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The Golden Age of Comic Books: Representations of American Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War

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The Golden Age of Comic Books: Representations of American Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War

Before beginning a historical study of comic books, it is necessary to shed our modern perception of the medium. Modern cultural logic regards comic books as a children's medium, a decidedly minor facet of American popular culture. However, research suggests that, during the Golden Age, comic books had a large cultural base of many ages. A *Yank Weekly* article, published in November of 1945, cited the estimates of the Market Research Company of America, which found that about 70 million Americans, roughly half of the U.S. population, read comic books. The ages of readers heavily favored children, with 95 percent of all boys and 91 percent of all girls between the ages of six and eleven reading comic books. The study also revealed a high percentage of adult readers, with 41 percent of men and 28 percent of women aged eighteen to thirty admitting to regularly reading comics. This impressive study proves that, in the Golden Age, comic books were not limited to children.¹

Comic books are a fitting subject for the study of American culture because comics are a uniquely American cultural creation. While certainly preceded by European satirical prints of the nineteenth century and the newspaper strips of the early twentieth century, the comic book format of telling a story through multiple colored panels was not popularized until the early 1930s.² The "Golden Age of Comic Books" lasted from the 1930s until the 1950s, during which the popularity of comic books reached its peak, both in terms of commercial success and cultural significance. The fact that the Golden Age of comic books occurred alongside the Great Depression and World War Two is no coincidence. The comic book creations of the thirties and forties filled a cultural need, one that was constantly evolving but was ultimately based on the desire for a cheap form of entertainment. Comic books during this time were not mere

¹ Sanderson Vanderbilt, "The Comics," *Yank: The Army Weekly*, 23 November 1945.

² Brian Walker, The Comics Before 1945. (New York: Abram's Books, 2004), 3.

trifles, but rather existed as part of the larger cultural fabric. Comics reflected the cultural visions of comic book creators, men who often used comics to advance specific visions. Therefore, the study of comic books is not merely a passive exercise, but rather entails a serious re-examination of American culture during this period. Unlike any other time in history, the comic books of the Golden Age informed the greater American culture while at the same time modifying it.

The creation of the comic book reflected the Depression Era in which it was born, a time when America desperately needed cheap diversions. Even President Roosevelt was aware of the power of popular culture in times of great suffering. He remarked in 1936, “When the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time during this Depression, it is a splendid thing that for just fifteen cents an American can go to a movie and forget his troubles.”³ While he speaks specifically of movies, the same sentiment applies to comic books. Both media provided fantasy worlds, worlds far away from the heartache of the age. In many ways, the comic book was better suited to meet the needs of the American people. In a time before mass recorded media, the comic book was the one form of entertainment that you could enjoy at any time and as many times as you wanted. A ten cent comic book could easily be traded among friends, thereby increasing its actual value. The first popular comic book series, “Famous Funnies,” attempted to give its consumers the most content for their money, an important selling point in a Depression culture. The 1936 cover of the first issue boasted “100 Comics, Games, Puzzles, Magic.”⁴ The comic largely delivered on its promise, and included light hearted tales of both America and faraway lands. Nowhere to be found were tales of the soup kitchens, closed factories, and “Hooverilles” that dominated the American landscape. The lighthearted nature of

³ Ibid, 185.

⁴ “Famous Funnies 1,” *Famous Funnies* (Dell Publishing, July 1934). Retrieved from, <http://www.coverbrowser.com/search?q=famous+funnies&searchmode=&name=&mode=searchResult> (October 21, 2008).

these initial publications led to the coining of the name “comic books” to describe this style.⁵

This misnomer has caused the comic book genre to be regarded as light and frivolous, even when the subject matter is decidedly serious.⁶ While there would continue to be purely comedic books throughout the course of comic book history, it is the more purposeful comic books that prove to be more interesting in the study of cultural history.

While they certainly served as entertainment, the early superhero comics actively attempted to modify cultural conventions. The birth of the superhero reflected the desire to fix the wrongs of the Depression in a spirit embodied by the New Deal. Although living in fantasy helped America forget its troubles, if America was ever to be saved from the hell of the Depression, it needed a hero. If Franklin Roosevelt proved to be the historical hero of the New Deal era, Superman was certainly its comic book hero. Created by Jerry Siegel and John Shuster, two Jewish Americans from Cleveland, Superman was introduced in the first issue of *Action Comics*⁷, but ultimately was the first comic book character given his own title in 1939.⁸ Superman was just one member of a long line of American folk heroes, but his story reflected the new American culture of the thirties; his adventures were based in the city rather than the frontier. Historian Bradford Wright distinguishes between this new cultural hero and the folk heroes of America’s past: “Whereas heroes of the previous centuries, like Daniel Boone, Natty Bumppo, and Wyatt Earp, could conquer and tame the savage American frontier, twentieth

⁵ Thomas Inge, *Comics as Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 32.

⁶ One type of comic book that I do not discuss are the so called “Pulp Comics,” which derive their name from the cheap paper on which they are printed. The antithesis of the purely funny comics, these books were geared specifically toward adults and often dealt with subjects not addressed in mainstream comics, such as sex, drug use, and realistic violence. Less concerned with commercial success, these comics never incorporated themselves into the popular culture. However, it is important to recognize that, even in comic book culture, alternate viewpoints find a voice.

⁷ “Superman,” *Action Comics I* (DC Comics, June 1938). Retrieved from, <http://www.coverbrowser.com/search?q=superman&searchmode=&name=&mode=searchResult> (October 21, 2008).

⁸ Brian Walker. *The Comics Before 1945*. (New York: Abram’s Books, 2004), 30

century America demanded a superhero who could resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer driven, and anonymous mass society.”⁹ Superman was created as a hero for the common man, a man who was disenfranchised and wondering if there was anyone looking out for his best interest. In looking at Superman in this period, we must remove ourselves from our modern perceptions of this hero. The Superman of this age was less idealistic than we would be led to believe. A little rougher around the edges and a little less powerful, this original Superman seemed to thoroughly enjoy beating up the bad guys. He was also less powerful. While certainly endowed with super powers, the original Superman pales in comparison to the modern version; abilities such as flight, x-ray vision, and control over wind have been added through the years. Fitting this more earthly persona, Superman’s stories reflect his desire to right the wrongs of society. In his early years, Superman does not fight supervillians we have grown used to but rather takes down the real villains of the New Deal era. Some early Superman villains include: bosses who do not provide safe working conditions, stock brokers who sell faulty stocks, and even a U.S. senator who conspires with a munitions manufacturer. Rather than merely escape from their problems, American culture wanted to see someone triumph, even that triumph was in the pages of a fictional comic book. Superman became the common man’s cultural hero. Wright puts Superman’s resulting popularity into perspective; “At a time when most comic book titles sold between 200,000 and 400,000 copies per issue...each bimonthly issue of the Superman title, devoted entirely to the character, sold an average of 1,300,000 copies.”¹⁰

⁹ Perhaps the foremost historian of comic books in the cultural context, Mr. Wright served as my primary inspiration and source of direction for this paper. Anyone serious about this type of study should read his book, as it gives a more thorough and illuminating treatment of the issue than I could ever hope to achieve. My goal was to merely scratch the surface of his immense scholarship. Bradford Wright. Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America. (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 10

¹⁰ Ibid, 13.

The commercial success of Superman led to an explosion of the superhero genre. Modern favorites such as Green Lantern and Batman were created as a result of Superman's smashing commercial success. Perhaps the most interesting creation of this period was Wonder Woman. William Marston, Wonder woman's creator, was not your typical cartoonist; he was a Harvard-educated psychologist and inventor of the polygraph test. Marston understood the power of comic books in American culture and wanted to use Wonder Woman as a means of spreading his own cultural vision. He relates that, "Wonder Woman is the psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world."¹¹ The first issue of the Wonder Woman comic reflects this vision. Riding on a white horse, a cultural symbol for high rank and bravery, Wonder Woman leads a charge of men into the trenches. Magic lasso in hand, she fearlessly dives into the trench and triumphs over her enemies.¹² Even as he made Wonder Woman a champion of a feminist cause, Marston still held on to the basic social constructs regarding women. He notes, "I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender maternal and feminine in every other way."¹³ This distinction reveals a sort of tension in her character, a tension that reflected the cultural tension regarding women. If Wonder Woman is a champion of the new type of woman, her alter ego, Diana Prince, is more traditional, working as a secretary. Also, the adventures of Wonder Woman are steeped in male sexual fantasy. Wearing a revealing costume, Wonder Woman's tales often involve her dominating men and getting into fights with scantily clad female villains.¹⁴ Despite the limitations in her character, Wonder Woman represented the first attempt to portray a woman

¹¹ Danna Elizabeth, "Wonder Woman Mythology: Heroes from the Ancient World and their Progeny" in B.J. Oropeza ed., *The Gospel According to Super Heroes* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing: 2005), 67

¹² "Wonder Woman's Story," *Wonder Woman* (DC Comics, Summer, 1943). Retrieved from, www.coverbrowser.com/search?q=wonder+woman&searchmode=&name=&mode=searchResut, (October 24, 2008).

¹³ *Ibid*, 69

¹⁴ Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 21.

in comic books as more than an object of lust or a damsel in distress. She was the female's Superman, a character that has come to represent the equal power of women. Wonder Woman represented the forward cultural outlook possible in comic books.¹⁵

The popularity of superheroes such as Superman and Wonder Woman continued into the 1940s. However, much had changed in the last years of the Depression; America seemed to be lifting itself out of debt and into a global conflict. The economics of the impending war also had an effect on comic book popularity. Due to increased production, which resulted in more jobs, families had more disposable income. Already established as a popular medium, comic books only grew in popularity during the war years, especially among adults. By December 1943, monthly comic books sales had climbed to 25 million copies.¹⁶ The number of comic book publishers and titles greatly increased.¹⁷ However, the success of comic books leading up to the war went beyond economics.

Comic books reflected a new desire to display America as a sympathetic character much in the same way Superman's New Deal comic reflects the fight of the common man. Wright puts this shifting logic into perspective: "the common man of the Depression era was now America itself, a repository of virtue and morality charged with extending justice and freedom to the oppressed in Europe and Asia."¹⁸ This changing set of cultural values was reflected in America's super heroes. Wright states, "Whereas the Depression had demanded superheroes for

¹⁵ Despite the possibility of such forward thinking in comic books, it is interesting to note that little to no representations of African Americans can be found during this period. The world of comic books seemed to lack any African Americans, both in terms of superheroes, villains, or general citizens. Not until the Falcon, a former sidekick to Captain America, did African Americans receive their first super hero in 1969. It would be another six years until, Storm, the first female African American superhero, would be introduced. The introduction of these characters reflects the civil rights culture of the period.

¹⁶ Ibid, 31.

¹⁷ The war also caused some very real problems for some comic book publishers. Numerous comic book creators, including Superman creator Jerry Siegel, were drafted during the war, forcing the publishers to commission other talent. The number of female comic book artists rose during this period, only to flatten once the men began to return. Also, wartime rations of paper led to the possibility that comic book would have to stop production. To account for this, stories were often shortened and lower grade paper was used.

¹⁸ Ibid, 35.

common Americans, the war years needed patriotic defenders of national interest.”¹⁹ If Superman represented the ideals of an American culture, Captain America represented the nationalistic aims of a culture about to become involved in a World War. Wearing a red, white, and blue costume, Captain America did not hide from what he represented and who he was fighting against. His nationalism is clearly depicted in the first issue of *Captain America*, released in March of 1941; the cover shows Captain America infiltrating a Nazi bunker and punching Adolf Hitler in the face: in the background, a monitor shows the destruction of an American munitions factory.²⁰ Somewhat surprisingly, this issue was released a full year before America declared war. The creators of Captain America, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, were Jewish Americans who wanted the world to know the evils of the Third Reich. They understood the power of comic books, and decided it was their duty as Americans to spread their message through their comic books.²¹ While their position is understandable and noble given our modern considerations, their viewpoint was not shared by the whole of American culture. Joe Simon recalled that, “when the first issue came out we got a lot of... threatening letters and hate mail. Some people really opposed what the Cap stood for.”²² What Captain America stood for was American intervention in the war in Europe at a time when many people in America favored an isolationist approach. Nonetheless, Kirby and Simon had succeeded; their comic books became part of the larger cultural dialogue.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor and America’s declaration of war, Captain America’s message of American nationalism would become fully incorporated into American culture.

¹⁹ Ibid, 29.

²⁰ “Meet Captain America.” *Captain America* (Marvel Comics, March 1941). Retrieved from, <http://www.coverbrowser.com/search?q=captain+america&searchmode=&name=&mode=searchResult> (October 21, 2008).

²¹ Robert G Weiner. “Okay, Axis, Here We Come! Captain America and Superhero Teams from World War II and the Cold War,” in B.J. Oropeza ed., *The Gospel According to Super Heroes* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing: 2005), 85.

²² Ibid, 36

Mirroring his first issue, issue twenty-three of *Captain America* saw the title character on the Pacific Front, punching a Japanese general on the face.²³ This comic represented many Americans view on the Japanese and the war: Captain America told the Japanese general on the cover, “You started it! Now we’ll finish it!” Racist caricatures of the Japanese could be found throughout popular comics and reflected the growing cultural distrust of all Japanese people, including Japanese Americans. This distrust became most evident in the Japanese internment camps of 1944.

While they were not commissioned by the government, the comic books during this period could certainly be considered propaganda. The subject matter of the comic books reflected the needs of a wartime culture. The August 1943 issue of “Batman” is an example of the voluntary propaganda on behalf of the comic books and the use of classic characters for the cause, in this case the purchase of War Bonds and Stamps.²⁴ This comic combines the cartoonish approach to the Axis while including a very serious plea; *Insure the Fourth of July! Buy War Bonds and Stamps!* Even Superman got into the act, urging his readers to give money to the American Red Cross. Eventually, the government asked comic book makers to think of the war effort when creating comics, urging them to ask of their products, “Will this help win the war?”²⁵ Comic books could help by presenting the war in a more appealing light and reaffirming the cultural logic that World War II was a just war that America was destined to win.²⁶

²³“The Mystery of the One Hundred Corpses,” *Captain America* (Marvel Comics, February 1943) Retrieved from, www.coverbrowser.com/search?q=captain+america&searchmode=&name=&mode=searchResult (October 21, 2008).

²⁴ “Fourth of July.” *Batman Comics* (August, 1943, DC). Retrieved from, <http://www.coverbrowser.com/search?q=bat+man&searchmode=&name=&mode=searchResult> (October 19, 2008).

²⁵ Ibid, 34.

²⁶ It is important to note that the world of comic books during this period was not wholly consumed with war. Purely childish characters, such as Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse, were also popular during this period. These characters have remained a cherished part of children’s culture in America. However, for the present discussion, their importance is greatly diminished.

Comic books not only served to collect support at home, but also to inspire soldiers fighting abroad. Comic books reminded soldiers they were fighting for American values and were being supported by their families back home. Comic books were careful not to portray super heroes as doing the job intended for America's servicemen himself. Rather than fight the Nazi's herself, Wonder Woman briefly served as a nurse. Superman protected America's home front from spies, declaring that "the United States Army, Navy, and Marines are capable of smashing their foes without the aid of Superman."²⁷ America's soldiers were the supermen on the lines, and, just like Superman, they would conquer their inferior foes. At least 35,000 copies of *Superman* were sent to servicemen each month.²⁸ In addition to these shipments, comic books were created specifically for servicemen, called GI comics. These comics all dealt with the life of a serviceman, but were varied in tone. Some were funny tales regarding routine, such as the popular *Sad Sack and the Sarge* series, while others depicted the realities of the war, an issue rarely addressed in comics made for general consumption.²⁹ The reality of the servicemen's position demanded this more complete and honest approach. While those at home could romanticize the war as a war for ideals, fought by super men, the servicemen had to face the realities of war. That did not mean, however, that they had to be disconnected from the general American culture. This connection was maintained largely by popular comic books.

The end of World War II and the subsequent post-war culture, marked the beginning of the end of the Golden Age of comic books. True, there was a boost in comic book sales in 1946, a year after the war, but this was merely a residual effect. Servicemen returning home still wanted to read their favorite comics, which allowed them to transition into their post war lives

²⁷ Ibid, 43.

²⁸ Ibid, 31.

²⁹ "Little Sad Sack" *Sad Sack* (Simon and Schuster, 1944). Retrieved from <http://www.coverbrowser.com/search?q=sad+sack&searchmode=&name=&mode=searchResult>, (October 22, 2008).

while still maintaining previous habits. The joy of winning the war resulted in the creation of many congratulatory comics, announcing the defeat of the Axis and the glorious future of the American vision. Americans maintained post war economic production maintained briefly, but that production of comic books eventually leveled. Also, the market was glutted with titles based solely on the war effort; these titles no longer had an audience and eventually faded away into obscurity.³⁰ Once America fully adjusted to a post war culture, it became evident that the comic book and America had done its job to win the war; the post war culture left comics searching for a new identity.

The new identity of comic books, and the declining cultural significance that followed, is most evident in the treatment of super hero comics after the war. During the war, the superheroes allowed America to envision itself fighting the evils of the Axis. The culture of postwar jubilation made superheroes seem less important. This was especially true of the heroes created during the war. Captain America, whose purpose was to defeat the Nazis, seemed unnecessary and was ultimately canceled in 1956.³¹ Superman retained some of his popularity, but became based on fantastical plots that had no cultural significance. Unlike his social justice stories of the late thirties, Superman's postwar plots consisted of fighting far out supervillians. In a postwar American culture, there were no more traditional villains for Superman to fight. Even when new cultural villains arose, namely in the Russian Big Red Machine, the new forms of popular media, television and popular cinema, would ultimately take up the fight. The villains of the Cold War would not be fought by Superman in the pages of comics, but by the A-Team and Rocky Balboa.

³⁰ Matt Pustz, Comic Book Culture (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 29.

³¹ Captain America would ultimately be revived in 1963, and remains one of the most popular comic heroes. However, the nationalistic aspect of his character would never be as prominent; he instead he became based on more social awareness issues. Falcon, the first African American superhero, started as Captain America's sidekick. I am not sure if the irony was intentional.

Without villains to be fought, comics shifted focus. The most popular comics of the end of the Golden Age were the “teen humor” comics, most notably the Archie comics. The presence of teen comics says some interesting things about the budding teenager culture after World War Two. Considered in many ways both child and adult, these young adults were no longer expected to get married and join the workforce, but were expected to cultivate the knowledge and virtues that would serve them as adults. A large commercial culture, which included comic books, arose to meet the needs of this new demographic. The comics that resulted were as far from the superhero genre as possible. If Superman’s goal was to defeat the Nazis, then Archie’s goal was to ask Betty to the big dance. Based on the lives of “typical teenagers,” these comics were based on everyday aspects of life and adhered to predictable formulas. These comics seemed to blunt the social message of the comic book genre. Bradford explains how these comics represent a decidedly adult vision of culture portrayed in teen comics; “America’s ‘typical teenager’ never uses teen slang, never fights, never smokes or drinks alcohol, always obeys his parents in the end, and betrays only the vaguest hint of his libido.”³² The cultural force of comics had been recognized, but this realization resulted in attempts for social control rather than social change. Popular comic books had officially become disconnected from American culture, limited to a world of otherworldly superheroes and teens that never had sex.

The developing cultural logics that defined the beginnings of the Cold War only served to further blunt the cultural significance of comic books. Ironically, comic books, a medium that had just a decade earlier served as nationalist propaganda, would become a prime target of those who believed that popular culture was leading America’s youth toward communism.³³ The

³² Ibid, 73.

³³ Ibid, 129.

backlash resulted from a newfound paranoia based on the role of popular culture in the shaping of the hearts and minds, young men and women who may be expected to fight the communists.³⁴ The resulting storm would not be limited to comic books, but also affected movies and radio. During the 1950's it became clear that comic books could not flourish in a Cold War culture. The Golden age was over.

During the Golden Age of comic books, lasting from the early nineteen thirties to the late nineteen forties, comic books reached a peak in America, both in terms of readership and cultural impact. The comic book was the perfect medium for the 1930s and 40s; it was easily produced, cheap to buy, and, perhaps most importantly, it was entertaining. Rising from its humble Depression era beginnings, the comic book reached its peak in the face of a world war. The superhero came to stand for both the American way of life and the victory of America over its foes. Standing behind these heroes, comic book creators used their influence to project their own viewpoints. Children and adults alike waited anxiously for their favorite comic every other week, much in the same way we look forward to watching our favorite television shows. While it is safe to say that comic books will never again be the cultural force they once were, it is important to recognize the impact that this lowly form of popular culture had on the American landscape.³⁵

³⁴ For further reading, I would suggest David Hajdu's book, [The Ten Cent Plague: the Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America](#), as it gives the most complete treatment of the censorship of comic books during the Cold War.

³⁵ The period discussed was not the only time when comic books had cultural relevance. The "Silver Age" of comic books lasted from the late fifties until the early sixties. While it certainly broke new ground in terms of its representations of African Americans, the contribution of comic books to American culture was less apparent during this period. This age was largely a commercial success based on a sci-fi approach to super heroes rather than an attempt to reflect culture. The "Bronze Age" of comics of the seventies and eighties followed and began to introduce more real world issues, such as drug use, into comic books. The "Modern Age" of comics represent our modern characterization of the genre; a successful part of commercial culture that is rarely relevant to the greater cultural discussion. Many scholars continue to argue in favor of the cultural relevance of comic books and other popular media. Although comic books have remained a part of modern culture since their inception, and remain a part to this day, I would argue that the continued cultural significance is based on the relevancy of the Golden Age and ultimately pales in comparison.

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