The American Comic Book: a Brief History⸻

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Interestingly enough, the American comic book neither originated in America nor did it develop in a vacuum. Some diverse and distant antecedents to American comics may be seen in the drawings of political cartoonists, such as Thomas Nast (1840–1902), who, in addition to using his political cartoons to target the corruption of Tammany Hall's William "Boss" Tweed and the institution of slavery, is often credited with popularizing the images of Uncle Sam, the Democratic Party's symbol of the donkey, and creating the Republican Party's symbol of the elephant. Likewise, another indirect antecedent to American comic books was the dime novel. With improvements in the nation's education system and increased literacy rates, dime novels, such as those published by Beadle and Adams, filled a growing need for reading material for the working classes starting in the 1860s. Dime novels presented sensationalized tales of heroism, mystery, and adventure. They were often illustrated with woodcut drawings and were just as often publically condemned by authorities as being detrimental to the morals of those who read them (Hajdu 94–95).

Some closer antecedents may be found in Swiss cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer's *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck*, originally published in various languages in Europe, but also published as a newspaper supplement in the United States in 1842 (Duncan and Smith 23), and in *The Fortunes of Ferdinand Flipper*, published by the Brother Jonathan Office in the 1850s. Both books present narratives with sequential images and include captions (but no word balloons) under each image. Another closer relative were gag cartoons, which proliferated during the 1880s. Gag cartoons generally combined a verbal joke, often in the form of a conversation between two people, and a visual image. Unlike the interplay between image and text common in most comic books, the image in the gag cartoon did little more than illustrate

the joke (Harvey 28). As Robert Harvey notes, "[M]ost cartoons of the earliest vintage are essentially verbal witticisms that are funny without their accompanying illustrations" (29).

The next step in the evolution of the comic book was fueled by a bitter rivalry between two newspaper magnates—William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. Near the end of the nineteenth century, competition among newspapers was increasing—over thirty newspapers were being published in New York and the competition to sell papers was often fierce (Hajdu 9). Pulitzer, seeking an advantage over his rivals, began including a four-page Sunday color supplement in his *New York World*. One of the main attractions of these bright pages was Richard Felton Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*, better known by its main character, The Yellow Kid. Outcault's series was set in the disheveled back alleys of New York's immigrant population and followed the often violent antics of its juvenile community. The raucous humor of *Hogan's Alley* was at once popular and the cause of concern to Pulitzer's competitors. The Yellow Kid became the first major comic strip character in the United States.

Hearst, however, was not to be outdone. He, too, purchased a color press and soon announced that his *New York Journal* would be publishing "eight pages of iridescent polychromous effulgence that makes the rainbow look like a piece of lead pipe" (Waugh 6). In a bold maneuver, Hearst bought out much of Pulitzer's staff, including Outcault, who brought The Yellow Kid with him. In response, Pulitzer simply hired another artist to continue *Hogan's Alley* in the *World*. While at the *Journal*, Outcault continued to innovate. Many of his early drawings of The Yellow Kid were single panels busy with characters and action. In some later pieces, Outcault incorporated a sequence of images without clear gutters. For example, in the October 31, 1897, *Journal*, Outcault presents six sequential images of The Yellow Kid with each image presenting a quick succession of events. The Yellow Kid, attempting to hide from a neighborhood girl, backs into a wooden fence with a hole in it, not realizing that a dog is on the other side. When the neighborhood girl finds him, the dog behind the fence has bitten into The Yellow Kid's

hindquarters and tears out a large hole in the Kid's nightshirt. As he pulls away, he realizes his embarrassing predicament and excuses himself to find new clothes. Each image in the brief narrative is subtly separated to form a sequence, the pattern known today as sequential art and essential to comics narrative.

Outcault's inventive use of image and sequence was not the only innovation being developed in comics. Over the next decades, many of the familiar conventions of comics, such as word balloons, gutters, panels of varying sizes, and techniques of lines depicting movement became more standardized and commonplace. While many of the conventions of comics were taking root, the ingenuity of comic creators expanded. Winsor McCay's, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, James Swinnerton's, *Little Jimmy*, Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff*, George Harriman's *Krazy Kat*, and many others began to demonstrate the creative potential of the medium.

