting that they have placed comics on the same level as recognised and accepted artistic mediums, as when Gary Groth writes that 'comics narrative is finally taking its place beside film and fiction as a medium capable of profundity, wit, humor, and drama' (Groth and Fiore 1988, xii). Passages such as these seek to elevate comics' cultural status by associating them with more prestigious mediums, thereby accepting and legitimizing the very cultural hierarchy that consigns comics to a lowly position, rather than contesting the hierarchy itself.[16] A corollary of the assertion that alternative comics established comics as a legitimate means of artistic expression is that, in doing so, alternative comics established autonomous aesthetic principles for comics, independent of the polluting influence of the marketplace. While it is true that alternative cartoonists often have more control over their work than mainstream cartoonists, especially those working before the 1990s, the situation is more complicated than this. Many brilliant and idiosyncratic cartoonists, especially newspaper cartoonists, worked under tight commercial constraints, while many alternative cartoonists with much greater artistic control produce uninspired replicas of others' work.

Another of the most frequently used tropes surrounding alternative comics is that they have 'grown up', an assessment repeated countless times by journalists over the past three decades. A typical example is a 1997 *U.S. News and World Report* article that asked, 'Remember the comic books of your youth? They've grown up… And that's not all. The comics are also winning new respect: Literary honors, respectful reviews, museum exhibits – and even academic attention.' (Lopes 2009, 133) The rhetoric of adulthood and maturation is not limited to journalists but has also been adopted by many scholars. Roger Sabin (1993) made adulthood the central criteria of his *Adult Comics*, in which he discussed alternative comics along with many other varieties of comics, a position that he reiterated in *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (1996, 177).[17] Similarly, Douglas Wolk has written that

> It's no longer news that comics have grown up. A form that was once solely the province of children's entertainment now fills bookshelves with mature, brilliant works by artists like Chris Ware, the Hernandez brothers, Daniel Clowes, and Charles Burns, discussed in the sort of tone that was once reserved for exciting young prose novelists. (Wolk 2007, 1)

Such statements equate low quality with childhood and high quality with adulthood, a conclusion that is contradicted by the prevalence of sophisticated narratives of childhood and adolescence in alternative comics, which are accessible to and frequently consumed by adolescent as well as adult audiences. In fact, it could be argued that adolescence and young adulthood are the central subject of alternative comics.[18] Since it is precisely the

liminal nature of this period between childhood and adulthood, when an individual's identity is formed, which makes it significant, the association of alternative comics with adulthood in opposition to childhood is highly problematic.

The approaches described above legitimize comics by viewing them through the binaries of artistic and commercial, adult and juvenile, aligning alternative comics with the valorized former term in each pair and distancing them from the denigrated latter term. This outlook is directly contradicted by the role that mainstream genres play in alternative comics. As this essay has shown, many of the most sophisticated and critically acclaimed alternative comics achieved their high quality not by distancing themselves from the denigrated term in each pair by immersing themselves in it. Comics critic and scholar Dan Nadel provides a different and better model for how to approach comics when he writes that comics are 'an impure medium' that

> come from the awkward meeting of words, pictures, and commerce. … [T]hese narratives exist in torn newspapers, filthy magazines, badly printed pamphlets, and exquisite editions. Within all of these formats there have been competent journeyman artists as well as brilliant practitioners: visionary artists whose drawings and ideas surpassed all boundaries, in a medium that – until recently – routinely ignored such talent. (Nadel 2006, 6)

