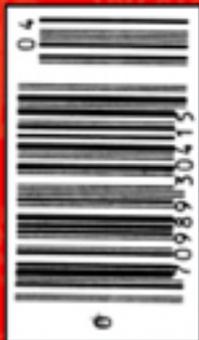


**PAUL LOPES**

# DEMANDING RESPECT

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# **DEMANDING RESPECT**



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*THE EVOLUTION OF THE  
AMERICAN COMIC BOOK*

Paul Lopes



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# Introduction

## *The Evolution of the American Comic Book*<sup>1</sup>

It is striking how over the last seven years comic book culture seems to have captured center stage in American popular entertainment. Hollywood seems addicted to this culture, churning out blockbuster film after blockbuster film based on a superhero or another comic book genre. The entertainment industry has also borrowed from comic book culture to create new prime-time television series. Children's television is not immune either, particularly with the huge popularity of Japanese animation, but including American superheroes as well. And let's not forget those nifty video games! Over the last few years, the San Diego Comic-Con, the largest comic book convention in North America, has become the premiere gathering for anyone interested in pushing the newest in electronic popular entertainment. Top Hollywood stars arrive at the convention to hawk the newest pulp Hollywood product. Meanwhile, journalists from newspapers and magazines swarm around the convention to discover why "geek" culture now defines the universe known as pop culture. It seems that popular culture has gone comic book crazy.

But what is most striking about the newfound interest in comic book culture is the decidedly minor presence of actual comic books. While comic book and science fiction fans at the San Diego Comic-Con now have a cachet as arbiters of the newest cool pop entertainment, the biggest entertainment industry players are promoting video games, television shows,

and films. Fans, publishers, artists, and dealers at the convention are buying, selling, discussing, and celebrating comic books as they have since the convention began in 1970. But the mainstream of the culture industry seems less interested in the quaint old printed form of comic books. This makes sense. There is not a lot of money to be made selling comic books compared to the profits in other media. While comic books were one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the mid-twentieth century, they have since suffered a steady decline. By the late 1980s, many claimed the comic book no longer was a *mass medium* in the sense that it no longer enjoyed a mass market of readers. By this time, comic books had receded into a subculture of fans, specialty shops, and conventions. Comic books no longer filled the racks at newsstands or convenience stores like in the past. By the end of the last century, some feared the American comic book was on its way to extinction. And while the last seven years have seen better times for American comic books, most consumers of popular culture have little interest in reading them.

This lack of respect for the actual comic book medium is not new. Even during its heyday as a mass medium in the 1940s and 1950s its popularity was equally matched by a deep suspicion of its cultural value and social impact. Comic book artists were considered hacks compared to artists illustrating or writing for comic strips, illustrated books, or popular fiction. Virtually all comic book artists remained anonymous. Many preferred it that way. And the very popularity of comic books among children and adolescents proved to many the dangers of a popular entertainment they considered lowbrow and of extremely poor quality. Critics accused comic books of everything from damaging children's eyesight to promoting juvenile delinquency. Such fears led to an anti-comic book crusade in the late 1940s and early 1950s, sparking lists of unacceptable and acceptable comic books, government hearings on the comic book menace, and even a few comic book burnings.

This crusade forced the comic book industry into a retreat in the mid-1950s. It imposed a self-regulatory code that eliminated any comic book that might corrupt the mind of an innocent child or young teenager. While readers of all ages actually enjoyed comic books, the perception in the popular imagination of comic books as a children's medium won over this reality. And where once the comic book faced the stigma of being a danger to the youth of America, after the new code, it faced the stigma that it could not conceivably be anything but a medium suited only for children or readers suffering from arrested development. The idea that comic books had the potential to engage older teenagers and adults with serious stories and

graphic art seemed preposterous. That comic books could be hip, socially relevant, or mature forms of popular fiction would probably elicit a raised eyebrow and a laugh. The idea that comic books could be as “literary” as the finest American literature would probably elicit an angry glare from a member of the cultural cognoscenti. For most of its history the American comic book could get no respect.

While official culture held the comic book and comic book artists in such low regard, certain individuals in the 1960s began demanding respect for this art form and its artists. Some comic book publishers began to target a new generation of older teen and twentysomething readers with new hip and socially relevant comic books. A comic book fandom appeared dedicated to celebrating past and contemporary comic books and their artists as worthy of adoration and respect. Out of the counterculture came underground “comix” artists who radically transformed comic books with adult material from the most profane to the most political. And over the next four decades, artists continued to expand the medium to rival the best in popular fiction and the best in literature. Over the same time period, comic book fandom also continued to grow.

