

Chapter 1

Introducing Comics and Ideology

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and Ian Gordon

All comics are political.

—Alan Moore, comic book writer (quoted in Sabin, 1993, p. 89).

In 1895 the Yellow Kid, one of the first regularly appearing comic characters, premiered in Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper, *The New York World*. The Kid, an impish, bald child in a yellow nightshirt created by Richard Felton Outcault, lived in a mythical urban environment called *Hogan's Alley*, the early title of the comic. Although this strip is often discussed by comic art historians because of the influence it had on later strips, including the promotion and merchandising of popular comics characters and the establishment of the importance of comic strips to the U.S. newspaper industry (Gordon, 1998; Witek, 1999), a modern look at the Yellow Kid is striking not because of how similar it was to later strips, but rather how different it was.

Compared with the middle-class orientation of many modern comic strips, the setting of the Yellow Kid's adventures was dirty, cluttered, and characterized by in-your-face urban poverty. The Yellow Kid and his friends were poor, and many seemed to live on the streets. Their environment was a slum, their clothes were simple, and there was often a look of poverty even in their facial expressions. Although Outcault took heat from his contemporaries who felt that his work celebrated life in the slums (De Haven, 1995), later comics historians pointed to the social criticism in *Hogan's Alley*. One critic argued about the Yellow Kid that his world "was that of tough, dirty little immigrant kids and disheveled old women with sad eyes and a hopeless look on their faces," and although the strip was designed to

be funny, “the sense of fantasy and use of humor masked a sense of despair” (Berger, 1973, p. 27). Humor was often based on the kids imitating “high class” activities and pretensions. When a Hogan’s Alley resident asked a friend of the Kid’s, “Little Rosilia McGraw,” to join the group in a game, she indignantly snapped: “No; we won’t come and play with youz, Delia Costigan. Our rejuiced means may temporary necessitate our residin’ in a rear tenement, but we’re jist as exclusive as when we lived on the first floor front and papa had charge of the pound in the Department of Canine Captivity!” (to view this strip, see Gordon, 1998, p. 27). No strip appearing in current U.S. mainstream newspapers today comes even close to portraying urban blight as starkly as did *Hogan’s Alley*.

The obvious portrayal of the urban poor in an historically significant comic, creating a “sharp satire on city poverty” (Sabin, 1993, p. 134), highlights the role of ideology in comic art. This book will explore several of the implications and manifestations of ideology in the comics. Admittedly, the definition of “ideology” can be a slippery one. It can be defined narrowly, focusing explicitly on mainstream Politics (with a capital P) when discussing liberal versus conservative positions on issues, a definition that comics critic Arthur Asa Berger seems to adopt in his discussion of the ideology of the U.S. comic strip *Pogo* (1973, p. 173). Or it can be defined very broadly, to encompass issues of mediated-persuasion and discussions of the influence of the mass media on its audiences, no matter what the nature of that influence (Barker, 1989, chapter 1). For the purposes of this book, ideology is strongly tied in with issues of social power. It asks: Why and how may comics challenge and/or perpetuate power differences in society? Do comics serve to celebrate and legitimize dominant values and institutions in society, or do they critique and subvert the status quo?

These, of course, are complex questions, with many different approaches that can be used to address them. Accordingly, this book examines how issues of social power are interwoven in various forms of comic art—including comic books and comic strips—with different critical lenses. Essays in this book take diverse theoretical perspectives such as cultural studies, political economy, feminist criticism, queer studies, and mythic analysis, all focusing on the relationship of comics with issues of social division. Diverse social divisions—including

gender, nationality and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class—are also covered. Mainstream comic icons such as Superman, Wonder Woman, and Dilbert are the subject of chapters, as are alternative forms such as feminist comics and comics in gay/lesbian publications. The authors often take different positions from each other, arguing at times that comics serve as oppositional culture, that comics connect to dominant ideologies, or even, of course, that comics have contradictory ideological dimensions.

Why is it important to focus on ideological issues when discussing comic art? Certainly much research about comics has focused on elements other than the ideological. Scholarship about comic art—comic strips, comic books, and editorial cartoons—is highly diverse in its approaches and perspectives (Lombard, Lent, Greenwood, & Tunc, 1999). Research has been conducted that explores the ways comics communicate (Carrier, 2000; McCloud, 1993); the potential for comics as an educational and literacy tool (Gower, 1995); the effects of comics on children (Wertham, 1954 is of course the most notorious here); the persuasive rhetoric of the comic form (Edwards & Winkler, 1997); the psychoanalytic nature of comics (Adams, 1983); the history of comics and their controversies (Barker, 1984; Harvey, 1996; Lent, 1999; Nyberg, 1998; Rubenstein, 1998); and the fans/audience of comics (Brown, 1997; Pustz, 1999; Tankel & Murphy, 1998), to name but a few. Despite this diversity, an ideological approach to comics is warranted for at least two reasons.

First, the nature of comic art makes the form ideologically interesting. Comic art combines printed words and pictures in a unique way. The complex nature of this combination allows for much flexibility in the manipulation of meaning, but often in a context that is constrained within a small space (four panels in a newspaper strip; 20 pages or so in a typical comic book issue). These characteristics have implications for both representation and interpretation of ideological images and meaning. On the one hand, the communicative elements in comic art encourage the form to occasionally create a closed ideological text, imposing on the reader preferred meanings. The limited space in which the artist/writer has to work, for example, may entice the creator to use stereotypes to convey information quickly (Walker, 1994, p. 9). Similarly, the use of storytelling devices such as captions and thought balloons can make the themes and

values in a comic especially explicit. On the other hand, techniques—such as the ease of comics to visually change the point of view in a comic strip or book (Carrier, 2000, p. 55) and the semantic space created by the sometimes ambiguous relationship between word and picture (Barker, 1989, pp. 11–12)—make comics a potentially polysemic text, encouraging multiple interpretations, even ones completely oppositional to any specific artistic intent.

A second reason that ideological analysis may apply to the understanding of comics is the form's social significance. Although often comics are dismissed as the insignificant “funnies,” they are also highly ego-involving for many readers, children and adult. The ritual nature of reading the comic-strip page of the newspaper (something read every day by both adults and children) can make the form a key part of the morning routine. One early example of mass media uses and gratifications research argued that people missed the habitual reading of the comics during a 1945 newspaper strike as much if not more than the front-page news (Berelson, 1949). The literally thousands of worldwide television and newspaper stories about the February 2000 death of Charles Schulz, the creator of *Peanuts*, illustrates the newsworthiness of celebrities made in the funny pages. With comic books, the “fanboy” culture cultivated in published letters to the editor, comic book conventions, and retail shops are indicative of diverse interpretative “reading communities” (Pustz, 1999, p. 20) that debate with passion the interpretation of various story threads and character assets. Thus for many people the comics are quite significant to their lives.

This is true not just in the United States, but throughout the world. Comic art is much higher on the cultural hierarchy in such countries as France, Italy and Belgium than in the United States (Sabin, 1993, pp. 184–199). By the early 1990s, the largest comics industry in the world was found not in the United States, but in Japan (Sabin, 1993, p. 199). Local production of comic books in Hong Kong, Korea, and Taiwan, often in the shadow of the Japanese *manga* comic books, thrived by the mid-1990s (Lent, 1995). In Mexico, comic books have historically been among the best-selling periodicals, appealing to both adults and children (Rubenstein, 1998, p. 8). How these comics fit in with the socio-political context of these countries, given the different roles that the comics may play in these countries, is a question of

ideological import, as is the potential of the role of the comics in the creation or resistance of cultural identity and imperialism, given the economic and cultural dominance of such countries as the United States and Japan.

The ideology of the comics has of course been dealt with in comics scholarship well before this book. This previous research has emphasized the fact that the portrayals of life found in comic art are not neutral or random images. In practice, not just in theory, often comics' portrayals of social issues and representations of particular groups have significant ideological implications. In fact, some of the most significant studies of comic books and popular culture—key research texts—have focused on the ideology of comic books. These studies have not just influenced comic book scholarship, but also have been profoundly visible in media studies and critical theory.

Probably the most famous, and infamous, example of comic book research—although it was intended for a popular audience—is Fredric Wertham's 1954 *Seduction of the Innocent (SOTI)*. Derided and hated by many comics fans today, Wertham's book is seen as the catalyst for an anti-comics campaign that economically crippled and culturally bowdlerized comic book production not just in the United States, but in as many as seventeen countries during the 1950s (Barker, 1999, p. 69). Intended as a polemic against what Wertham saw were abuses by the U.S. comic book industry, this book was highly ideological in its arguments, the background of its author, and the political players that became enmeshed in the resulting controversy.

The most sensational images and descriptions of comics in the book were of the explicit sex and violence found in crime and horror comics of the time. Although Barker (1989) argues that these typical "media effects" issues are ideological in and of themselves, other charges made by Wertham in *SOTI* are even more firmly ideological.

Wertham at times seems progressive and even Marxist in tone when he explores the sexist, racist, and fascist values he believed to be found in many comic books. His chapter on advertising in comics raises concerns similar to later critical scholarship about advertising dealing with body image and commodity fetishism (although Wertham does not use that term). As Nyberg concludes about *SOTI*, "Wertham's ideological analysis, while relatively unsophisticated,

would not be out of place in the company of media scholarship that addresses many of the same issues” (Nyberg, 1998, p. 95).

Wertham himself, in fact, was arguably influenced by European “mass culture” theorists such as Theodor Adorno (Nyberg, 1998, p. 87). Certainly Wertham’s ideas struck a chord with many critical scholars and political activists at the time. The critical sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote a favorable review of *SOTI* in the *New York Times Book Review* and before the review was published sent Wertham a complimentary letter wishing him “good luck” (quoted in Gilbert, 1986, p. 103). In Britain and Australia, activists in the Communist Party used the controversy sparked by *SOTI* to raise issues about American cultural imperialism and the dangers of mass culture (Barker, 1984; 1999).

Other parts of Wertham’s critique of comics—and the resulting alliances and policies that followed—had anti-progressive elements to them. Certainly some of his arguments reflect, in modern context, a conservative critique of comics’ ideology. Wertham’s elaboration on the Batman and Robin relationship as “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together” (p. 190), and his accompanying quotations from gay youth under his treatment, may trigger a feeling of empathic despair in modern readers for the sexual repression done to youth during such “treatments” (for a discussion of *SOTI* from a queer studies perspective, see Medhurst, 1991). Barker (1999) argues that Wertham’s potentially radical critique was undermined by his faith in traditional institutions such as the law and the alliances he struck with more conservative institutions like organizers in the Catholic Church (see also Nyberg, 1998). By attacking all comics with such a broad stroke, Wertham also missed more subtle textual and interpretative cues that actually critiqued dominant institutions rather than celebrated the status quo, especially true in his interpretations of some EC Comics (Nyberg, 1998). Sabin argues, in fact, that war comics of the 1950s, often more patriotic in tone but just as violent as other books, were generally ignored by crusaders while the more liberal-leaning EC books were targeted (1993, p. 153). In the United States, the self-regulatory Comics Code which resulted from the controversy fanned by Wertham constrained comics in their potential role as oppositional culture. With such provisions as “Policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall never be

presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authorities,” the Comics Code established in the mid-1950s muted “the vitality of comics and to ratify authoritarian social control” (Witek, 1989, p. 49).

If Wertham’s work is dismissed by media studies scholars as a product of its times or as populist propaganda, other research that highlighted the ideology of comics is often lauded as having a significant impact on later ideological research. Next to *SOTI*, perhaps the best known example of comics criticism is Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart’s *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, originally published in 1971. An attack on Disney comic books that were imported into South America (particularly Chile) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this book has been called “one of the most important studies of comics ever undertaken” (Barker, 1989, p. 16), and is “often cited as a paradigm of Marxist cultural analysis” (Bongco, 2000, p. 9). Focusing specifically on the pro-capitalistic values in Disney comics, Dorfman and Mattelart’s book sold 500,000 copies in the 1970s alone. It was seen as such an effective anti-capitalist work that the corporate friendly dictator Augusto Pinochet specifically targeted this book for burning when he forcibly came into power in Chile in 1973 (Solomon, 1999).

Similarly, Angela McRobbie’s various works on the British teen-girl magazine *Jackie*—a magazine that had strong comics elements—is also influential in the development of feminist cultural studies. Beginning with work published in Britain in the late 1970s, and then made more widely available in 1991 with the publication of *Feminism and Youth Culture*, McRobbie was one of the first scholars to treat girls’ culture as something worthy of academic study. Arguing that the message of the 1960s’ *Jackie* ultimately served patriarchal culture by preparing girls for adulthood through the values of traditional femininity and consumer culture, McRobbie’s work has been called “groundbreaking” (Mazzarella, 1999, p. 97) and has been credited specifically with cultivating scholarship about girls’ culture (Pecora & Mazzarella, 1999). (For a critique of both Dorfman and Mattelart’s work and McRobbie’s work as comics scholarship, see Barker, 1989).

The above research mainly focused on mainstream comics: the work produced by for-profit businesses and distributed in routinized publication outlets and, this research argues, often producing

messages that especially flow with dominant ideology. But another interesting element in the ideology of comics is the role of alternative, even underground, comics as oppositional culture. Although other media have radical forms, the availability of self-publishing technologies and political freedom of underground “comix” is especially influential, shaping both the development of the comics industry and the ideological scope of the medium.

Grounded in the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, underground comix are perhaps the most significant cultural legacy of this movement, excepting music (Witek, 1989, p. 51). Taking advantage of cheap printing technology such as offset litho printing and alternative outlets like music stores and “head shops,” these comix reflected and commented on the social divisions and tensions of American society during this time (Sabin, 1993). Characters such as “Whiteman,” created by Robert Crumb; the anarchist hero “Trashman,” by Manuel ‘Spain’ Rodriguez; and titles including *Class War Comix* and *Slow Death* ridiculed dominant institutions like government and consumer culture with explicit language and portrayals.

The underground comix influenced current comics and the social messages in these comics. For example, comix illustrated to mainstream creators the potential for social criticism that the comics medium may have. They also loosened organizational constraints by encouraging creators to form independent production companies and retain the ownership and copyright to their characters as an alternative to the traditional “work for hire” system in which the company owns the character and the pages (Sabin, 1993). In addition, many of the most provocative comics of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor*, have direct lineages to the undergrounds (Witek, 1989). Even in the comic-strip pages one sees the influence of underground comix, especially in papers that carry Bill Griffith’s absurdist *Zippy the Pinhead*. Today, the Internet provides an additional alternative “publishing” outlet for comic book creators who wish to go a different route than the mainstream offers.

However, another legacy of the undergrounds is more a reaction to them than their outgrowth: the rise of feminist comics (Sabin, 1993, p. 224). Although many of the early feminist comic creators lived in

the environment of the underground comix of the late 1960s/early 1970s and thus were used to the idea of self-published comix, the sexist themes and images of many of the underground comix (as well as their inaccessibility to women contributors) sparked such creators as Trina Robbins and Joyce Farmer to create comics with a decidedly feminist orientation (Robbins, 1999). Dealing frankly with such issues as rape, abortion, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination, these works helped cultivate the women's voice in comics beyond works such as *Jackie* in Great Britain or *Superman's Girl Friend: Lois Lane* in the United States.

Building on the research legacy of such critics as Angela McRobbie, and noting the potential for both dominant and resistant ideology in comics, specific chapters in this book focus on many of the ideological issues discussed above. Applying political economy to comic books, Matthew P. McAllister explores in the next chapter the relationship between the production context of comic books and the constraints on messages that these books may produce. He argues that recent trends toward ownership concentration and media conglomeration undermine innovation by stressing conventional content, contribute to a financial crisis faced by the industry in the mid-1990s, and disadvantage smaller publishers and retailers who often present alternative voices in the industry.

The next three chapters discuss gender themes in comics. Taking a historical perspective, J. Robyn Goodman's chapter focuses on the depictions of women's suffrage in cartoons in the early twentieth-century humor magazine, *Life*. Concentrating on the years 1909 to 1914, the author notes that over 80% of the cartoons reflected an antisuffragist ideology. Women, for example, were often portrayed as being biologically unfit to vote, and suffragists were portrayed as unnaturally masculine.

Although the two chapters that follow continue to focus on images of women in comics, they bring in an international perspective by concentrating on Asian comics. Wendy Siuyi Wong and Lisa M. Cuklanz examine the recent work of Lau Lee-lee, a prominent feminist comic artist in Hong Kong. After presenting a history of key women comic artists in Hong Kong, the chapter provides a detailed examination of the themes and ideology in Lau's work to illustrate the ways in which she provides a feminist critique and vision within

the Hong Kong context. Alternatively, the next chapter, “The Dominant Trope,” by Anne Cooper-Chen, explores dominant patriarchal ideology portrayed through the gender roles and sexualized portrayals of women in three contemporary life narratives found in the Japanese manga *Weekly Young Jump*. The author points out that portrayals of the male gaze in this publication often focus on nude women and “panty views,” and sexual assaults by males figure prominently.

Chapters 6 and 7 highlight portrayals of nationality and international conflict in comics. Chapter 6 begins with the premise that Wonder Woman, an Amazon figure attempting to live in the United States, has symbolized the immigrant in Western society since her first appearance in the 1940s. However, author Matthew J. Smith also notes that the portrayal of Wonder Woman has not been static, but rather the image of the character as an immigrant has been viewed with changing ideological frameworks that include various models of assimilation and accommodation. Using post-colonial literature, this chapter does a deep reading of the different depictions of Wonder Woman’s adjustment to a dominant culture, highlighting the ideological implications of each. Annette Matton’s chapter is an analysis of Marvel’s *The ’Nam*, published from 1986 to 1993, and touted as a “realistic” portrayal of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. Exploring the ideology of realism and military conflict that pervaded *The ’Nam*, Matton argues that American soldiers were often portrayed heroically, while the Vietnamese were visually dehumanized.

The role of the superhero and the antihero in comics—and their ideological implications—comprise the next two chapters. Ian Gordon examines numerous incarnations of Superman to show the ideological dimensions of nostalgia. His essay highlights an intersection between nostalgia and mythology in the ongoing tale of Superman. Gordon points out that recent versions of Superman, such as in DC Comics’ *Kingdom Come* and TV’s *Lois and Clark*, have attempted to rework the character of Superman for [post]modern times while deploying features of earlier incarnations. In this essay, Gordon suggests that newer incarnations, demonstrating deep-seated yearnings for an idealized, more innocent time, construct nostalgia ideologically. The essay by Matthew T. Althouse analyzes the polysemic nature of a more brutal character—*Judge Dredd*, a British comic. The author contends

that Dredd's early appeal hinged on the reader's ability to participate in the creation of meaning in relation to social fallout created by Margaret Thatcher's reform initiatives during the 1980s. The study argues that *Judge Dredd* is an equivocal text that appealed to both liberals and conservatives in the British public.

The portrayal of gay characters, readers' reactions to these characters, and the application of queer theory to comics scholarship are themes explored by chapters 10 and 11. Morris E. Franklin III conducts an analysis of Letters to the Editor, including the editors' response to these letters, of comic books that featured gay characters. The essay focuses on DC's *Superman* and *Green Arrow* titles in the late 1980s, and DC's *The Flash*, Marvel's *Alpha Flight* and Innovation's *Quantum Leap* from the early- to mid-1990s. Arguing that letter columns in comic books, coupled with the nature of the medium, provide a unique way of thinking and writing about social issues, the chapter illustrates the distinct manner of "outing" that matches up with a decisive change in the way readers' reactions are handled and even presented in the different comic books. Similarly, the chapter by Edward H. Sewell, Jr. critiques queer characters in both traditional and alternative publications from a queer theory perspective. The primary question is: What does it mean to be queer in the comic strips? Sewell argues that mainstream portrayals tend to present gay characters as assimilated in straight society, whereas alternative publications stress the unique nature of gay and lesbian communities.

Finally, in chapter 12 Julie Davis tackles one of the most popular comic strips in the United States by exploring the degree to which *Dilbert* serves as oppositional culture by critiquing certain economic and social ideals of society. By looking at the characters and plots of the cartoon as well as the official *Dilbert* web site, the essay argues that *Dilbert* exposes the excesses of the American business system and helps build a "community of labor."

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