Nadel recognizes that the vitality of the comics medium derives from its historically subordinate position and that any appreciation of comics' virtues must celebrate these features rather than evade them, a delight in impurity that is exemplified and shared by genre-splicing alternative comics.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The term 'genre-splicing' was suggested to me by Charles Hatfield in place of the more awkward 'disjunctive genre hybridity', which I used in my dissertation.
2. Charles Hatfield (2005, 37) and Jeet Heer (2010, 3) compare Ware's style in this story to that of Superman artist and co-creator Joe Shuster.
3. For a longer analysis of the interplay of text and images in this story, see Hatfield (2005, 37–39). Hatfield refers to the story as 'I Guess', which are the words that appear on the first page of the story in the position usually reserved for a comic's title, but the story is more correctly referred to as 'Thrilling Adventure Stories', which is the name given for it in the table of contents of *Raw* vol. 2, no. 3, where it first appeared. The story was subsequently reprinted in Ware (2003), which lacks a table of contents and thus provides no official title.
4. This theme is also explored in Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* (Ware 2000) and his Rusty Brown stories (Ware 2005, 2006, 2008).
5. Because of the disjunctive nature of genre-splicing, discussed further in the next section, genre-splicing and realism are always at odds with each other, although they are not completely incompatible and often are mixed together uncomfortably. Nevertheless, it is possible to make a broad division between genre-splicing and realist alternative comics. Prominent examples of realist narrative in alternative comics include Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* (1976–2008), Jack Jackson's historical novels of the Southwest, the Palomar (Hernandez 2003) and Locas (Hernandez 2004, 2009c) stories in the Hernandez brothers' *Love and*

Rockets (1982–), Chester Brown's *I Never Liked You* (1994), Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (1996), Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World* (1998), Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003), Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) and Jessica Abel's *La Perdida* (2006).

6. Charles Hatfield suggests a similar point but does not dwell on it. As mentioned above, he sees mainstream and alternative as 'imprecise and loaded terms' and their origins are 'contestable', but nevertheless argues that they are still relevant ways of distinguishing between different types of comics (Hatfield 2005, 31).
7. Film scholar Yannis Tzioumakis (2006, 10–13) makes a similar argument.
8. 'Teen Plague' first appeared as a strip in alternative newspapers, the serial nature of which could explain the absence of background information, but no such introduction appears in any of the Big Baby stories that were reprinted in *Raw* or *Big Baby* (Burns 1989, 1999).
9. In some cases David is showing reading *The Yellow Streak* immediately before the *Yellow Streak* panels appear, implying that the reader is seeing the same panels as David.
10. See Coogan (2006, 30–43) for a discussion of the combination of these attributes as defining the persona of the superhero.
11. *Maus* is a complex and multi-layered work that has received more scholarly analysis than any other American comic book. My purpose here is not to address the full complexity of this work, but rather to situate it within alternative comics' use of genre-splicing.
12. Only one of the characters, the second from the left, appears later in the series, where she is briefly identified as a superhero known as Comrade 7 (Hernandez 1986, 95).
13. Thanks to Jonathan Gray for pointing this out to me.
14. Genre-splicing can also be found in other types of comic, including newspaper comics like George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (1913–1944), underground comix like Robert Crumb's Fritz the Cat stories, ground-level comics like Dave Sim's *Cerebus* (1977–2004), and mainstream comics like Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986–1987) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999–), not to mention in other media.
15. The autonomy of the artwork was the subject of extensive critique by leading artists and cultural theorists in the twentieth century, notably Benjamin (1968), Brecht (1964) and Bürger (1984), so ironically, by advocating the autonomy of the medium, comics advocates are putting themselves at odds with one of the most influential strains of twentieth-century artistic thinking.
16. Bart Beaty's recent *Comics versus Art*, in which he declares that his book 'is most assuredly not a manifesto calling for comics to be viewed as an art form', is a welcome exception to this trend (Beaty 2012, 7).
17. It should be noted that Sabin's works were among the first to attempt a historical overview of comics, a valuable contribution to the development of comics studies, and that his use of the 'adult' moniker is at least partially understandable given the lack of previous scholarly research available for him to draw on.
18. The list of alternative comics dealing with adolescence and young adulthood includes Chester Brown's *I Never Liked You* (1994), Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (1996), Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World* (1998), Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000) and Rusty Brown stories (2001–), Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003) and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006).

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