Unfortunately, all the moves by publishers, artists, and fans to demand respect for comic books happened for the most part “under the radar” of official culture as this art form moved into a marginal subculture in the late 1980s. At first, articles about comic books would occasionally appear in the press. Some articles were respectful, while most were written with a bemused patronizing tone. But over time the efforts of publishers, artists, and fans did eventually find an increase in respectful press coverage. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, one could argue that the efforts in the comic book field to have comic books taken seriously had made tremendous gains compared to most of the twentieth century. Of course, one problem remained: catching the respectful attention of the press and official culture is not the same as convincing everyday readers who long ago abandoned comic books to pick them up once again. And even if they were interested, most would have to find one of those small comic book shops hidden away in a nondescript suburban strip mall.

This book is a social history of the modern American comic book. While my main interest is in the various ways individuals since the 1960s have engaged in taking comic books seriously as an art form, their story only makes sense if we understand the history of the American comic book, beginning with its commercial birth in the 1930s. Comic books started with the crassest of commercial interests. They were produced in sweatshop, assembly-line fashion. And eventually they were subject to one of the most successful

crusades of censorship in the United States. But the modern comic book would eventually be reborn and become the center of a vibrant, creative field of art. How this came about will tell us a lot about art, commerce, and the politics of culture in America. As the legendary comic book artist Will Eisner once said, comic books came from a humble background, were forced into a cultural ghetto, but did eventually rise up and demand as equal a respect as any other art form in America.<sup>2</sup>

## Themes

This social history of the modern American comic book stretches over seventy-five years and resembles more a roller-coaster ride than the smooth evolution of a new art form from infancy to maturity. Of course no art form develops in a clearly determined path without its conflicts, disappointments, unexpected turns, or periods of crisis. But the comic book suffered such a willful low regard for most of its history, and its industry struggled so long to find some semblance of stability after its boom market ended in the 1950s, that demanding respect for comic books has covered a rather broad array of meanings, practices, and actors. Given this long, turbulent, and diverse history, I decided to present the social history of comic books in a more or less chronological order. This means that critical themes in understanding this history will often appear more than once. So I thought it best to present these analytical themes from the outset. While these themes shape the basic structure of this social history, a chronological narrative allows me to focus in more detail on the evolution in the meanings and practices associated with the field of the modern American comic book.

Like my previous work on jazz, my method is to immerse myself in the discourse and practices surrounding a field of art to guide my analysis.<sup>3</sup> The core of my study of comic books, therefore, relies on analyzing the discourse on comic books over time. This analysis focuses on two basic cultural fields. Following the framework of John Fiske, I analyze the evolution of comic book discourse in both “official culture” and the “subculture” of comic book fandom.<sup>4</sup> “Official culture” refers to the discourse about comic books outside the field of comic books, that is, the reception of the American comic book over time in the press, trade books, and professional as well as academic journals. The discourse of the comic book subculture provides an alternative story of the modern American comic book developed by those committed to celebrating and transforming what they consider a great artistic medium. This discourse is in the large compendium of books, articles,

interviews, and Web sites in comic book fandom. The power of this alternative story is that it emerges from a collective dialogue among fans, artists, and publishers in the comic book field. In many ways, the ultimate question in demanding respect for the comic book is to what extent this alternative story crossed over into the comic book discourse of official culture.

### *Fields of Art: Heroic and Industrial Ages*

I refer to the period from the 1980s to the present as the “Heroic Age” of comic books. I borrow this term from the French scholar Pierre Bourdieu and his analysis of French literature in the mid and late nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu called this period a “heroic age” because this is when writers generated “principles of autonomy” in the French literary field. These principles claimed independence from the “rules of art” governing this field at the time: the power of commercial markets and elite patronage to determine the economic and symbolic value of books and their authors. French writers and critics were able to revolt against these rules of art by forming their own “restricted subfield” of production where they could create independent criteria for determining the best in French literature. The first rumblings of this rebellion began during the bohemian revolt against bourgeois culture and art in the mid-nineteenth century by artists like the French writer Charles Baudelaire. This bohemian revolt while charismatic was unfortunately less than systematic. Bourdieu argued, however, that over time an artistic subfield governed by the principles of autonomy first articulated in the bohemian revolt did gain a coherency that made it a permanent part of the literary field. So by the late nineteenth century, staking claim to artistic autonomy became a recurring theme in French literature.