Although many of the most successful comic strips were clever and innovative, early strips had no pretentions to being considered art, let alone high art. For newspaper publishers, the comics served a commercial and highly utilitarian purpose—to increase the sales of their newspapers. For comic artists, comics were a means for displaying creativity, social commentary, or just silliness. Comic readers also played a role in the production of comic strips as their tastes greatly influenced which comic strips survived and which ones did not. The newspapers were swift to maintain popular strips and just as swift to end ones that were not. And, as a popular medium, early comic strips often reflected the hardships of the downtrodden and the lower classes, who, in the large cities where the newspapers were published, were often immigrants with limited English skills. Many of these strips displayed "skepticism toward authority" and "spoke to and of the swelling immigrant populations in New York and other cities" (Hajdu 11). As David Hadju explains, "The comics offered their audience a parodic look at itself, rendered in the vernacular of caricature and nonsense language. The mockery in comics was familial—intimate, knowing, affectionate, and merciless" (11). The dual effects of these comic strips were to give

voice to the lower classes and to make their struggles, indignities, and injustices known to the upper classes.

Proto-comics

As with many other successful innovations, progress toward the comic book was rather fitful. In 1911, the promotional manager of the *Chicago American*, Calvin Harris, ordered 10,000 copies of a six-inch high by eighteen-inch wide book compiling previously printed *Mutt and Jeff* comic strips. Readers of the *American* who clipped and mailed in six successive coupons from the paper, along with a small fee, would be sent a copy of the book. To the surprise of Harris and his employers, over 45,000 orders flooded the *American*'s office (Waugh 335–36). From 1919 to 1934, Cupples & Leon sold 9½-inch square black and white reprints of comic strips (Duncan & Smith 27). In 1922, Embee Distributing Company published *Comic Monthly* on cheaper paper and sold each copy for ten cents on newsstands. The run ended after its twelfth book (Duncan & Smith 27). In 1933, Eastern Color Printing Company published what is generally considered the first comic book—*Funnies on Parade*. The smaller, four-color reprint of various comic strips was used as a give-away by Procter & Gamble. The next year, Maxwell Charles Gaines placed ten-cent stickers on *Famous Funnies* and had them set out on newsstands. They sold out quickly and the comic book industry was born (Lente & Dunlavey 27–28).

The Original "Comics"

In 1935, the eccentric Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson began printing *New Fun* with previously unpublished material. He collected previously rejected comic strips and published them in black and white in a thirty-six-page tabloid format (Hajdu 19). The varying quality of the works and the reluctance of newsstands to carry the comic book caused Wheeler-Nicholson's *New Fun* to struggle. Between 1936 and 1939, three major factors contributed to the emergence of the comic magazine as an established product of American popular publishing; these included 1) the increase of the number of themed magazines, 2) the increase of the number of

publishers, and 3) the appearance of Superman, the first superhero of the Golden Age (Gabilliet 14). In late 1936 and early 1937, the first themed comic books were published by Comics Magazine Company, Ultem, and DC (*Detective Picture Stories* #1, *Star Ranger* #1, and *Detective Comics* #1, respectively). These titles broke with the standard content of comics, offering readers western-themed, detective, and crime narratives. *Detective Comics*, which still exists today, "was to embody the rise of the publishing outfit founded by Wheeler-Nicholson's magazines" (Gabilliet 15). In the face of his rising debts, Wheeler-Nicholson partnered with his primary creditor, Harry Donenfeld, and Jack S. Liebowitz, in order to form DC, or "Detective Comics, Inc." (16). By 1938, Wheeler-Nicholson had sold his company and his interests to his creditors, which included Detective Comics (Duncan & Smith 31).

