THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN



MORALITY & IDEOLOGY: THE COMIC - BOOK CHARACTER HERO 1950 - 1990

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# CONTENTS

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODCUTION	1
CHAPTER 1  1950s AMERICA, The Great Crack Down AMERICAN HEROES: Superman and Batman (a case study)	5
CHAPTER 2  BRITISH HEROES : Dan Dare and Judge Dredd (a case study)	38
CHAPTER 3  Crisis, Controversy and Censorship	74
CONCLUSION: The Changing Face of the Comic Hero	103
BIBLIOGRAPHY	112

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

111.	No.	Page
	Chapter 1	25
1 2	Harvey Kurtzman. 'Air Burst' Bernard Krigstein. 'Master Race'	26 27
3 4	The Comics Code Authority Logo EC Horror Comics	28
5	EC Crime Comics Spain.An Underground View of the	29 30
7	Comics Code Authority Daredevil. A Conscientious	31
8	Vigilante Superhero Superman and Justice	32 33
9	Batman's Motivation	34
10 11	Batman and Violence Batman. Injustice and Insanity	36 37
	Chapter 2	57
1	Dan Dare, Victorian Hero of 1950s Britain	58
2	Dan Dare. Aliens as Servants	59
3 4	Dan Dare. Colonial Space Adventure 'Meet Dan Dare'	60 61
5	Judge Dredd on Christmas Road Safety	62
6 7	Judge Dredd. Fair Play Doesn't Count 2000AD and Violence ('Strontium Dog')	63 64
8	Judge Dredd. A Typical Opening	
9	Scene 'It Pays to be Mental'in Mega-City \	65 66
10	Kitch as an Art Form in Mega-City Mega	67 68
11 12	Ugly as an Art Form in Mega-City  Fat is a Great Achievement in Mega-City	69
13	Judge Dredd and a Mutant Lawbreaker	70
14 15	2000AD. Humans Portrayed as Corrupt The Eagle's Typical Portrayal of	71
15	Women	72
16	2000ADIC Portraval of Women	73

I11. ì	No.	Page
	Chapter 3	88
1	Martin, The Censored Thalidomide	89
	Skinhead Comic Character	0.
2	Swamp Thing	90
3	The Censored 'Swamp Thing' Cover	9-
4	The Controversial Comic Book Koran	92
5		93
6	The AIDS Colouring Book Comic	93
0	The <i>Graphic Docudrama</i> , 'Brought to Light'	
7	Propaganda for Terrorists	94 95
8	Amnesty Join 'Crisis'	96
9	Drug Characters in Comix	97
10	R. Crumb, Americanism Ridiculed	
	in Comix	98
11	R. Crumb, Racial and Sexual	
	Discrimination in Comix	99
12	Uninhibited Portrayal of Violence	
	in Manga	100
13	Uninhibited Depiction of Sexual	
	Situations in Manga	101
14	Stories Involving Rape in Manga	102
	Conclusion	109
	001101401011	
		110
1	Art Spiegelman. 'Maus'	
2	Alan Moore 'Watchmen'	111

#### INTRODUCTION

Morality has always been a built-in feature in comics. It is best personified through the use of what has become known as a 'superhero' character. This dissertation presents an investigation into the underlying values and morals that are propagated by a diverse range of comic hero characters. The period examined is between 1950 and 1990.

One feature that is consistent in all comics, is that a specific moral, idea or set of values, whether intentional or not, is presented to the reader: the characters in a comic can be either superheroes or based on real people, and the situation can be either fantasy ('glamourised unreality'.¹), or based on real life. On concluding examination of specific comic book heroes, there is essentially a message behind each story, and an underlying moral communicated by each comic hero.

The moral illnesses of the American and British superheroes are examined. The violent role of the male superhero and his association with children is also dealt with, with conflicting criticism from varying sources.

Frank Miller, Daredevil and Batman artist, has one opinion on the effect of violent superhero stories on children:

It is definitely not the same thing to read a violent story as it is to hit somebody. 2

Dr. Fredric Wertham, ever cautious, has a very different view:

No positive science of mental health is possible if it permits such interference as the mass onslaught of comic books. 3

Among comic heroes examined in Chapter 1, are
two of the great American superheroes, Superman and
Batman, and in Chapter 2, two British comic heroes, past
and present; Dan Dare and Judge Dredd. At the very
least, these superheroes contained in the comics do not
make for passive reading; they arouse some reaction
in the reader, if only to entertain. The reader is
invariably delighted when the bad guy gets a punch in the
face from the superhero character. Thus, in the process
of reading such, the reader is conditioned to recognise
what is presented as a hero, and his situations and
problems become those of the reader. The censoring of
other comic characters is examined in relation to 'superhero'
characters. Jamie Reid remarks:

Censorship prevails because there is no mass outlet for any alternative ideas; only those which are accepted as the propaganda of the status quo appear. 4

From its beginnings, the comic has been used to satirise and ridicule aspects of reality, in an entertaining way. In Chapter 3, comics are shown to have become part of real reality, real people have become comic characters. In this chapter, the employment of comic characters for very specific roles is examined, along with the subsequent censoring of material deemed 'unsuitable'.

William Leith (i-D magazine, December 1986) says that

(modern comics contain) . . .
stronger morals, more triumph and
tradjedy (and) a sharper distinction
between heroes and villians . . .

# FOOTNOTES

- Wertham, Fredric, M. D.
  'The Experts for the Defence'
  Seduction of the Innocent
- Wertham, Fredric, M. D. Ibid., p. 249.
- 4 Reid, Jamie
  'State of the Art : Art of the State'
  Heartbreak Hotel
  July/August 1988
  p. 68.

# CHAPTER 1

#### 1950s AMERICA

In order to assess the comic characters of this time it is necessary to study their evolution.

The major changes that affected the entire comic industry must be understood if the 'superhero' genre is to be justified.

The events that happened in America during the 1950s changed people's attitudes to comics as literature for good. Most literature since then has been of a disparaging and condescending nature in its criticism of comics in general.

Comics serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and mores, and they speak directly to human desires, needs and emotions.

But since events during the 1950s, such merits were outlawed. Critics began to view comics as subversive threats to high brow culture and social stability.

'EC' comics or 'Entertaining Comics' were originally called 'Educational Comics'. This publishing company printed comic-book versions of the Bible and American history in its beginnings. By the 1950s however, horror stories were the main bulk of EC's publishing. These comics were deplored in the years that followed, and the initials 'EC' on comics promised gore and horror in their stories. EC also had other stories that did not involve horror, and these stories also came under scrutiny. Harvey Kurtzman illustrated numberous EC comics, employing great realism in his depiction of war stories, which in fact, became a later hallmark of EC comics. 'Air Burst' is a late example of such war stories. It gave a

sympathetic depiction of the Chinese enemy during the Korean War (III. 1). Another EC artist, Bernard Krigstein, illustrated a story called 'Master Race' in 1954 (III. 2). Comparable to Art Speigelman's 'Maus' story of the 1970s and 80s (see later conclusion), 'Master Race' shows rare depth of feeling on a difficult subject. This was one of the first serious attempts to bring comics to a mature audience.

Yet despite material such as this, comics were coming under severe criticism during the 1950s. Because most of the readers were children, some people worried that comic books - crude and violent as many were - might be damaging young minds.

# The Great Crack Down

In 1954 comic books were dumped on bonfires; comic books were denounced in Congress; comic books were solemnly condemned by psychiatrists as the root of a host of social evils. 2

This attitude led to the setting-up of the self-regulating Comics Code Authority of America, 1954 (Ill. 3). The Authority set down strict rules for comics in relation to the suitability of material. All comics from then on had to support the Authority logo on the front cover.

In Britain, a similar Authority was being set up. The Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act was passed in 1955, which campaigned against the American horror and crime comics. A conservative spokesman said, 'it was these "gum-chewing, pasty-faced" young working-

class Americans who brought the comics (horror, crime) over, '3: part of the reaction was just plain English snobbery. The British were perhaps even more hysterical than the Americans in their outrage and their criticism of contemporary comics. They felt that their whole heritage was at stake. The British Authority on Censorship wanted a change from the opinion that 'these comics are doing the following calculable damage' to 'these comics are morally objectionable and horrible'. It was being said that comics did not only generate delinquents, but that they were seducing the innocent. An eminent American psychiatrist, Dr. Fredric Wertham, had studied child psychology and especially in relation to comic books, wrote a highly publicised book 'The Seduction of the Innocent' in 1954. This book alone started a snowballing effect that was to lead to the abolition of the 'crime' and 'horror' comics and even brought all other comics under severe scrutiny. Wertham's book upset many parents and teacher's groups which led to the Comic Code Authority, and with it, the most stringent code ever applied to any of the mass media.

Some basic rules of the Comics Code Authority were:

- Police, judges and government officials must be portrayed in a good light;
- Good must always triumph over evil;
- The family system must not be mocked;
- Graphic violence, imitations of sex, bad language

were all prohibited.

Comics were being said to corrupt the mind, atmosphere, values and proper development of the reader. This great crack down had an enormously devastating effect on the comic industry, least of all financially. In 1954 comic circulation, before the Comics Code Authority was enforced, in U.S. was one billion; today it is around 138 million. Around the time the Comics Code Authority came into effect in 50s America, it entailed a \$700 fine or forty days in jail, or both, to anyone who tried to sell or give away comics that contained horror or crime stories ('glamourised unreality').

The traditions of 'Britishness' was besieged by Americanization. Among the talk of American crime, American comics, American publishers, British publishers were not mentioned, for this 'anti-Cocacolization' needed to see comics as an alien threat to British values and traditions. The British establishment stood firm in their anti-comics campaign.

Englishness, good manners, proper English language, fine literature (were all to be upheld) . . . anything else is harmful. 4

Martin Barker's study 5 of the campaign against horror

comics in Britain in the 1950s reports

They (the comics) were full of sadistic violence, horrific obsession with death, lustful representations of women. They showed crime in a glamourous light. They could do, must do real damage to their young readers. It was an act of simple morality to stop these fly-by-night publishers.

A comment on EC comic books in The Village Voice of Jan. 18. 1973 read

Clearly this is junk, not harmless junk but sensational sadistic trash (the quality of the artwork is irrelevant: scum that glistens is scum still).

Concern was expressed by teachers, magistrates, parents, women's organisations, newspapers, and churches about the horror comics which were available to the youth of Britain in the 1950s. Pressure groups were established, The Comic Campaign Council and the Council for Children's Welfare.

Comics under review were 'Tales from the Crypt' (I11.4 & 5), 'Crime Detective', and even the more familiar Superman and Batman.

Curiously enough, this crack down in Britain against the American horror comics, began with the Communist Party, who since World War II were concentrating their efforts on a campaign against 'American Imperialism'.

This attack on the American influence not only affected American big business, but it more importantly affected the American influence on British culture, albeit temporarily.

During the 50s in Britain, the effect of U.S. comics on their audience was stated in quite specific terms:

The crude and negative stereotypes of foreigners (German, Russians, 'Japs' and 'Gooks') that the comics contained, served to justify and legitimate the actions of American soldiers in the real world. 6

It was also claimed that young people raised on such comics would, when older, be psychologically prepared to kill, maim and torture on behalf of American capitalism. Comics used to brainwash?

It was perhaps understandable that the horror comics would be seen as offensive and damaging to minors, with stories featuring gore and mutilation in abundance. But even though the superhero stories had apparently less gore involved, children's favourites like Superman and Batman also were perceived to be immoral.

Mass society produced individuals who were less defenceless against the persuasive powers of the media . . . (and children) even less resistable.

Comic superheroes were said to typify the propaganda machines that existed in the media in general. A young American reader of Superman was perceived to be cannon-fodder in the eyes of the British Comics Code Authority. However, the superheroes survived throughout the big investigation in the 1950s. For a time, humourous newspaper strips, furry animal strips, and superhero strips were all there was to represent comics in the Western World. Apart from this, all other comic culture was condemned. And to this day, as a result of the crack down, superhero comics dominate the market.

#### THE AMERICAN HEROES

After the great crack down of the 1950s,

American superhero comics dominated 'comics' in general.

Horrific as many of the EC horror comics were, the

acceptable vigilantism and the moral illness of the superhero were valid, legal subject matter for comics.

However, some publishers recognised that the superhero

comics contained much of the same degrees of violence.

Walt Disney, in an effort to counter this, produced comics

that had a subduing effect on the reader and displayed

little or no violence in its stories.

In 1985, Cannon Films were promoting the upcoming blockbuster, 'Captain America'. Above the title the all capitals copy blared: 'America's star-spangled superhero battles the forces of evil!' But Captain America's origins can be traced back to the eve of World War II when he was designed to be a superpatriot superhero, instilling the reader with a sense of pride in all things American. So from early on the American superhero served as a propaganda tool.

The role of the male superhero in comics is acceptably associated with violence. The most popular American superheroes are acceptable in their roles as viligantes. Frank Miller's recent adaptation of 'Daredevil' perhaps best sums up the rare guilt expressed by a superhero, and voiced from an intelligent standpoint (III. 7). Daredevil is one of few American superheroes

who has problems within himself, and his dilemma in being a crime fighting superhero. ('But I'm not God . . . I'm not the law . . . and I'm not a murderer'.)

Similarities between two of America's most popular comic superheroes, Batman and Superman, are compared in the following pages. Where there are superficial differences between the two, their similarities in both their modes of operation and their objectives cannot be overlooked.

#### Superman

One superhero who is still going strong today and in fact, is the most famous fictional character worldwide, ever, is of course, 'Superman'.

Superman is to many, the opitomy of the comic book superhero: He is the ultimate superhero, outlasting all other mere mortal superheroes. Superman, to many, represents a character with God-like qualities (infinite strength, a gift of flight, superior knowledge, indestructability, etc.), he is the greatest, all white, all-American superhero. On the first page of the very first Superman appearance, Superman is introduced as 'Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!' But on examination, Superman can also be perceived on quite a different level.

The promotional material for the 1978 Superman movie read: 'with Marlon Brando as Jor-EL, who gave his only son to save the world'. This sounds curiously familiar. Intended or not (and it may not have been intentional) only the word 'begotten' seems to be missing from the sentence. Superman is thus presented to us as being on a par with any of the great religious prophets, and the association is inavoidable. 'Superman' readers are conditioned to see the Superman character as somebody who is the embodyment of the God of good, and all that that God entails. But on closer examination, Superman is quite unlike the other superheroes that are to be found in all the world's great religions. Superman does not offer love or goodwill, self-knowledge or contemplation as keys to man's salvation. Instead, he offers his own physical powers in theform of tremendous bouts of violence, usually toward anything that is alien to Superman's own morals. But Superman's own personal morals are nothing of the sort! Superman stands for 'liberty, justice and the American way'. Superman is an American superhero. Ultimately, Superman's message for man rests only in his own superior strength and lies in his power to be an enforcer of his own judgement (which happens to be on-line with American judgement) of what is good and what is evil.

'Superman' survived the great crack down of the 1950s. But not without some sharp criticism:

Frederick Wertham -

Superman (with the big "S" on his uniform - we should be glad, I suppose, that it is not an "SS"), (effects children in either of two ways:) 'either they fantasy themselves as supermen, with the attendant prejudices against the submen, ("foreign looking") or it makes them submissive and receptive to the blandishment of strong men who will solve all their social problems for them - by force. 8

Wertham's opinion/accusation made great waves during the crack down, but little was done to change the ideology behind Superman, and Superman survived, receiving similar criticisms in the many years that followed.

Wertham's opinion on Superman, is surely at fault on at least one aspect. Wertham does not credit a child's ability to distinguish the comic hero as an imaginary, fantasy figure.

On initially recognising the established artistic merits and entertainment quality contained in a 'Superman' story (or any story with a superhero/hero), surely the next response would be the reader's unconscious deciding on which character(s) he likes best and can identify with most. Most readers would identify with Clark Kent, Superman's alter ego. Kent is a mild mannered, inoffensive character with none of the exciting qualities of Superman. But when Clark Kent disgards his identity to reveal his true one; Superman, the reader recognises part of their own identity in him also. Superman is not passive reading. There is an enormous'audience participation' involved: a lot of Superman's attractive qualities

(supreme strength, etc.), momentarily become the reader's

To have moral concepts worked out on paper, and a world where people fight for them . . . I think that's a lot of what draws our audience to comics. 9

Indeed a violent and dangerous world. A world not least of all associated with Superman and an affinity shared with readership. In a particular issue of Superman where he kills three villians by throwing them into the bullets he has deflected off his own chest, sales of 'Superman' for that issue doubled. In the very first episode of 'Superman', Superman convinces the State Governor to stop the execution (by electric chair) of an innocent woman, accused of murder (Ill. 8). After the girl is released, Superman leaves a note that says: 'You'll find the real murderess bound and delivered on the lawn of your estate'. In effect, Superman is indirectly murdering the guilty party, as the reader is to assume the innocent woman and the real murderess simply swap places on the electric chair. The reader is not encouraged to have any sympathy toward the murderess she just presumably replaces the other girl on the electric chair and in doing so, is brought to 'justice'. Such is the 'liberty, justice and American way' of Superman. To fight for'the American way' is such an immoral purpose in itself, as has been all-too-numerously proven throughout American history: 'Americans' fighting against Indians, Americans fighting in Vietnam, Nicaragua, etc.

To many critics, Superman serves as a graphic reminder that some of the worst traditions and those most typical of the comic genre are still alive, and not only stunt the development of the medium, but affect the sensibilities and morals of the reader.

#### Batman

Batman is a comic book, turned television, turned movie hero. Not even so much of a *comic* hero anymore, Batman is a supertough, trendy pop-cult icon of the late 1980s. This is the superhero, like Superman, that merchandising made immortal.

Previous to Batman, a bat-costumed night stalker had appeared before in American pulp fiction magazines of the 1950s - on either side of the law. Batman was one of the first Matt Black superheroes, complete with matching car and other accessories; Judge Dredd is one of the latest Matt Black superheroes.

With Batman, a curious character emerged. A dogooder, like Superman, existing and operating on the outskirts of the law. Batman is oddly motivated by vengence, revenge and is haunted by the past: he is a vigilante who prefigured Charles Bronson and Clint Eastwood. (Batman's alter ego Bruce Wayne)

decided to devote his life to fighting crime, or rather, of course, to one man vigilante justice. 10

(Ill. 9)

Similar to Superman, Batman operates above the law. But if the definition of 'a criminal' is said to be of someone who breaks the law, then surely Batman by the law of Gotham City, is a criminal. It is common criminals who break the law, but this is the same law that Batman himself operates above. Something of a misnomer, this very American superhero trait remains quite acceptable to the readership.

Batman has no superpowers and relies on technogadgetry in his opposition of all murderers, robbers and criminals. This, along with the fact that Batman is motivated by vengeance from some tragic event that happened in his childhood, makes his operating above the law quite human. Unlike Superman, who declares himself on the side of American law (but above it) Batman, the character, is not as much a role-model. He does not crusade for 'the American way'.

Asides from this, there is good reason to question the morals of Batman, on establishing his background.

It is perhaps unjust of Batman (who in turn is a millionaire playboy, Bruce Wayne) to persecute criminals who for the most part are victims themselves. Many people that turn to crime are of poor background, are unemployed or are just desperate characters, trying to survive in a harsh world that is run with money, a problem which Bruce Wayne (Batman) has never had experience of, or a problem with. Bruce Wayne's fortune was inherited. But what before that? Maybe the Wayne family themselves

robbed and plundered others to achieve their vast wealth in the first place. Batman would be minus motivation if this were the case.

One writer has quite a valid opinion on what might have happened to Bruce Wayne:

Yet one can't help getting the feeling that had he not witnessed the murder of his parents, Batman, like all the other Noo Yawk Rich Kids, would have spent his life making a killing on Wall St. by day and cokeing-it-up by night.

Like Superman, Batman only ever manages to fight the criminals on the street. Street criminals may themselves be victims of hierarchy and corruption from higher levels in society: Both Batman and Superman only ever fight the symptoms of crime - they never seem to eradicate the true causes at the source.

Taken together as symbols, Superman and Batman represent two sides of the superhero coin: one light, one dark; one a God, one a man; one with powers inherited, the other self made. But the two have one fundamental thing in common - they both operate above the law and in a violent fashion. The overall coin has one value.

Dr. Frederick Wertham was equally thorough in his criticism of 'Batman' as he was in criticising 'Superman'. But with Batman, Wertham attacked the sexuality of Batman, accusing Batman and Robin (Boy Wonder) of being gay ('Batman and his boy'). But this type of criticism was a part of a witch-hunt that was

quite unfounded. Wertham, in fact did not bother with the traditional scientific methodologies to support his charges. Simply because mentally disturbed youngsters (that Wertham had been examining) read comic books was enough to suggest to him that the comics themselves were causing juvenile delinquency. Wertham found all manner of evil signs and subliminal horrors in all comics: vaginas hidden in the shadings on muscles, phallic symbols in background subject matter, female breasts in headlights, etc. One result of the accusations made about Batman led to Alfred, Bruce Wayne's butler (and the second male to be sharing Wayne Manor with Bruce Wayne), beingkilled off for a time. But even after the demise of the Robin character (in 1988) the question of Batman's sexuality has come up as a theme again. Dave McKean, an artist involved in a recent Batman graphic novel, 'Arkham Asylum':

The best way (for the Joker) to assault Batman is to assault Batman's sexuality, which we (artist and writer) figured would be the weak link in this muscular Dark Knight. 12

Apparently, before the censorship involved, the Joker in Arkham Asylum was to prance around Batman in one scene, dressed in a woman's dress, taunting him and singing Madonna's 'Like a Virgin'. This idea was subsequently censored.

In overcoming his adversaries, Batman does not possess any superpowers. He does not carry a gun and never kills. Batman unlike Superman has a different

method of bringing to justice those who oppose him. He swears to rehabilitate criminals - even those most twisted and evil. One such enemy, the Joker, escapes from, and is put back into an asylum time and time again, but is never killed by Batman, despite his horrific crimes. Nevertheless, Batman is seen very often using violence in the ultimate confrontation and capturing of his victims (Ill. 10).

Dr. Wertham remarks:

Punishment in comic books is not punishment, it usually takes the form of a violent end. Melodrama instead of morality. 13

On Batman the movie, Graham Linehan remarks:

(the Joker) "I'm the worlds first, fully
functional, homocidal artist . . ."
 . . (the Joker) dances on, kills
someone, and the audience collapses in
laughter (and if making a mass murderer
this funny is not subversive then what
is?) 14

One cinema owner remarked, on release of Batman the movie, 'I've got two kids and, I'm telling you, I wouldn't bring them to it . . . it's violent and frightening".

One of the things that could have made "Batman" (the movie) a perfect experience would have been an "18s" rating so that we could wander down those black corridors that can only be glimpsed there. 16

Unlike the outright battle between good and evil in 'Superman', Batman's world has always been full of macabre twists of fate. 'The Joker' is one enemy who cannot go to jail; he is insane and recurringly ends up in mental hospitals. Another strange case was that of

Adam Lamb (II1. 11) a gentle museum curator who is transformed each night into a murdering psychopath after an accidental bump on the head.

A 'DC comic' representative calls the Batman movie: 'The comic book event of 1989'. The Batman movie has led to other comic characters being adapted to the big screen - Dick Tracey, Swamp Thing, Watchman, Spiderman, etc. Comic superheroes make good movie fodder. In fact there are lots of comic writers who are now scripting movies. Frank Miller, famous for his interpretation of Batman in 'The Dark Knight' series, is now writing 'Robocop II'.

Hollywood's opinion on Batman the movie is'that all exposure is good . . . whether the Batman movie is goot or not'. So the Batman known as a comic character is a financial hostage. With the 'Batman' movie, a huge effect is had on the comic community in general, as its impact on the public's perception of comics reinforce the opinion that comics are exclusively juvenile entertainment. This is destroying the possibility of of comics finding an intelligent, sizeable audience and leaving the same audience unconvinced of the theory that comics as an art form are capable of mature artistic expression.

Asides from perhaps Captain America and blatant super-patriot superheroes, the comic superhero in general never is shown to attempt to understand or question society, human nature or social problems of any kind.

#### On superheroes :

They tend to operate on earth, though they may be alien to it; they retain anonimity by assuming a mortal identity or alter ego; and they wear a distinctive costume. 17

Perhaps added to this attempt at a definition, should be that the superhero transcends all knowledge of such things as social issues, human nature and 'the system', and instead sees fit to single handedly propagate moral reform in one way or another. But is the whole function of a superhero based around entertainment? Education? Using similar logic it has been argued that superheroes present us with an expression in terms of literature, others argue that superheroes have morals and values that are streamlined and personified in an exciting way; propaganda machines.

artist and a writer. The artist and writer in turn belong to a society with its own laws, values and morals influencing the writer/artist. The resulting superhero/hero character is something of a hybrid, in moralistic terms. He exists solely through appreciation of readership: attention from the media. This appreciation in turn is entirely dependent on whether or not the embodyment of the superhero either exaggerates, embraces or at the least represents in a clear way the contemporary values and morals to which the reader holds and/or has been conditioned to belong. The American comic superhero character has a cultural purpose.

# FOOTNOTES

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4	Ibid, p. 195.
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ILLUSTRATIONS TO CHAPTER 1



ill. 1
Harvey Kurtzman. 'Air Burst'

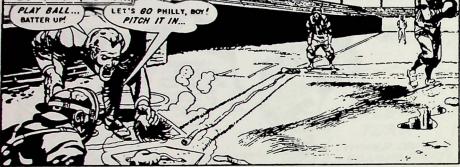


ill. 2
Bernard Krigstein. 'Master Race'

# THE OFFICIAL STAMP OF APPROVAL!



The Comics Code Authority logo.
All comics were to show this symbol on the front cover



SEE THE BATTER COME TO THE PLATE SWINGING THE LEGS, THE ARMS, THEN THROWING ALL BUT ONE AWAY AND STANDING IN THE BOX WAITING FOR THE PITCHER TO HURL THE HEAD IN TO HIM. SEE THE CATCHER WITH THE TORSO STRAPPED ON AS A CHEST-PROTECTOR, THE INFIELDERS WITH THEIR HAND-HITS, THE STOMACH-ROSIN-BAG, AND ALL THE OTHER PIECES OF EQUIPMENT THAT ONCE WAS CENTRAL CITY'S STAR PITCHER, HERBIE SATTEN.



ill. 4
EC Horror comics



ill. 5
EC Crime comics



The Underground artist, Spain, makes his statement about the Comics Code Authority during the 1960s.

(note the reference to Dr. Wertham)



ill. 7
Daredevil. A conscientious vigilante superhero



ill. 8
Superman. Liberty, Justice and the American Way?



ill. 9
(and following page)
Batman motivated through vengance

THE BOY'S EYES ARE WIDE WITH TERROR AND SHOCK AS THE HORRIBLE SCENE IS SPREAD BEFORE HIM.







AS THE YEARS PASS BRUCE WAYNE PREPARES HIMSELF FOR HIS CAREER. HE BECOMES A MASTER SCIENTIST.



TRAINS HIS BODY TO PHYSICAL PERFECTION UNTIL HE IS ABLE TO PERFORM AMAZ-ING ATHLETIC FEATS.





CRIMINALS ARE A SUPERSTITIOUS COWARDLY LOT, SO MY DISGUISE MUST BE ABLE TO STRIKE TERROR INTO THEIR HEARTS.IMUST BE A CREATURE OF THE NIGHT, BLACK, TERRIBLE.. A A...

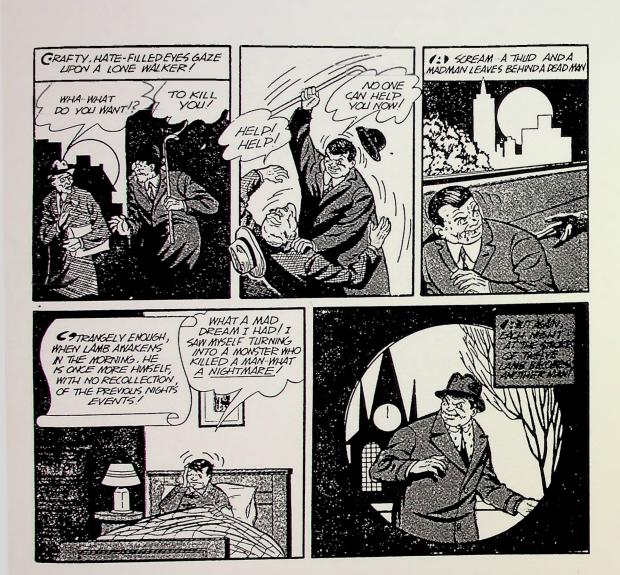








ill. 10
Confrontation inevidably ends in violence



ill. 11
Batman. Injustice and insanity

# CHAPTER 2

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#### THE BRITISH HEROES

In this chapter, are examined two British comic heroes. One from the past, one from the present. Dan Dare (of the 'Eagle' comic), and Judge Dredd (of 2000AD comic), are two comic heroes that, although both from Britain, stand world's apart. They both show strong differences in their character make-up and in the ideology behind them: they are presented as contrasting characters.

They are conventional comic hero material, but not quite 'superheroes' as unlike the American comic heroes, the characters are mortal, and they have no super powers.

On the formula that comic book heroes are misfits, (like Batman) or aliens (not forgetting Superman is an alien), these two British heroes do not comply. 'Dan Dare' represented clearly, the British establishment of his day, because he was indeed part of it. He was a super-patriot space pilot. 'Judge Dredd' in the stories, also represents an establishment though not quite the British establishment. Neither 'Dredd' nor 'Dare' are heroes with vengence in mind, or operating during the night (like Batman), or operating above 'the law' (like Superman). The only similarity in these two British heroes is that they overtly represent the establishment in their respective stories.

Superman and Batman fight on the side of the 'system', but 'Dare' and 'Dredd' in fact are the system

in their strips. These are the British heroes.

## Dan Dare from the 'Eagle'

Dan Dare was the main comic hero from the 'Eagle' comic in 1950. The 'Eagle' comic was set up with a very specific audience in mind. It set out to be the cleanest, brightest, most successful comic ever published for young boys. And above all, it had to be a 'British' comic.

The 'Eagle' was brought into being, appropriately enough, by a vicar, Marcus Morris in 1950. He had examined the comic market and was appalled at the American 'horror' comics (EC).

'Children are born hero-worshippers, not born ghouls'. With a specific audience in mind, Marcus Morris wanted to

convey to the child the right kind of standards, values and attitudes, combined with the necessary amount of excitement and adventure. 2

Already, the 'Eagle' comic was to educate as well as entertain. Britain at this time, 1950, was not long over World War II, and 'Dare' was meant to inspire young boys, in clearly definable morals, to adjust to life after the war. The great crack down on the American pulp comics had not yet begun, but anticipating reform, Morris set up the 'Eagle' comic.

Decency, fair play, selflessness were all compulsory qualities to be displayed (preached?) in the

'Eagle'. In depicting such qualities, using exciting characters and adventurous settings, it was intended to make such qualities irresistable to the young reader.

Morris, as a vicar, and having had various religious comics and illustrated versions of the gospels out in publication previous to the 'Eagle' comic, was very conscious of promoting his beliefs in the 'Eagle'.

Morris, in the very first issue of the 'Eagle', pointed out to the young reader some moral values to which every true 'Eagle' reader should adhere to in life.

Members of the Eagle club will:

- a) Enjoy life, and help others to enjoy life.

  They will not enjoy life at the expense of others.
- b) Make the best of themselves. They will develop themselves in body, mind and spirit. They will tackle things for themselves and not wait for others to do things for them.
- c) Work with others for the good of all around them;
- d) Always lend a hand to those in need of help. They will not shirk difficult or dangerous jobs.<sup>3</sup>

Such was the elitist nature inherent in becoming an 'Eagle' reader. Morris wanted to make it very clear to all concerned that the 'Eagle' was to set new standards in comic literature in Britain. The young reader, his parents, teachers, clergy, and the British censorship

authorities would all admire the 'Eagle'comic in its attempts to demonstrate all things Christian, and to define proper British standards.

The science-fiction strip in the comic, 'Dan Dare' soon became the new cult hero of middle class 1950s

Britain. 'Dan Dare' became the main character and biggest selling point in the 'Eagle'. 'Dan Dare - Pilot of the Future', to give the character his full title, was almost titled - 'Dan Dare - Saviour of the Future', which is what Marcus Morris wanted him to be called.

Morris who had titled him 'Lex Christian - Parson of the Flying Seventh' (!). Dan Dare was indeed a comic book hero saturated with morality (Ill. 1). Dan Dare was to be a character with no super powers, no cloak; a mortal man who relies on intelligence and technology.

Morris wanted 'Dare' to be associated mostly with adventure, mostly in space. Closer to the truth is that 'Dan Dare - Pilot of the Future' is remembered as a role model for middle-class boy scouts throughout Britain in the 1950s - 1960s.

'Dan Dare' is mainly motivated by space adventure, but an interesting subtext throughout the storylines was that Dare was on a crusade through the solar system, seeing British Justice brought wherever he went.

Morris, as conscientious editor of the 'Eagle',
was concerned about the levels of violence which appeared

in 'Dan Dare'. By comparison to the levels of violence, sex and horror demonstrated in the American 'horror' comics of the 1950s, 'Dan Dare' the comic strip, contained very little. Morris even employed a child psychologist to monitor any violence or dealings with violence with which Dare would be involved with in his adventures. As a result of this intensive self-censorship, there was no apparent crudity or senselessness in the violence depicted in 'Dan Dare', or the rest of the Eagle comic. Frank Hampson, the artist reponsible for 'Dare', had very definite views as to the way 'Dan Dare' should be presented as a comic hero to thousands of children.

Dare', Dare was very much a Victorian hero. His arch enemy, the Mekon, is an evil alien of supreme intelligence and cunning. But he is simply met with the glorious uppercut when fighting Dan Dare. Even with the backdrop of futuristic and imaginary technology, a good square biff to the chin sorts out the Mekon. 'The Mekon' character was a member of an alien race from Venus, called the 'Treens'. Dare often visited the planet on on his adventures and was hallowed by the green-skinned Treen race. In the story, there was constant controversy over the earth's authority on Venus. This is quite comparable to the way Britain has colonised other countries in reality. When on Venus, Dare and other humans automatically assume superiority over the Treens, calling

on them as servants (Ill. 2) and sub-ordinates on his safari treks (Ill. 3). 'Dare' even has his own valet, Digby. Digby serves basically as a Man-Friday for Dare. Not so much a 'Right-hand-man' for Dare, Digby was a lesser sidekick; a servant.

'Dan Dare' is an excellent example of race superiority, demonstrated through the comic strip medium.

'Dare' conforms to the British Space Authorities and British Standards wherever he goes and in everything he does. 'Dare' sees a lot of aliens as lesser life-forms to be brought over to 'civilized' ways of thinking: colonised. (Comparable to Britain colonising India in 1800s.) Dan Dare is not just of the human race, he is intrinsically British in being a human.

Dan Dare was the great white British comic hero of the 1950s. He was to openly represent everything the conservative British establishment at the time stood for. In doing so this was quite intentionally a direct attack on the American 'horror' and 'crime' comics coming out at the time. But in embracing the said ideals portrayed in 'Dan Dare' and the 'Eagle' comic, this attitude offered no solutions to the problems in Britain at the time: the treatment of the treens in 'Dare' offered little consolation, indeed would surely aggravate the black immigrants that were flooding into Britain in the years to come. The success of the comic declined during the 1960s and in 1969 after 991 issues the 'Eagle' expired.

#### Judge Dredd from 2000AD

In marked contrast to the preachings of 'Dan Dare' of the 1950s, Britain has produced another comic hero, and an even more successful one than 'Dan Dare'. This comic hero is Judge Dredd.

With exciting developments in other different areas of youth culture during the 1970s, Britain had produced comics like 'Action' and 'Bullet', which were considered too violent. 'Action' comic was subsequently banned in 1977. A Fleetway publication (which later produced'2000AD' comic), 'Action' contained stories featuring teenage anarchy (Kids Rule OK) and violence (Death Game 1999). With stories about social upheaval, unemployment, and the injustice of the British system, the subject matter was considered too offensive, and not suitable matter for the teenage readerships of the comic.

As the superhero was a much less offensive subject for comic literature, a new comic, '2000AD' was to come out at such a time. It featured fantasy stories, science fiction stories and stories set in the future, and took the relatively safe option by featuring superheroes. In 1977 '2000AD' comic made its debut and was quickly rivalled by other similar comics. 'Tornado' and 'Starlord' however faded in popularity and the readership of 2000AD held strong. Over the years the readership of 2000AD became varied in terms of age. The comic communicates extremely well to both children and adults.

Today 2000AD is mainly aimed at an 'adult' market.

'Dan Dare' had proven to be the most successful British comic book hero of the 1950s, and 2000AD latched on to this success by featuring a revived, updated 'Dan Dare' in its first issue. But times had changed and Dan Dare, even an updated version, was not successful with his new audience. 'Judge Dredd' was to be the new British comic hero. 'Dredd' as a comic hero catered better for the needs of the readership, more so than the updated 'Dan Dare' did, in terms of strength of character and, more important, in terms of respect for the reader's own social, racial and moral background. 'Judge Dredd' was a comic hero that most definitely was not about preaching to white, middle-class, boy scouts.

'Dredd' is quite unlike any of the American superheroes like Batman and Superman in that least-of-all 'Dredd' is not a vigilante, as they are. 'Dredd' does not operate above the law, as they do. In fact, in the strip 'Dredd' is the law (the establishment that represents law) and the strip states that clearly 'Dredd' is a judge, a futuristic cop, who has virtually unlimited authority to keep peace and uphold the law in mega-city-one. 'Dredd' not only patrols the streets but patrols the entire city; he is a comic hero who operates in a mass society.

Dredd dispenses justice instantly on the streets in a stylish, hard, techno fashion, ultimately ruthless. The citizens in mega-city-one fight against the system

and in general, oppose the law and all that judges represent. The citizens fight for causes like democracy and freedom from oppression from the judges. But the judges rule the people with a strict dictatorship; judges issue instant justice and instant execution to anyone opposing 'the law'. The message, basically is 'crime doesn't pay'. 'Judge Dredd is the law and you better believe it!', is the slogan most associated with the strip.

Unlike 'Dan Dare', who is motivated chiefly by British morals and a British temperament, 'Judge Dredd' is motivated only by 'law' and 'justice'. Dredd is basically a radical, fascist lawman, with no allegience to anything else (i.e. friends, relationships, country, etc.). Dredd contains none of the selflessness, values and attitudes demonstrated in Dan Dare.

The severity of Judge Dredd's judgement is delivered with total equality to anyone or anything that breaks the law, and is enforced in a cold, sharp and hard fashion. Indeed, in the strip, world wars have been fought over trivial things which nonetheless are crime related. Dredd is rarely used as a role model, but on the odd occasion, he is used to demonstrate to the reader aspects of law that should be adhered to by any standards, in reality (Ill. 5 - a Christmas warning by Judge Dredd to readers - 'Drive carefully' being the moral).

The film 'Robocop' directed by Paul Verhoven (1987) borrows heavily from a lot of characteristics to be found in the Judge Dredd comic strip. In the film, the Robocop demonstrates the issuing of justice in an efficient but cold, impersonal, frank and ruthless way. Unlike the Robocop however, domestic, humanistic and personal problems for Dredd do not exist. The true identity of Dredd is never revealed, the exterior is all that is shown. Dredd, as a result, is a faceless hero, the helmet Dredd wears is suffice a symbol to recognise and to understand all that should be known about the character.

'Judge Dredd' is a more successful comic hero than 'Dan Dare' ever was. Yet Dredd is so cold, unfeeling and at times, seemingly inhuman even, that the reader cannot identify with Dredd on human terms. 'Dan Dare' was more of human character in that he had emotions and feelings. 'Dredd' is all the more touchable as he does not have these qualities. and 'Dredd' differ greatly in their ideology, their values, and morals. Unlike Dare, who adventurously crusades across the solar system bringing British morals to all aliens, 'Dredd' simply fights crime. The criminals in the world of Judge Dredd are sophisticated and corrupt the crimes they commit are real by any real standards, employing all the tactics of real criminals, but in a futuristic setting. Some crimes Dredd deals with are petty, others are of world concern. The law that is applicable

to mega-city-one is the same law of Western reality.

Judge Dredd's treatment of criminals is not so much
the result of a personal vendetta (as is the case with
Batman), but Dredd is quite a blind and automatic
individual who operates strictly by 'the law' that
the system has educated him to obey and enforce.

In the American code for editorial standards (ref. The Comics Code Authority) Part A:

2.No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime, with the exception of those crimes that are so far-fetched or pseudo-scientific that no would-be lawbreaker could reasonably duplicate. 4

With reference to this rule, the crimes committed in the Judge Dredd strip are real (i.e. robbery, murder, extortion rackets, etc.), but the nature of the story, in settings that are so futuristic and unreal, produce crimes that relate to science fiction fantasy more than they relate to street credibility. One story in Judge Dredd involved murderers who get rid of the bodies of their victims by passing them onto a fashionable human taxidermist.

6. On every instance good shall triumph over evil, and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.

With reference to this rule, Dredd ultimately fulfills this golden rule of comic book morality. Dredd is a Western hero - he always gets his man. Fair play does not count with Judge Dredd (Ill. 6) as it accounted so much for Dan Dare; Dredd is an unusual hero.

There is a level of violence consistent in the Judge Dredd strip, a level that would never have been permitted in Dan Dare (Ill. 6). Yet despite this, straight forward fistfights and old-fashioned shoot-outs with criminals are in common in the stories not only in 'Judge Dredd' but in other strips in 2000AD also (Ill. 7 - Johnny Alpha, another 2000AD hero, unashamedly blows away a bad guy in a violent, ruthless fashion).

However, some of the stories in 'Judge Dredd' hardly involve Judge Dredd at all. Sometimes no crime is committed in the story, sometimes Dredd is hardly featured in the story. 'Judge Dredd' apart from being an entertaining comic character is often a story. story only features a character: his name is 'Judge Dredd'. Dredd, the character, is very often the only constant feature in the stories contained in the strip. Unlike in 'Dan Dare' and in so many other superhero stories, 'Judge Dredd' often provides an insight into the environment of mega-city-one, and life in a mass society. In many episodes, the mass society backdrop gives way to themes that are inevitable: attitudes to race and other fundamental social problems. More is seen of these things than is seen of the lawman enforcing the law (Ill. 8 - a typical opening scene from 'Dredd' contains much information about the landscape to give the situation sense). 'Judge Dredd' offers high-tech gloss just as 'Dan Dare' and 'Batman' do, but the difference is that the urban and social decay is in clear view in

the 'Judge Dredd' strip. For example - mega-city-one has an enormous unemployment rate; with a staggering 30,000 citizens occupying every square mile of the city, only one in 300 people have a job. An insight into the everyday life of a random invididual (who usually turns out to be quite an unusual individual), from mega-city provides the story in the strip occasionally. Thus the reader is presented with a perspective on life in mega-city that is unavailable from Judge Dredd himself: Dredd does not tell the story, the little guy does. The life of a citizen of mega-city is seen as a bizarre, sick, insane, inevidably crime-ridden existence. Considering such a massive oppressed society, characters as odd as those encountered are perceived not so much as evil or insane villians (as would be the case in 'Batman') but they merely reflect the sickness of the society in which they are forced to live. When such an insight into the ills of mass society is given, 'judges', 'the law' and 'Judge Dredd' are sometimes forced to be perceived in a very different light.

Life in mega-city is a peculiar existence indeed:

'it pays to be mental' in mega-city (Ill. 9);

having a nearest and dearest stuffed by a professional

human taxidermist is all the rage (Ill. 10); as is

making your appearance as ugly as possible, as opposed

to the American idea of beauty (Ill. 11); and to become

the world's first two ton man is an achievement envied

by any mega citizen (Ill. 12 - 'Two Ton Tony Tubbs').

However, the reader recognises Dredd for being the right-wing, ruthless, law-machine that he is, and in so doing finds entertainment in following Dredd's hopeless pursuit of instant justice, in a society that is filled with very real problems. Dredd is not so much a propaganda weapon, in attemtping to teach law to the reader, but rather is a subtle indication that disorder is inherent in mass society.

Where Superman and Batman optimise two American superheroes, it must be remembered that they are above the law, above the system, in their modes of operation. 'Dare' and 'Dredd', optimise two British heroes, they both are representative characters of their respective systems.

If 'Superman' and 'Batman' are said to represent two sides of the superhero coin, then 'Dredd' and 'Dare' represent two different values of the coin, only similar in currency.

Unlike 'Dan Dare' and the 'Eagle' comic,

'2000AD' is very aware of dealing in stereotypes. There
is a healthy balance of white and coloured, male and
female, normal and mutant, human and alien, humanoid
and android characters portrayed throughout 2000AD and
any to the above can serve both as good or evil characters
in the comic.

In 'Dan Dare', the Treens were seen to be an inferior alien race, but in 2000AD aliens abound in stories and in general are even portrayed in a more favourable

light than humans. One story in 2000AD, 'Nemesis', portrays all humans in the story as alien-haters, rascist, evil oppressors, all wanting to 'purify' the galaxy of 'alien scum'. Aliens are the heroes in the story. This theme lends itself to comparison with themes of real racial prejudices: Black Power versus the Ku Klux Klan.

The rascist theme is evident in other stories also: in 'Strontium Dog', bounty-hunting is a job that normal humans despise, so mutants are the only people who qualify for such, they being exempt from other job situations because of simple rascism. This story has a real theme; in reality people are shut out because of their colour or because of physical handicap. 2000AD often uses such handicapped characters not as the evil oppressors (as would be more typical of American superhero comics), but as its heroes. Occasionally of course, mutant characters are law breakers (Ill. 13 - Dredd and a mutant law breaker; curiously in this example the mutant in question is breaking the law in an attempt to overthrow non-mutant 'normo'oppressors, of which Judge Dredd is seen here to be). According to Chris Claremont, creator of the 'X-Men', mutant superheroes (American):

Every teenager can identify with a mutant.. life is nice, normal, safe, ordered. Then you hit thirteen and your voice breaks, you get zits, and you're growing in leaps and bounds... Your hormones are running wild, you get no respect. 6

Thus, the attraction of stories containing mutant heroes is explained. But the use of mutant heroes in comic stories can be a means of communicating a moral to the reader:

Stories that contain mutants and aliens have resonances to the situation in the U.S., or South Africa, or the relationship of the gay community to that of the straight community . . . 7

Robots are also subject to favourable protrayal; they are given the sentiments, emotions and personalities of humans. In the stories in 2000AD real humans are portrayed as cruel and inhuman in their treatment of robots.

The 2000AD comic is unusual in its choice of heroes and anti-heroes; in general, human beings are the ones protrayed as being the cruelist, most rascist, unjust, evil race in the galaxy(Ill. 14). Leading heroes in the comic like 'Rogue Trooper', 'Nemesis' and 'Strontium Dog', are portrayed as outsiders who struggle mostly against humans, not aliens, in the quest for peace and justice. Unlike the women in 'Dan Dare' (Ill. 15) the women in 2000AD are portrayed very often as the stronger, braver characters: heroines (Ill. 16).

There was a very definite bias on racial stereotypes in 'Dan Dare' but with 'Judge Dredd' a different character has emerged, from a different comic and from a different time. As presented in Chapter 1, the American superheroes had very many definite functions - a moral, political, and cultural purpose. Dan Dare

fulfilled these functions also, but within a British context. But the British comic hero has changed. Changes in society over a period of time, changes in attitudes and changes in the needs of the reader has produced the antithesis of Dan Dare: Judge Dredd is the inevitable British comic hero.

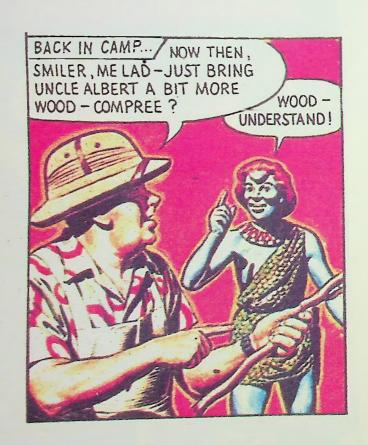
### FOOTNOTES

1	Crompton, Alastair The Man who Drew Tomorrow
2	Ibid.
3	Ibid.
4	Horn, Maurice The World Encyclopedia of Comics
5	Ibid.
6	McCarthy, Gerry (in an interview with Chris Claremont) <u>In Dublin</u> , p. 11.
7	Thid.

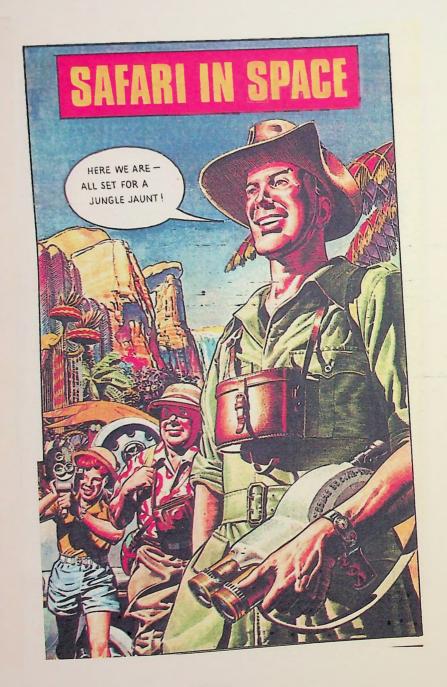
ILLUSTRATIONS TO CHAPTER 2



ill. 1
Dan Dare, Victorian hero of 1950s Britian



ill. 2
Dan Dare. Aliens as servants



ill. 3
Dan Dare. Colonial space adventure



Dan Dare's exploits are known all over the world. But what of the man hamself? News one to seek publicity, declaring that most of this solicements were the resulted team work has exhaust at this solicements are the resulted team work has exhaust print interface to the press and the public at large know very lattle of his background.

From official records of the Interplanetary Space Fleet, we have manged to compite the following background.

Dan Date was born in Manchester in 1967. His father was william Dare, better known as Mad Billy Dare, the famous explorer and space pilot who was the first man to explore the dreaded Matte Grosse of Brazil fully and find the fabilious El Dorado. His mother was a Seot, Jean MacGregori younget daughter of the MacGregori of Culloden.

It seemed almost intentible that Dan would grow up to enter one of the Services. From both sides of the family he inherited a long tradition of military achievement.

But Dan grow up fit a world at peace, where the bigger nations were pointed together for the betterment of human conditions. At the age of twelve he entired Rossell School, where his high symits soon made him popular among his fellow peptls. Many of them, still remember the keependary Date's Climb, from the windows of the Lipper School to the Clock Tower steeple, an exploit that carned Dare we of the best from the headmaster.

He was Captain of the School when he left Rossell in 1984 to go up to Trunity College. Cambridge, to read Modern Science. More and more his intenset grew in flying, He joined fluctures. More and more his intenset grew in flying, He joined fluctures. More and more his intenset grew in flying, He joined fluctures the flucture of the latentity of the latentity of the But for crecket the placed for Cambridge against the West Indies at Leods in 1988, and the flow paged to he have not be fluctured to the flucture of the flucture of the Harvard University trunder the flucture and astrophysics, he fine action to Harvard University and content to the flucture and astro

the Boof Race.
Gaining his-degree in mathematics and astrophysics, he then aent to Harvard University under the International Exchange.
Scheme to do research work. In 1986 he was awarded the International Universities Prize for the best paper on the science of

hattoni Universities.

The following years at the age of 20, he joined the Interplanetary.

Space Fleet as a Cader Navigator. In 1990, after routine service between farth and the Stationary Orbit Rocket Tanus. Dantook the Interstellar Navigation Course and the following year his tops.

Sir Hubert Guest, Controller of the Interplanetary Space Fleet.

Master Prior's Certificate. At the age of 24 he had reached the tank of Pilos Major.

After taking the routine Impulse Wave Engineer's Course, he was one-extraored to the Moon and English, afterwards was promoted to Colonel.

By the more the was 20 Jan had become the chigh pilot of the space fleet, as a total of the Martin Fight and was stationed at the HQ of One-disciplinators. Space Flight mafter the direct command of Six III and revinest. Controller of the Space Fleet Ard it is a first of the specific product of the space fleet. It was stationally a familie A shortage of food here on Earth brought about by a tremendous growth in the population and had farming methods which had exhausted vast creas of the world's agreeditant lands.

Darming methods which had exhausted vast creats of tine world's agricultural lands.

Darn was given the task of lending a team to Venus to try to persuade the Treets and Thereas, the two races of the Northern and Southern Horsequers to release food for Earth, Haw he specified was one of the ereal adventure stones of our century.



ill. 4 'Meet Dan Dare'

# CARELESS DRIVING COSTS LIVES



ill. 5

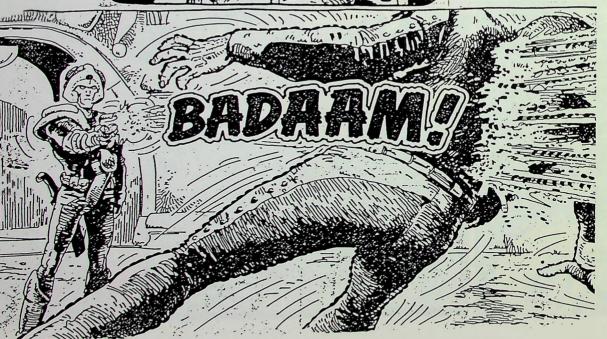
Judge Dredd on Christmas road safety



ill. 6

Judge Dredd. Fair play doesn't count,
Dredd always gets his man





ill. 7
2000AD and violence. ('Strontium Dog')



ill. 8

Judge Dredd. A typical opening scene





ill. 9
'It pays to be mental'...in Mega-city



ill, 10
Kitch as an Art form in Mega-city



ill, 11 Ugly as an Art form in Mega-city



ill. 12
Fat is a great achievement in Mega -city



ill. 13
Judge Dredd and a mutant lawbreaker



ill. 14
2000AD. Humans portrayed as corrupt



ill. 15
The Eagle's typical portrayal of women





ill, 16
2000AD's portrayal of women

CHAPTER 3
CRISIS, CONTROVERSY AND CENSORSHIP

Among points examined in this chapter is what is not considered acceptable in comics, and an attempt to explain why. Some comics contain characters that are considered obscene and unsuitable, and result in the censoring of such material.

Censorship of comic material dubbed 'immoral' or 'unsuitable' is not something that is to be solely associated with the great crack down on comics in general during the 1950s in America. Censorship still works today, and has been at work recently with a story that was to run in the third best selling comic in the U.K. - 'Crisis'.

'Crisis' comic is a sister comic of 2000AD, they share the same publisher, Fleetway Publishing, who heralds itself humbly as 'the cutting edge of British comics'.

But 'Crisis' is different from any of Fleetway's other comics. 'Crisis' is Fleetway's brave attempt to politicise British mainstream comics.

'Skin' was to be a strip that was to run in 'Crisis'. It was however, cancelled, only three weeks before publication. A press release that was sent out at the time stated that the market was not yet ready for it. Closer to the truth is that Fleetway was in fact in danger of being prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act 'as tending to deprave and corrupt'. 1
'Skin' was in fact a story about

the sexual and intellectual awakening of a teenage thalidomide skinhead, (who) seeks revenge on the drug company responsible for turning him into what his mates call a "seal-boy" 2 (Ill. 1)

There are no science-fiction superheroes in 'Crisis' but the heroes in its stories are firmly rooted to real life. The writer of 'Skin', Peter Milligan, claims the really offensive thing about the story

is the fact this thing happened, and that they (the German drug company) were allowed to get away with it. 3

But is 'Skin' just a deliberate attempt to sensationalise 'Crisis' comic, thus attracting commercial attention? It is quite likely a new interest in Crisis will follow this controversy and undoubtedly add to its popularity.

Martin (the thalidomide character), certainly attracts a lot of attention in being the leading character. But he is only a vehicle with which to express the moral of the 'Skin' story - the moral being about the greed and lack of accountability in the major drugs companies. The obvious shock value involved with a character like Martin in a comic was to prompt major criticism from the British censors:

'Something to offend everyone, in fact, disabled people in particular'. Milligan, writer of 'Skin':

It's cruel, but it's fucking true . . . what of the hundreds of comics in which sex . . . (and) where rape and sexual violence against women are packaged as entertainment? 5

The demise of Martin, the thalidomide skinhead, really challenges that title Fleetway has adopted: 'the cutting edge of British comics'.

Milligan was even instructed on what the characters were and were not allowed to say.

my characters weren't allowed to say "Jesus Christ", but they could say "Oh God" - except for the Irishman for whom the expletive "Jesus Christ" was considered part of his cultural heritage. 6

Religious issues are a highly sensitive area when they are to be depicted in comics. 'Swamp Thing' is one superhero story that came to light recently and was also censored. 'Swamp Thing' the comic, has become known through the years as one of the few good comic books that is aimed at the 'mature readers' or'adult material' audience. Not that there is nudity or sexual situations contained in the stories, 'Swamp Thing' is basically an on-going superhero series. Integrity has been the hallmark of Rick Veitch's Swamp Thing stories. 'Swamp Thing' is another unusual comic book superhero. He is a sinister, organic creature who is constantly caught up in thought about his own existence. The 'Swamp Thing' is a plant with the memories of a man (Ill. 2). In a recent controversial saga, 'Swamp Thing' (who is present throughout history) was seen to appear as an angel who offered the cup to Christ in the Garden, and was also to be depicted on the front cover of that issue

as a crucifix (Ill. 3). On 'Swamp Thing's' banned meeting with Christ, 'DC' comics president and editor-in-chief Jenette Kahn said that DC had a responsibility to its readers and she noted that though the subject was handled with integrity and respect, the saga would not be published, as the story concept itself would be offensive to the reader. It has been said that this banning of the story insults whatever 'mature readers' the comic book had managed to attract. Resigned writer of the 'Christ' episode, Rick Veitch said 'If anything, I believe my story to be an affirmation of the rather elegant symbolism of Christ's personal sacrifice and crucifixion'.

On religion in comic superhero stories, the censors are sure to come down hard. There is also a recent comic strip version of the Koran (Ill. 4), which could possibly cause as much protest as Salman Rushdie's novel 'The Satanic Verses'. Youssef Seddik, the author of the comics, intends them to make the Koran more accessible for teenagers and for millions of Muslims with reading difficulties. However, Muslim beliefs specify that it is heretical to depict the prophets in a graphic way - least of all in the manner of a comic book. The comics are to appear in 100 page volumes, and are entitled 'If the Koran had been told to me'. The same group that are leading the campaign against Rushdie are also denouncing the comics. It is described as an 'absolute misrepresentation and manipulation of the text of the holy book' and ultimately sacrilegious.

Indeed comic characters are now being increasingly borrowed from reality. Comic characters that deal with real issues are increasingly being used to communicate more effectively, subjects that do not relate specifically to the comic medium. For example there is now 'The non-colour AIDS colour-me-deadly colouring book' (Ill. 5). The medium of the comic, and the employment of the comic book character are used here in a humourous, educative way. In a world of AIDS and illiteracy, this novel colouring book comic presents factual information in a way that even illiterate people can understand. The comic features the monster 'AIDS' and other characters such as 'Auntie Social'.

Public figures sometimes serve as the good or bad characters in modern comics. This is the comic as propaganda weapon, and a superhere or hero character in its crudest form. The characters in the comics can also serve to inform the reader of information that may not be the truth.

'Brought to Light' is called a 'graphic docudrama' by the publishers and features the story of the Iran/contra affair (featuring Oliver North) and the story of the La Penca Bombing (which crippled or killed over a dozen international journalists). This 'comic' is an attempt to put such affairs under the international spotlight (III. 6). Other effective examples of politics through comics include some U.S. Defence Department

training manuals; the CIA have produced comic-sytle leaflets, dropped in Nicaragua, which explain to the anti-government forces how to make incendaries (Ill. 7).

In these comics, there is no apparent singular heroic figure throughout. But between the lines can be seen a concentrated, realistic propaganda machine - the type that to a greater extent is depicted best by conventional superheroes. Just as 'Superman' represents the 'all American' superhero, whose objectives are to serve 'liberty, justice and the American Way' these political comics are actually a more realistic presentation of just what the 'American Way' entails (the truth?). Both 'Superman' and the type of material in 'Brought to Light' in their own ways, present to the reader characters who are meant to be clearly perceived as either good or bad. The messages are the same. In 'Brought to Light' the story and the message are conveyed in a comic strip form as the publishers recognise the immense communicative power of comics as a medium.

Very recently, comics have again been lending themselves to other non-fiction material. Amnesty International, The Human Rights Organisation, has chosen 'CRISIS' comic to diffuse real stories to the enormous 'CRISIS' readership. Based on research gotten from Amnesty's files, the very latest issue of 'CRISIS' contains two very real stories.'The Death Factory' (Ill. 8), deals with the plight of the Uprington 14, currently on death row under South African Law, the other story, 'A Kind of

Madness', explores the plight of a young Palestinian involved in the intifada on the Gaza Strip. Amnesty has chosen CRISIS, as it is a comic that shares 'parallel concerns about the abuse of human rights'. The stories do not have any cloaked superheroes: they are about real people and real events, a real story word for word. No fiction.

Using actual photographs both as reference and as part of the artwork itself . . . (the artist, Sean Phillips) . . . achieved a quality of hyperreality. 10

Dan Jones, Amnesty International:

. . . the student who stood in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square, or Jan Palach, the Czech student who set himself on fire as a protest against the Soviet Invasion of '68 . . . these are my superheroes. 11

Other stories in preparation for 'CRISIS' deals with teh Khmer Rouge, Sri Lankan Tamils, Latin America, Eastern Europe and refugees worldwide.

The late 1980s is not the only time when comics have dealt with non-mainstream issues. Culture and the comic strip have already met with the arrival of 'COMIX' in the late 1960s. These 'comix' were termed 'underground' and were to openly portray drugs, violence, sex and other taboo subjects in their stories (Ill. 9).

Underground cartoonists proceeded to publish every taboo to the limit, depicting all known varieties of sexual experience explicitly and enthusiastically and protraying characters who injested

drugs in huge quantities and exotic combinations for the amusement of readers who were taking drugs in real life. 12

These underground comix were anti-establishment, they opposed the prevailing attitudes of mass culture. Comix got away from the concept of the superhero and instead, employed real characters in real situations. Comix were part of 'real-reality'. There was serious political satire, sex and sexism, horror and obsenity, and humour protrayed. Comix were always on the side of the underdog, they supported the little man, coping with and struggling against the big society all around him, and also, of course, to ridicule that society.

Illustration 10 shows a comix character (by Robert Crumb) who just like 'Superman' is trying to stand up for all things American. But this time, the character is portrayed as a ridiculous and tragically insignificant one.

In Britain, 'The Beano' comic although aimed specifically at children, contained a lot of characteristics similar to those reviered by the Underground. The Beano was not censored yet it was clearly anti-toff, anti-'swank', anti-teacher, anti-parents, anti-authority and totally class ridden.

where a lot of underground comix are realistic, some contain a lot of fantasy, sometimes drug induced, but never science fiction fantasy. (In contrast to mainstream comics.) They were not like ordinary comic books, as they invariably had 'For adults only', or sometimes 'for

adult intellectuals only' on the front cover. Needless to say, Comix did not abide by the censorship imposed by The Comics Code Authority in America. The underground's unabashed treatment of sex, violence and drugs led to a loosening of the Comics Code in 1972. However underground artists have been through many court battles, arrests and persistent attempts at censorship through the years. Comix were mostly anti-establishment, which meant they were also financially unrewarding. Underground artist, Gilbert Shelton said: 'If we fail, we succeed, but if we succeed, we fail'. Bill Pearson, co-editor of 'Witzend' magazine says on underground comics -

... it is one of the very few (and probably the only cheap) communication form that can be totally created by one person, without mutilation of the result by editors, distributors, or modifiers of any sort before it reaches the audience. 14

In the eyes of the media, underground comix are perceived as being stereotypical propaganda weapons for their own causes. But as demonstrated in Chapters 1 and 2, so-called 'mainstream' comics contain much of the same levels of propaganda.

Another 'mainstream' superhero is Spiderman, who was very popular during 1960s America. He was the superhero that was respected most by the underground movement. Spiderman was a loner, he had personal problems, he was paranoid, poverty-stricken and despised the press for giving him such a hard time. He was, all in

all, readily identifiable to his American college campus readership.

Robert Crumb, to most people, represents the pinnacle of underground comic art. Crumb started by sitting on the street, drawing comic strips, and selling them as they were finished. Peddling art on the street assured him of freedom of expression as work was not going to print. Crumb's strips feature him as an artist and philosopher. He makes statements about social morality and his own personal relationship within the 'free love' era. Crumb's sex comics are really personal hang-ups on paper, some bizarre, and with considerable shock value. One opinion at the time:

The substitution of pornographic matter for the standard matter does not deny the artistic function of comics: it exploits it. 15

Unlike Crumb, who rejoices in sex, other artists portrayed sex in a different way, seeing it as a symbol of decay. But some of the fantasies reproduced the worst racial and sexual stereotypes (Ill. 11).

In Japan, the mainstream comics there feature strips that would be regarded as underground material to the western reader. Even in the children's comics, scenes of sex, rape, gay love and severe violence are common (Ills. 12, 13, 14). These are the Japanese 'manga' or simply, 'comics'. Historically 'manga' has

a curious second meaning: 'morally corrupt'.

Readership varies from the child to the middle aged man, with the same comic. Recently, many grown men have confessed they love reading the comics created especially for girls. The characters and superheroes to be found in the 'manga' comics are mostly fantasy based, and western looking, but with Japanese censorship imposed, the result is very different to anything to be seen in the mainstream comics of the Western World. It is interesting to note that all the manga characters have western facial features: although the comics use Americanised characters in the stories, the stories themselves are totally uninfluenced by American codes of censorship.

Yet all are an integral part of Japan's popular culture and as such reveal legacies from the past, ideals of love, attitudes to work and perfection, and a basic love of fantasy. 16

Thirty percent of literature in Japan is Manga. There was no crack down on Japanese comics during the 1950s, and as a result manga has developed into the huge industry it is today. The theories of Dr. Wertham (that violence, horror and crime in comics cause juvenile delinquency) fall very short in Japan:

. . . violence in the comics is offset by a remarkably inviolent (Japanese) society . . . during the years that sales of comics in Japan have soared, the crime rate has actually been dropping. 17 Perhaps this has to do with the fact that Dr. Wertham totally overlooked the possibility that readers can distinguish between fantasy and reality. In manga, the reader can only recognise the characters, the situations and the stories to be but total fantasy. However, this is not the case with comics in general. 'Crisis' comic for example, presents a very realistic standpoint, '2000AD' presents fantasy characters with their roots in reality. But manga perhaps is proof that reading comics does not necessarily incite the reader to carry out in reality the violence, horror or crime portrayed in the comics.

During the long commute home (the Japanese worker) . . . immerses himself in a fantasy world where he can laugh at his frustrations, seduce beautiful women, machine-gun his enemies (on reading his favourite manga comic). 18

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9	Shaar Murry, Charles Observer Magazine p. 40.
10	Ibid. p. 41.
11	Ibid. p. 42.
12	Armstrong, David 'The New Media Environment' A Trumpet to Arms p. 84.
13	James Estren, Mark A History of Underground Comics
14	Ibid.
15	Peckham, Morse 'The Art in Pornography' Art and Pornography, p. 114.
16	Schodt, Frederick L Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics
17	Ibid.
18	Ibid.

ILLUSTRATIONS TO CHAPTER 3

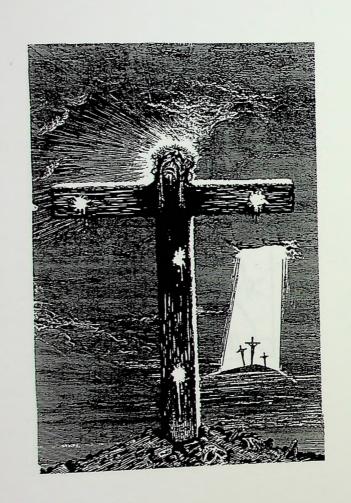


ill. 1

Martin, the censored thalidomide skinhead comic character



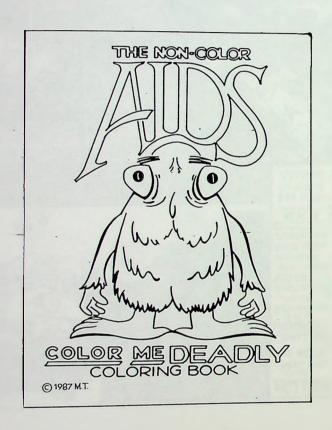
ill. 2 Swamp Thing



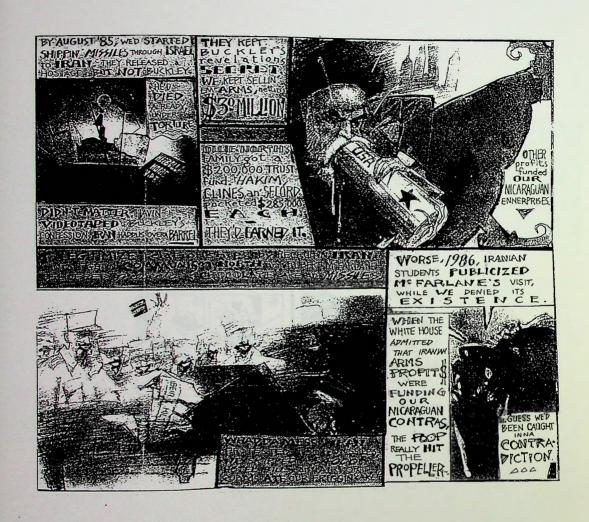
ill. 3
The censored 'Swamp Thing' cover



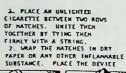
ill. 4
The controversial comic-book Koran



ill. 5
The AIDS colouring book comic



ill. 6
The graphic docudrama, 'Brought to Light'











BETVEEN EMPTY WOODEN OR CARTON BOXES.

3. LIGHT THE CIGARETTE AT THE FREE END. THE MATCHES WILL LIGHT IN 5 OR 10 MINUTES.

INCOMDIANT BONS ("MOLOTOW COCKTAIL")

1. FILL A MARKOW-SECRED BOTTLE VITH
CASOLINE, KENDSEE, ON BRUMBLE DIESEL;
RETTER STILL, IF SHREDDED SOMF OF
SAMOUST ADDED.

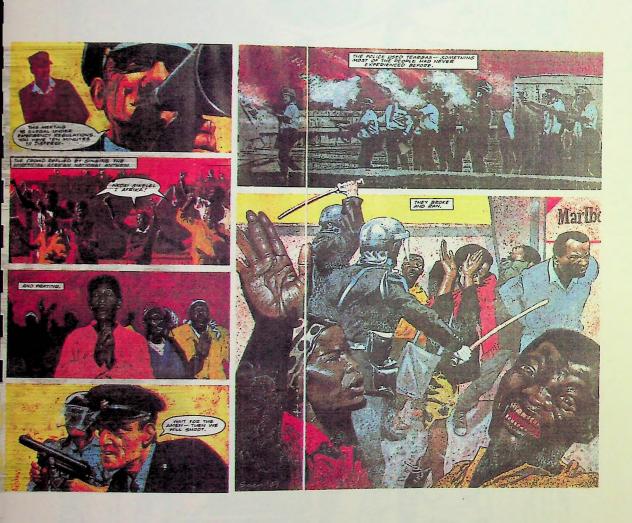
2. INSERT A BAG IN THE BOTTLE WITH
OWNERS THE LIQUID AND THE
OTHER EXTENDS NO MORE THAN JOGG FROM
THE RATE OF THE BOTTLE. SEAL THE
BOTTLE TIGHTLY WITH A STRING ON TAPE,



), TO ACTIVATE THE DEVICE:

A) MOLD THE BOTTLE IN ONE MAND WITH
YOUR AAN EXTENDED.

B) LICHN THE BAC WITH YOUR OTHER MAND.
C) IMMEDIATELY THROW THE LICHTED
BOTTLE AT YOUR BUJECTIVE WITH SUFFICIENT
FORCE THAT IT BREACS ON IMPACT.



ill. 8

Morality without fiction in the Amnesty issue of 'CRISIS'

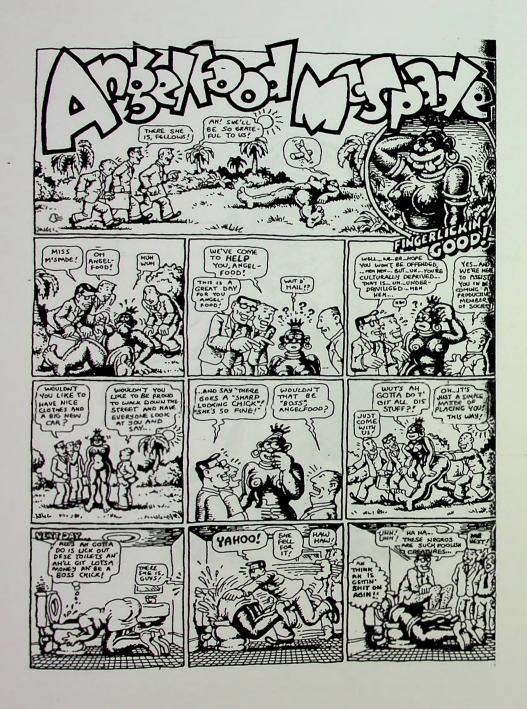


ill. 9 Drug characters in comix



ill. 10

R. Crumb. Americanism ridiculed in comix



ill. 11

R. Crumb. Racial and sexual discrimination in comix



ill. 12
Uninhibited portrayal of violence in manga



Uninhibited depiction of sexual situations in manga (to be read from top right to bottom left of page)



ill. 14
Stories involving rape in manga
(to be read from top right to bottom left of page)

CONCLUSION

## The Changing Face of the Comic Hero

In the mid 1980s, there was a shift from the concept of the 'superhero' in mainstream comics. The new characters that evolved were an attempt at demonstrating the flexibility of the comic medium. A better balance between the graphic elements and attempts at new literary challenges were struck and the result is what has now become known as the 'graphic novel'. The graphic novel today not only features a whole revised adaptation of traditional superheroes (including Batman and Daredevil), but also provides characters in stories that in the past have barely been used in mainstream comics.

'Maus' (Ill. 1) is a graphic novel series by Art Spiegelman. It tells the story of the holocaust and life in a concentration camp. The Nazis are cleverly depicted as cats, and the jews as mice. The characters are all presented mostly from a jewish standpoint, in a striking story that reflects a horrific situation in a graphic way. More a story of humanity and inhumanity. Praised by critics worldwide as being a literary masterpiece. With 'Maus' Spiegelman has a specific message in mind -

After the holocaust, we are all Jews . . all of us . . . including George Bush, J. Danforth Quale, Yassir Arafat, and even Yitzhak Shamir. Now our job is to convince them of that. 1

Bernard Krigstein had produced a similar story,
'Master Race' (See Ill. 2, Chap. 1) in 1954, for EC comics.
With the subsequent censorship imposed on EC during the

great crack down, the true potential of stories like 'Master Race' is only energing now, nearly forty years on, with the arrival of material like 'Maus' and other serious attempts to bring mature expression to the audience. The praise that is attributed to 'Maus' defies Dr. Wertham's defence:

(Comics) . . . are not poetic, not literary, have no relation to any art, have as little to do with the American people as alcohol, heroin or marihuana . . 2 (!)

Wertham was one frustrated critic indeed!

In Chapter 3, 'CRISIS' comic, a commercial mainstream comic, was shown to include no superhero stories
at all - indeed the Amnesty International issue (see Ill. 8,
Chap. 3) is more proof to the theory that comics are
growing up, and the comic character is becoming more of
an adult phenomena, rather than a juvenile associated one.
Editor of 'CRISIS', Steve McManus:

We've included the address of President F. W. DeKlerk (in the Amnesty issue) and requested that everybody write to him, so hopefully he'll get 55,000 letters demanding that he commute the death sentences. If it takes a comic to do that, then great.

Sean Phillips, an artist with 'CRISIS' feels the Amnesty project is equally useful to comics in general, 'far better than another 50 years of superheroes'.

The use of comic characters who break the superhero mould is also of paramount importance to other comics developing in this 'new wave' tradition. 'RAW' is one such comic that declares

It's safe for adults to read comics. You don't automatically lose IQ points. . . It's okay, really

'RAW' contains serialised versions of the 'Maus' story, and is co-edited by Art Spiegelman. 'RAW' claims to have an alienated and anxious audience, 'The graphix magazine for damned intellectuals.' Spiegelman claims: 'It's too "upscale" to be easily dismissed as garbage'. Spiegelman is quite dissillusioned with the modern superhero comics, and in doing 'RAW' sees a better future:

. . . for the most part comic books are those superhero things and I tell you, I can't figure them out . . I can't believe that's the stuff of which a mass medium is built. 6

It is perhaps that superhero comic characters are the best ready explanation of the comic genre, they have become the most successful way of communicating to the 'lowest common denominator'. And as a result there was a period when publishers snobbishly would only put comics on bookshelves if people were not buying literature anymore.

Publications like 'Maus' and 'RAW' would seem to indicate a very definite direction that comics seem to be going at the moment. However this is not to say that superhero comics are being totally looked down upon by this 'new wave'. Alan Moore, a much respected writer of comics, remains fascinated with superhero figures, crime-fighters and presents his own explanations to his eternal fascination with such figures in his graphic novel,

'Watchmen' (Ill. 2). Watchmen is an adult story containing 'adult' superheroes. Watchmen is heavily based on the caped crusader image, but on a far more subtle level than the straightforward nature of the Batman/Superman ethic.

Comic characters have never been great examples of high art or literature. But with the rapid evolution of the comic, that only now is taking place, and with the everchanging face of the comic hero, the comic is destined to develop along diverse and previously untouched paths. It is untrue to say that nothing will be achieved or learned from the new breed of comic characters, for even the most simple comic character is part and reflection of the total context of contemporary popular culture, and all the morals and values that go with it.

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- 6 'New York and Company' (Radio programme)
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ill. 1
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ill. 2
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