In the 1960s, comic book fandom and underground comix represented the first rumblings of rebellion in the comic book field. Both movements challenged the rules of art in this field where the culture industry simply produced an industrial product with no other value than quick consumption and equally quick disposal. Comic book fandom developed an appreciation beyond the mere consumption of comic books. These fans were not simply readers of comic books, but avid collectors as well. Their deep affection for comic books led fans to develop an expert knowledge and also to elevate comic book artists as celebrated creators of this art form. Underground comix artists, on the other hand, initiated a new movement in comic books that rejected commercial success as the only measurement of achievement. They also rejected the idea of comic books as merely purveyors of popular entertainment. They created comics expressing their own personal visions for a sophisticated young and adult audience. Fandom and comix, however,

were initially separate movements in comic books—each approaching the modern American comic book in radically new ways. And similar to the bohemian revolt in French literature, these early movements were not part of a coherent subfield of comic book production. In the 1980s, however, these new approaches to the comic book merged into a more coherent comic book subculture similar to the restricted subfield in the Heroic Age of French literature.

This new comic book subculture marked the beginning of the Heroic Age of comic books. In this subculture, artists, fans, critics, and publishers developed their own set of criteria to judge and appreciate comic books and comic book artists. Also, like nineteenth-century French literature, principles of autonomy emerged in the world of comic books. Against the rules of art in comic books before this age, these new principles rejected the subordinate position of artists in the comic book field. These principles asserted that artists' talents and unique visions were central to the world of comic books. While these principles of autonomy were articulated in a number of different ways during the Heroic Age, depending on the artist, publisher, or fan, in general they transformed the comic book field as a whole. This broad transformation in the rules of art in comic books was made possible in part because, unlike the restricted subfield of French literature, the new restricted subfield of comic books in the 1980s was the dominant market for all comic books: there was no larger commercial mass market for comic books. This new comic book subculture, therefore, significantly determined the economic and symbolic value of comic books and their artists during this new Heroic Age.

The period before the Heroic Age is what I call the “Industrial Age” of comic books. It coincides with what comic book fandom calls the Golden, Silver, and Bronze Ages of the American comic book. Comic books from the mid-1930s through the 1970s were created under a different context than the Heroic Age. It was a period of ingenuity, creativity, and risk-taking. And the period produced a cultural legacy that we continue to enjoy today. But the rules of art were driven by one simple overriding rule: if it sells, keep selling it, and find as many ways to sell it in slightly different packaging. Such a rule has been applied during the Heroic Age, but in the Industrial Age this was the golden rule with no equally compelling ones. It was an age of a mass market where readers, for a period, seemed to have an insatiable demand for comic books. An assembly-line process was essential to produce product for an ever-expanding market and to generate greater and greater profits. There were no principles of autonomy among artists during this age, nor was there an interpretive community to apply independent criteria of judgment to comic books as an art form beyond simply commercial success. Certainly artists during

this age had criteria to judge their craft of writing and illustrating, but with no principles of autonomy in the field of comic books they remained mostly craftsmen producing a mass product judged by a very different set of criteria than during the Heroic Age.

The field of comic books from the 1980s to the present has been heroic for another important reason. French writers and critics in the nineteenth century felt that the best and most authentic literature was besieged by market and other external forces. Individuals in the comic book subculture, however, felt the art form itself was under siege and wholly unappreciated. The 1980s to the present has been a heroic age in comic books because artists, publishers, and fans have fought heroically against the possible disappearance of the comic book. And they also have fought heroically for recognition, respect, and appreciation for an art form they believe is as imaginative and entertaining as any of the more popular arts or as serious and sophisticated as any of the more respectable arts. This makes the Heroic Age of comic books strikingly different than the Heroic Age of French literature as described by Bourdieu. Comic book heroes were not seeking to reject market forces or institutional consecration like their heroic literary brethren in nineteenth-century France. The comic book was so marginal and given such low regard that comic book heroes worked hard to regain a mass market for comic books as well as institutional recognition of the comic book as a legitimate art.

