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COMICS

Mad Vestibule to TV

It was thanks to the print that Dickens became a comic writer. He began as a provider of copy for a popular cartoonist. To consider the comics here, after "The Print," is to fix attention upon the persistent print-like, and even crude woodcut, characteristics of our twentieth-century comics. It is by no means easy to perceive how the same qualities of print and woodcut could reappear in the mosaic mesh of the TV image. TV is so difficult a subject for literary people that it has to be approached obliquely. From the three million dots per second on TV, the viewer is able to accept, in an iconic grasp, only a few dozen seventy or so, from which to shape an image. The image thus made is as crude as that of the comics. It is for this reason that the print and the comics provide a useful approach to understanding the TV image, for they offer very little visual information or connected detail. Painters and sculptors, however, can easily understand TV, because they sense how very much tactile involvement is needed for the appreciation of plastic art.

The structural qualities of the print and woodcut obtain, also, in the cartoon, all of which share a participational and do-it-yourself character that pervades a wide variety of media experiences today. The print is clue to the comic cartoon, just as the cartoon is clue to understanding the TV image.

Many a wrinkled teenager recalls his fascination with that pride of the comics, the "Yellow Kid" of Richard F. Outcault. On first appearance, it was called "Hogan's Alley" in the New York *Sunday World.* It featured a variety of scenes of kids from the tenements, Maggie and Jiggs as children, as it were. This feature sold many papers in 1898 and thereafter. Hearst soon bought it, and began large scale comic supplements. Comics (as already explained in the chapter on The Print), being low in definition, are a highly participational form of expression, perfectly adapted to the mosaic form of the newspaper. They provide, also, a sense of continuity from one day to the next. The individual news item is very low in information, and requires completion or fill-in by the reader, exactly as does the TV image, or the wirephoto. That is the reason why TV hit the comic-book world so hard. It was a real rival, rather than a complement. But TV hit the pictorial ad world even harder, dislodging the sharp and glossy, in favor of the shaggy, the sculptural, and the tactual. Hence the sudden eminence of MAD magazine which offers, merely, a ludicrous and cool replay of the forms of the hot media of photo, radio, and film. MAD is the old print and woodcut image that recurs in various media today. Its type of configuration will come to shape all of the acceptable TV offerings.

The biggest casualty *of* the TV impact was Al Capp's "Li 1 Abner." For eighteen years Al Capp had kept Li'l Abner on the verge of matrimony. The sophisticated formula used with his characters was the reverse of that employed by the French novelist Stendhal, who said, "I simply involve my people in the consequences of their own stupidity and then give them brains so they can suffer." Al Capp, in effect, said, "I simply involve my people in the consequences of their own stupidity and then take away their brains so that they can do nothing about it." Their inability to help themselves created a sort of parody of all the other suspense comics. Al Capp pushed suspense into absurdity. But readers have long enjoyed the fact that the Dogpatch predicament of helpless ineptitude was a paradigm of the human situation, in general.

With the arrival of TV and its iconic mosaic image, the everyday life situations began to seem very square, indeed. Al Capp suddenly found that his kind of distortion no longer worked. He felt that Americans had lost their power to laugh at themselves. He was wrong. TV simply involved everybody in everybody more deeply than before. This cool medium, with its mandate of participation in depth, required Capp to refocus the Li'l Abner image. His confusion and dismay were a perfect match for the feelings of those in every major American enterprise. From Life to General Motors, and from the classroom to the Executive Suite, a refocusing of aims and images to permit ever more audience involvement and participation has been inevitable. Capp said: "But now America has changed. The humorist feels the change more, perhaps, than anyone. Now there are things about America we can't kid."

Depth involvement encourages everyone to take himself much more seriously than before. As TV cooled off the American audience, giving it new preferences and new orientation of sight and sound and touch and taste, Al Capp's wonderful brew also had to be toned down. There was no more need to kid Dick Tracy or the suspense routines. As MAD magazine discovered, the new audience found the scenes and themes of ordinary life as funny as anything in remote Dogpatch. MAD magazine simply transferred the world of ads into the world of the comic book, and it did this just when the TV image was beginning to eliminate the comic book by direct rivalry. At the same time, the TV image rendered the sharp and clear photographic image as blur and blear. TV cooled off the ad audience until the continuing vehemence of the ads and entertainment suited the program of the MAD magazine world very well. TV, in fact, turned the previous hot media *of* photo, film, and radio into a comic-strip world by simply featuring them as overheated packages. Today the ten-year-old clutches his or her MAD ("Build up your Ego with MAD") in the same way that the Russian beatnik treasures an old Presley tape obtained from a G.I. broadcast. If the "Voice of America" suddenly switched to jazz, the Kremlin would have reason to crumble. It would be almost as effective as if the Russian citizens had copies of Sears Roebuck catalogues to goggle at, instead of our dreary propaganda for the American way of life.

Picasso has long been a fan of American comics. The highbrow, from Joyce to Picasso, has long been devoted to American popular art because he finds in it an authentic imaginative reaction to official action. Genteel art, on the other hand, tends merely to evade and disapprove of the blatant modes of action in a powerful high definition, or "square," society. Genteel art is a kind of repeat of the specialized acrobatic feats of an industrialized world. Popular art is the clown reminding us of all the life and faculty that we have omitted from our daily routines. He ventures to perform the specialized routines of the society, acting as integral man. But integral man is quite inept in a specialist situation. This, at least, is one way to get at the art of the comics, and the art of the clown.

Today our ten-year-olds, in voting for MAD, are telling us in their own way that the TV image has ended the consumer phase of American culture. They are now telling us what the eighteen-year-old beatniks were first trying to say ten years ago. The pictorial consumer age is dead. The iconic age is upon us. We now toss to the Europeans the package that concerned us from 1922 to 1952. They, in turn, enter their first consumer age of standardized goods. We move into our first depth-age of art-and-producer orientation. America is Europeanizing on as extensive a pattern as Europe is Americanizing.

Where does this leave the older popular comics? What about "Blondie" and "Bringing Up Father"? Theirs was a pastoral world of primal innocence from which young America has clearly graduated. There was still adolescence in those days, and there were still remote ideals and private dreams, and visualizable goals, rather than vigorous and ever-present corporate postures for group participation.

The chapter on The Print indicated how the cartoon is a do-it-yourself form of experience that has developed an ever more vigorous life as the electric age advanced. Thus, all electric appliances, far from being labor-saving devices, are new forms of work, decentralized and made available to everybody. Such is, also, the world of the telephone and the TV image that demands so much more of its users than does radio or movie. As a simple consequence of this participational and do-it-yourself aspect of the electric technology, every kind of entertainment in the TV age favors the same kind of personal involvement. Hence the paradox that, in the TV age, Johnny can't read because reading, as customarily taught, is too superficial and consumerlike an activity. Therefore the highbrow paperback, because of its depth character, may appeal to youngsters who spurn ordinary narrative offerings. Teachers today frequently find that students who can't read a page of history are becoming experts in code and linguistic analysis. The problem, therefore, is not that Johnny can't read, but that, in an age of depth involvement, Johnny can't visualize distant goals.

The first comic books appeared in 1935. Not having anything connected or literary about them, and being as difficult to decipher as the Book of Kells, they caught on with the young. The elders of the tribe, who had never noticed that the ordinary newspaper was as frantic as a surrealist art exhibition, could hardly be expected to notice that the comic books were as exotic as eighth-century illuminations. So, having noticed nothing about the form, they could discern nothing of the contents, either. The mayhem and violence were all they noted. Therefore, with naive literary logic, they waited for violence to flood the world. Or, alternatively, they attributed existing crime to the comics. The dimmest-witted convict learned to moan, "It wuz comic books done this to me."

Meantime, the violence of an industrial and mechanical environment had to be lived and given meaning and motive in the nerves and viscera of the young. To live and experience anything is to translate its direct impact into many indirect forms of awareness. We provided the young with a shrill and raucous asphalt jungle, beside which any tropical animal jungle was as quiet and tame as a rabbit hutch. We called this normal. We paid people to keep it at the highest pitch of intensity because it paid well. When the entertainment industries tried to provide a reasonable facsimile of the ordinary city vehemence, eyebrows were raised.

It was Al Capp who discovered that until TV, at least, any degree of Scragg mayhem or Phogbound morality was accepted as funny. He didn't think it was funny. He put in his strip just exactly what he saw around him. But our trained incapacity to relate one situation to another enabled his sardonic realism to be mistaken for humor. The more he showed the capacity of people to involve themselves in hideous difficulties, along with their entire inability to turn a hand to help themselves, the more they giggled. "Satire," said Swift, "is a glass in which we see every countenance but our own."

The comic strip and the ad, then, both belong to the world of games, to the world of models and extensions of situations elsewhere. MAD magazine, world of the woodcut, the print, and the cartoon, brought them together with other games and models from the world of entertainment. MAD is a kind of newspaper mosaic of the ad as entertainment, and entertainment as a form of madness. Above all, it is a print- and woodcut-form of expression and experience whose sudden appeal is a sure index of deen changes in our culture. Our need now is to understand the formal character of print, comic and cartoon, both as challenging and changing the consumer-culture of film, photo, and press There is no single approach to this task, and no single observation or idea that can solve so complex a problem in changing human perception.