That same year, the most significant comic book in the industry's history was published: *Action Comics* #1. For six years, two old high school friends, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, had shopped their character Superman as a newspaper strip and as a comic book character and received no less than seventeen rejection letters (Van Lente & Dunlavey 31; Duncan & Smith 32). Eventually, editor Vincent Sullivan of National Allied Publications accepted Superman for the newly created series to the bewilderment of his employer, Harry Donenfield. Donenfield, upon seeing Superman lifting a car above his head on the cover of the first issue, roundly criticized the absurd image. Superman wouldn't appear on the cover of *Action Comics* again until issue seven. After discovering that children were asking newsstand operators for Superman by name, Donenfield had a change of heart. From issue nine forward, Superman's name or likeness appeared on every cover since. Within two years, the series was selling five-hundred thousand copies a month (Hajdu 31).

The Superman character touched a chord with many readers. Siegel and Shuster had created a hero that was fresh, yet familiar. Superman spoke to the desire for strength and autonomy in a time when few had either. In 1938, the Great Depression gripped the nation and the world; the unemployment rate in the United States was at nineteen percent, and despair and insecurity were widespread.

Superman appeared as a savior, a man who embodied the inward fantasies of young and old alike. Not a few critics have seen elements in the Superman narrative that suggest his being a Christ-like or some other messianic figure, and not a few have sought to problematize this interpretation (Babka; Fingeroth; Garrett; Hajdu; Lewis; Schenck; Weinstein, et al.). However Superman is to be read, as a Christ-figure, a Moses-figure, or something else, the character arrived when his readers were ready to accept him.

The success of Superman led to a massive expansion of the comic book industry over the next few years. In 1939, *Detective Comics* #27 introduced the first adventures of Batman (Gabilliet 19). In the same year, eight new publishers appeared, including Martin Goodman's Timely Comics, which would become the future Marvel Comics (17). As Charles Hatfield notes in his discussion of the origins of Marvel, "the company's history is a maze: known among collectors as Timely, then Atlas [. . .] began in 1939 with a single comic book" (*Hand of Fire* 81). Goodman, in concert with Funnies Incorporated, ordered a new comic book entitled *Marvel Comics*, whose first issue included the original Human Torch, Jim Hammond (Benton 30). DC introduced The Flash (Jay Garrick) in the 1940 *Flash Comics* #1 (Benton 13); Marvel launched *Captain America Comics* #1 in 1941 (Gabilliet 22); and in 1942, DC introduced Wonder Woman in *All-Star Comics* #8 (Benton 191). As Jean-Paul Gabilliet notes, during this time period:

> costumed crime fighters had become the first character types designed primarily for comic books thanks to their graphic and visual potential. In comic-strip form, the stories starring these protagonists made for a much more intense reading experience [. . . .] Superheroes, then, were the first characters to be identified with the comic magazine (19).

New and established publishers—Dell, Fawcett, Lev Gleason, Harvey, EC, Ziff-Davis, and others—joined the frenzy trying to tap into this new market. Hadju notes that:

Comics were in their gold-rush period, a frenzied era of speculation, experimentation, easy rewards, and a kind of aesthetic lawlessness, through the lack of clear, established standards and the limited accountability within the trade. The people creating and publishing comic books were competing by improvising, trying practically anything, rejecting almost nothing, in a freewheeling spirit of innovation entwined with opportunism born, for many, of desperation. (34)

Such boon periods and growth within popular culture would not, however, come without fringe concerns that would become wide-scale debate.

Even before the public's fascination with superheroes began to fade shortly after World War II, other genres of comics were coming to the fore. In 1942, Charles Biro and Bob Wood introduced a comic series that was reminiscent of the gangster films and true crime pulps that had already been popular for a couple of decades in their comic book *Crime Does Not Pay*. (Hajdu 59–60). What distinguished this comic from other crime comics was its gratuitous sensationalizing of violent crimes and its focus "almost solely on lawbreakers and their crimes, rather than crime-fighters and law enforcement" (Hajdu 63–64). The covers enticed with scenes of extreme violence: the cover of issue twenty-four shows a man holding a woman's head against a flaming gas burner; the cover of issue twenty-five shows a man in a phone booth being riddled with bullets; the cover of issue twenty-six shows a beaten man with tattered clothes being thrown from a moving car. And so on. The stories themselves glorified the violence, while at the same time striking a moralistic tone—the comics would decry a life of crime and always end with the perpetrators either being killed or arrested or sent to the electric chair or gallows.

Though the crime comics genre advanced slowly, it soon became dominant. Other crime comics appeared after World War II, with each one trying to "out-gore and out-sex" the other (Van Lente & Dunlavey 66). As the depiction of violence and gore increased, so did public criticism. Biro met this criticism head on, claiming that because the stories were true, which they weren't, that they were a deterrent to crime. However, as pressure continued to mount, Biro

made concessions, while defending his product. Starting with issue sixty, the phrase "Dedicated to the eradication of crime!" was added to each cover. The inside front cover of issue sixty-three contained a message from Biro purportedly sharing with readers the "self-imposed censorship" Lev Gleason Publications expected its creators to follow. The message listed twelve standards, among them were the following: "[N]o attempt to emphasize sex appeal will be permitted for publication"; "[c]riminals will not be made attractive either in physical appearance or character"; "[c]riminals must not be shown to enjoy a criminal act." All three of these standards are violated in this very same comic.

Another genre that soon gained prominence was romance. In 1947, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created *Young Romance*, a comic aimed at an older female readership by telling stories grounded in the real world. Joe Simon noted, "[W]e knew a lot of comic book readers were high school age and, as a result, they wanted to read about people a few years older, so that's how we approached *Young Romance*. We never talked down, and we were very realistic and adult" (Hajdu 159). By 1950, twenty percent of comics being sold were romance titles (Duncan & Smith 37). Ironically, the majority of writers and artists of romance comics were men. Most stories reflected the traditional values of the times and were rather tame as young women were faced with choosing between two men—one a hard-working, decent, if slightly dull man, the other a dangerous, but exciting, man of questionable reputation (Van Lente & Dunlavey 60). Though most of these comics reinforced traditional values, some romance comics challenged conventional boundaries, occasionally depicting teenage girls defying their parents and other authorities without consequence (Hajdu 161–62).

In 1950, EC Comics began to make significant innovations in the comic industry in both product and management. Bill Gaines, who had no interest in his father Max's EC Comics, was forced to take over the struggling company in 1947 when his father died in a boating accident. Max's vision for EC had been to create educational comics, but Bill began to move EC toward what he hoped would be a more profitable product, comics that entertained. At first Bill Gaines

followed the trends, imitating comic series that were successful. That direction began to change when, after a discussion with artist Al Feldstein, Gaines decided to pursue making horror comics. In 1950, EC Comics introduced *The Crypt of Terror* (later renamed *Tales from the Crypt*) and *The Vault of Horror* along with *Weird Science*, *Weird Fantasy*, and *Two-Fisted Tales*, which presented realistic war stories. The stories that Gaines and Feldstein created often chaffed against societal norms: "Working allegorically through genre stories, they sought to engender sympathy for misfits, underdogs, and exiles of every breed—human, animal, fish, alien, living, dead, undead, and combinations thereof" (Hajdu 180). Family life was often depicted negatively, as was marriage (Hajdu 179). The message, it would seem, was that the world and its inhabitants could rarely be trusted.

Where EC excelled was in its treatment of its artists, who were paid above the going rates. Gaines also encouraged his artists to develop their own styles, unlike most other publishers who would require artists to conform to an in-house style. He also allowed writers to sign their names to their works (Hajdu 184–85). The result of these business practices were motivated artists and a high quality product that appealed to an older reader. These practices also resulted in many of the best comic book artists working for EC—Johnny Craig, Reed Crandall, Jack Davis, Will Elder, George Evans, Frank Frazetta, Graham Ingels, Bernard Krigstein, Harvey Kurtzman, Jack Kamen, Joe Orlando, John Severin, Marie Severin, Al Williamson, Basil Wolverton, Wally Woods, and others. With such a high quality product, EC's future seemed assured, but the industry was soon to experience a near death blow.

Controversy

A growing concern about the potential harmful effects of comic books was given credibility by the work of Fredric Wertham, a then highly respected and well-known psychiatrist. Comic books had often been the target of attacks that arose and subsided periodically, but Wertham's campaign against comic books gained significant traction when, after a six-month publicity campaign, he published *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. In the book, Wertham connected

many forms of juvenile delinquency to children reading comic books. His campaign and many fearful media reports preceded the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency's hearings in New York on the effects of comic books on America's youth. While most comic book creators avoided appearing at the hearings, Gaines eagerly sought to be invited to the hearings so he could defend the industry. Gaines, though, underestimated the politics at play. He had not slept the night before as he was preparing his statement for the committee. At the hearing, Gaines' testimony was delayed. After waiting for hours, Gaines was medicating himself to stay awake. In his physical condition and having to face professional politicians, Gaines found himself in trouble. Estes Kefauver, Democratic senator from Tennessee who had presidential aspirations, confronted Gaines with the cover of *Crime SuspenStories* #22 depicting a man holding a woman's decapitated head by the hair in his left hand with a bloodied ax in his right. Kefauver asked Gaines if he thought the image was in good taste. Gaines' reply that he thought the image was in good taste caused most observers to become incredulous.

The resulting furor of the hearings led to the forming of the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), which was granted wide censoring authority over the comic book industry. This group quickly developed and implemented the Comics Code, which identified strict standards comic books had to follow and required the inclusion of the Comics Code Authority stamp on works that met its criteria. The code set narrow standards for how crimes and romances could be depicted: it prohibited seductive clothing, profane dialogue, and negative portrayals of religion, race, marriage, or established authority; it even encouraged comic book writers to avoid bad grammar; the code also went so far as to prohibit certain advertisements (knives, toy guns, fireworks, questionable "toiletry products") and required publishers to "ascertain that all statements made in advertisements conform to the fact and avoid misinterpretation" ("Standards"). The code saved its most stringent rules for horror comics, going so far as to prohibit the use of the words "horror" and "terror" in comic book titles and to proscribe the creation of comics "dealing with [. . .] walking

dead, torture, vampires, and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism and werewolfism" ("Standards"). Essentially, the CMAA banned EC from publishing the majority of its comics. The code was rigorously, if arbitrarily, enforced. Printers refused to print comics without the seal. Distributors refused to distribute comics without the seal. Newsstands refused to sell comics without the seal (Hajdu 310). By 1956, EC stopped publishing comics altogether.

The Return and Rise of the Superhero

With comic books now being sanitized and with television becoming a more affordable option, comic book sales began a steady decline (Duncan & Smith 40). Artists found less work available and were offered less money for the work they could find (Duncan & Smith 41). Many companies stopped publishing comics in the 1950s: EC, Eastern Color, Fawcett, Fiction House, Fox Feature Syndicate, Lev Gleason Publications, Quality Comics, St. John, and Standard either closed their doors or were sold to other publishers. One company, DC Comics, was able to survive. In the 1950s, DC was one of the larger comic book companies; it was publishing a variety of comic book genres and still had a few of its superhero comics selling sufficiently well to maintain their publication (42–43). It was during this time period that DC's "three pillars" (Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman) achieved iconic status in the realm of the superhero genre because of their "exceptional popularity" (Gabilliet 51). The Comics Code may have inadvertently helped the superhero genre to strengthen its footing. As Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith have argued, "The sanitized violence and moral purity of superhero comic books might not have been as titillating as the sexy and gory of the early fifties, but they were a good fit with the standards of the new Comics Code" (45).

Shortly after the code was enacted, longtime DC editor Julius "Julie" Schwartz began updating and reintroducing a number of its superhero characters, who had not seen print for a number of years. In 1956, *Showcase* #4 reintroduced the Flash with a new costume and a new identity (Duncan & Smith 45); this event marked the beginning of the "Silver Age" of comic books (Gabilliet 51).