Bourdieu also argued that heroic ages in art are chaotic because the rules of art are undergoing radical transformation. The “social space” of an art form, like literature in nineteenth-century France, is no longer occupied with “ready-made” positions for authors to create their work, publishers to promote their books, critics to judge a work of art, or audiences to apply their likes and dislikes. Even the ready-made positions before a heroic age are subject to the chaos that prevails in this new social space. Positions are extremely “elastic” with futures “uncertain” and “dispersed.”<sup>6</sup> Such chaotic fields of art invite individuals of different social backgrounds and dispositions to join in what Bourdieu described as “a sort of well-regulated ballet in which individuals and groups dance their own steps, always contrasting themselves with each other, sometimes clashing, sometimes dancing the same tune, then turning their backs on each other in often explosive separations, and so on.”<sup>7</sup>

The Heroic Age of comic books was certainly chaotic in exactly this way. The end of the Industrial Age in some ways opened up the social space of the comic book field, since major commercial success in a mass market was no longer very viable. Only three old publishing houses, Marvel, DC, and Archie survived beyond the Industrial Age and they relied mostly on

characters created during this earlier age. The field of industrial ready-made positions also was incredibly limited in terms of genres and artistic styles. Positions in this new social space, therefore, were to “be made” as artists and publishers attempted a diverse array of comic books in terms of graphic style, content, and genre. Artists even rebelled in “remaking” the industrial ready-made positions of the old publishing houses. Small independent publishers as well as a self-publishing movement appeared that allowed artists to create comics based on old genres, new genres, combinations of genres, or supposedly genre-free “literary” comics with styles ranging from the traditional mainstream American style to the avant-garde. The chaos of this new social space also provided openings for artists from social groups previously marginal to the field. Women, gays, and minorities joined the dance to make new positions or remake old positions in the field. And debates ensued as artists, publishers, editors, critics, and fans danced about the constantly changing positions in the chaotic field of comic books.

Out of this chaos, however, something miraculous happened. Comic books did become more serious, more complex, and more respected. And this was true from the most pulp to the most literary of comic books. To borrow a phrase commonly used in the general press coverage of comic books: comic books actually “grew up.” While comic books originally were based on short stories in serial format, now comic books present long-arc'd narratives with complex story lines. Now the fastest growing market for comic books, graphic novels, presents this art in book-length format, again allowing for complex and compelling storytelling. Graphic novels also range from pulp fiction, literary fiction, autobiography, and history to even journalism. Graphic novels are reviewed regularly by *The New York Times* and *Entertainment Weekly*. More importantly, they are reviewed regularly by the *Library Journal* and *School Library Journal* as libraries have become one of the more important new markets for comic books. Comic book artists receive prestigious awards from the MacArthur Fellowship to the Pulitzer Prize. They even have their work displayed in art museums like the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. And, of course, there does not seem to be a moment when a comic book character is not gracing multiplex screens across the country. The future of the comic book as a respected art form has never seemed brighter, but as this book will show, it was a long, difficult road to respectability.

### *The Production of Culture*

Of course the Industrial and Heroic Ages occurred in the “real” world of actual production, distribution, and consumption. The social history of the

American comic book is also about the way market forces, organizational structure, technology, laws, and government or industry regulation shape the aesthetics and content of an art form. It is also about the logics of cultural production and consumption: how artists and others approach the production of an art form and how audiences and others approach its appreciation and consumption.<sup>8</sup> From the culture of production perspective in sociology, the state of an art form—whether the popular art most commonly produced by mass media industries or the fine art most commonly produced in institutional and commercial art worlds—is less about any intrinsic qualities it may have, the breadth of talent available to realize its full potential as art, or the full range of audience tastes ready to enjoy it. The production of culture perspective is more about how other factors constrain or aid the development of the art form from the creative output of its artists to the access available for those who might want to consume it.<sup>9</sup> And the history of American comic books certainly bears this truth out as anyone in comic book culture would readily attest.

For both the Industrial and Heroic Ages of the American comic book, for example, the dominant logic of production has been the same logic found in most popular culture industries. Todd Gitlin best summarizes this logic as “recombinant culture”—innovation stems from copying or recombining whatever is successful at the moment.<sup>10</sup> In the culture industry, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The comic book industry’s main concern in both ages has been to publish guaranteed product, and whenever possible, to exploit its properties in other media and consumer products. At the same time, however, the industry had to adapt this fundamental industrial logic to specific circumstances, whether a boom market, a threat of government regulation, a rapidly declining market, or a new comic book subculture. The basic question is how the adaptation of this logic by the industry affected the evolution of the comic book over its long history. So mainstream comic books did evolve more complex story lines and mature content. A star system of artists also emerged as comic book fandom’s purchasing power supported the talents and visions of individual comic book artists. And mainstream publishers responded to the interests of comic book consumers as not only readers, but also collectors. But the basic industrial logic never changed as the dominant publishers during the Heroic Age depended on a few tried-and-true properties and genres, repurposed successful product from other media, and relied heavily on the licensing of their properties.

One of the more unique aspects of the social history of comic books was the transition in the 1980s from a mass market to what is referred to as a “direct” market. The old system of distributing comic books via magazine distributors to newsstands and other retailers was collapsing by the early

1980s. In order to survive, commercial publishers shifted to a new direct market based on special comic book distributors and comic book shops. Publishers relied on a new dedicated comic book subculture. Specialty retailers preordered nonreturnable comic books for their local comic book shops. So publishers were able to avoid the problems of overproduction, poor sales, and corruption in the old system. It is a commonly held belief in the comic book field that the direct market saved the American comic book. Unfortunately, this market also became a structural roadblock to ever regaining the mass audience comic books once enjoyed. And by the end of the twentieth century, with six years of declining sales, the direct market seemed more like an obstacle to the survival of comic books than an aid.

This transition to a direct market in many ways set the stage for the Heroic Age in comic books. It was mainstream publishers' dependence on this direct market that forced them to adjust their industrial logic to a new comic book subculture's criteria of judgment and forms of consumption during the Heroic Age. The new power of this subculture also empowered artists to challenge the rules of art in the comic book field as their individual economic and symbolic value increased within comic book fandom. These artists also were empowered by the entrance of independent publishers made possible by a niche, direct market where small publishers could more easily enter the field. Independent publishers and rebel artists, in other words, were able to challenge the old rules of art from the Industrial Age in ways that were not feasible in the declining mass market. The Heroic Age in comic books, therefore, was made possible because this fundamental reshaping of the comic book market allowed new forms of appreciation and new principles of autonomy to enter the field.

Again, what the production of culture perspective highlights is the way factors external to communities of artists, and their potential audiences, significantly shape art forms. Richard A. Peterson, for example, argues that the Rock 'n' Roll revolution in the 1950s was more about mundane changes in industry structure, technology, and regulation than either the creativity of a new generation of musicians or the power of a new generation of listeners.<sup>11</sup> And Herman Gray argues that the rise of black television shows in the 1990s was more about the competition of cable television and new broadcast networks, that is, a fundamental change in the structure of the industry, than a sudden desire in the television industry for a multicultural universe of prime-time programming.<sup>12</sup> So the question is how such factors as market forces, industry structure, technology, laws, or regulations affected the evolution of the comic book as an art form. More importantly, we will see how the opportunity space created by such factors in the comic book field in the 1980s both aided and constrained comic book rebels' attempts during the Heroic Age to

transform the field's rules of art and to make the comic book a legitimate and respected form of art.

### *Demanding Respect: The Status of Comic Books, Artists, and Fans*

When I started my research project in 2001, it was not unusual to find a perplexed look on the face of individuals when I told them I was doing an academic study on comic books—or at least a curious look from those unfamiliar with the world of actual comic books. In some ways, this very marginality or invisibility of comic books and comic book culture at the time was what attracted me to this study. As a sociologist I was interested in art forms during moments of radical transformation in their meaning and practice. I was particularly attracted to radical transformations in popular art where those involved believe they faced an uphill battle against a reigning orthodoxy that viewed this art form as less than respectable—or certainly not to be taken seriously. Of course in the case of comic books, it might not be disrespect for this art form that was the sole problem, but also a matter of its invisibility to most Americans. This was particularly the case for new types of comic books created during the Heroic Age of comic books—most peoples' memories of comic books remained locked in the Industrial Age.

In choosing comic books as my object of study I quickly found that “lack of respect” was the common lament of virtually all who have participated in the field of comic books. This lament was not simply about comic books' low regard, but the low regard toward artists and fans as well. Official culture until recently remained convinced that the comic book is an art form best for either childish humor or adolescent fantasy. Comic book artists also struggled in both the Industrial and Heroic Ages with the low status of their chosen field of art. Comic book fans, on the other hand, faced the stigma of collecting, cherishing, and taking seriously an art most considered childish. For most of comic book fandom, official culture looked with scorn or incomprehension at such cult-like devotion. Given the low status of the art form, its artists, and its fans, demanding respect in the field of comic books has had a wide-reaching significance.

Comic book fandom has not been alone in feeling a lack of respect for devoting so much time and energy into a popular art. Fandom of popular culture in general has received little respect from official culture. Joli Jensen, Henry Jenkins, and Matt Hills point to how fans of popular art have faced an official culture that views their fan activities as not only silly and inane, but views the fans themselves as somehow suspect, suffering from some form of arrested development or psychological pathology.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars have