

From Madness to Dysentery: *Mad*'s Other New York Intellectuals¹

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One of the most curiously overlooked publishing phenomena of the 1950s was the appearance of the comic book *Mad* in October 1952 which “burst forth full blown from nowhere on an unsuspecting comic book reading public” into the midst of the domestic Cold War.² In 1959 *Newsweek* observed that “*Mad* each month sticks a sharp-pronged fork into some part of the social anatomy”³ while Gloria Steinem recalled: “There was a spirit of satire and irreverence in *Mad* that was very important, and it was the only place you could find it in the ’50s.”⁴ And even Marshall McLuhan considered *Mad* worthy of mention in his influential study, *Understanding Media*. Noting its “sudden eminence,” he attributed this to its “ludicrous and cool replay of the forms of the hot media of photo, radio, and film.”⁵ Surprisingly, very little attention has been paid towards *Mad* beyond its own retrospective publications, one book, and several short articles. This is unfortunate since the comic provides a sharply satiric, yet extremely perceptive insight into many aspects of Cold War America during the 1950s. Furthermore, as I shall argue, those who wrote and drew for *Mad* formed an alternative New York intellectual circle to that which is commonly written about. *Mad*'s critique of America was far more effective and devastating than their better-known

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¹ Of course, my title refers to Woody Allen's quip in his *Annie Hall* (1977), “I heard that *Commentary* and *Dissent* had merged and formed *Dysentery*.” I would like to thank Robert Lovejoy and Chris O'Brien for their invaluable assistance and comments on earlier drafts of this article.

² John Benson, quoted in *MAD*, ed., John Benson (West Plains, Mo.: Ross Cochran, 1986).

³ *Newsweek*, 31 August 1959, 57.

⁴ Gloria Steinem, quoted in Maria Reidelbach, *Completely Mad: A History of the Comic Book and Magazine* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1991), 132.

⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (London: Abacus, 1974), 177.

counterparts and consequently, *Mad* deserves credit as one of the sources of the counterculture of the 1960s.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMICS

Comic books date back to mid-1930s when they escaped the confines of newspapers and advertisers, but it was not until the last three years of World War II that their mass appeal really set in, by which point they were selling at the rate of ten million copies per month. By 1947, the rate was sixty million per month. Both children and adults read comic books regularly, that is, six per month or more. Forty-four per cent of men in army training camps during World War II read comics regularly and 13 per cent occasionally; 41 per cent of the civilian male adult population and 28 per cent of female adult population were regular readers; 25 per cent of adult elementary school graduates, 27 per cent of adult high-school graduates, 16 per cent of adult college graduates, and 12 per cent of schoolteachers read them regularly. Within the eighteen to thirty-four age group, almost three times as many people read comics, as did those of an older age. Between the ages of six and eleven, 95 per cent of boys and 91 per cent of girls read an average of fifteen comic books per month and within the twelve to eighteen age range, more than 80 per cent read at least twelve per month.⁶

THE BIRTH OF *MAD*

William Gaines' Educational Comics (EC), which had a reputation for "quality artwork and innovative editorial direction," and was known for *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, *The Haunt of Fear*, *Weird Fantasy*, *The Crypt of Terror*, and *Weird Science*, published *Mad*.⁷ The first issue, the full title of which was *Tales calculated to drive you MAD – Humor in a Jugular Vein*, was thirty-two pages long, cost 10 cents, and contained four stories that each parodied a different EC comic. The comic was primarily targeted at the teenage market. It was initially written and edited by Harvey Kurtzman until September 1956 when he was lured away from *Mad* by Hugh Hefner to work

⁶ These figures are from surveys conducted by the Market Research Corporation of America, Paul H. Stewart and Associates, and by other commercial market and media research organizations and are cited in Norbert Muhlen, "Comic Books and Other Horrors: Prep School for Totalitarian Society?" *Commentary*, 7:1 (January 1949), 80–87. See also Colton Waugh, *The Comics* (New York, 1947).

⁷ William W. Savage, Jr., *Comic Books and America, 1945–1954* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 98.

on his new publication *Playboy*. Al Feldstein then took over as editor. Originally published in colour, in 1955 Gaines transformed *Mad* into a 25-cent, black-and-white, bimonthly magazine renaming it *Mad Magazine* in the process. It was at this point that *Time* somewhat mistakenly referred to *Mad* as “a short-lived satirical pulp ...”⁸ Less than two years later *Time* would eat its own words: “Through such zany mockery of the solemn, the pretentious and the inane, the bimonthly *Mad* is compiling a growth chart that is no laughing matter.”⁹ By the late 1950s, the magazine was second in popularity among high-school students to *Life* magazine.¹⁰ By the end of the last century, not only had *Time* eaten its words, but also its corporate empire Time Warner had swallowed up the magazine through its acquisition of *Mad's* owner, DC Comics.

Mad Magazine was born in an anti-comic era. In 1954 Dr. Frederic Wertham had published his *Seduction of the Innocent* – a vehement condemnation of crime and horror comic books – and which has been seen as a personal “vendetta” against the medium.¹¹ Wertham attributed the growth of juvenile delinquency and homosexuality to comic books leading to news stand boycotts and comic-book burnings.¹² Dr. Wertham was not the only person decrying comic books at that time. Writing in *Commentary* magazine, Norbert Muhlen described them as “Penny dreadfuls” (as they were called in England, where they were also known as “Yank Mags”), “dehumanized, concentrated, and repetitious showing of death and destruction.” George Orwell wrote: “In the Yank Mags you get real blood-lust, really gory descriptions of the all-in, jump-on-the-testicles style of fighting, written in a jargon that has been perfected by people who brood endlessly on violence. A paper like *Fight Stories* [incidentally, one of the most popular comic books in America at that time], for instance, would have very little appeal except to sadists and masochists.” Muhlen concluded that comics provided an

⁸ “Sassy Newcomer,” *Time* (24 September 1956), 31.

⁹ “Maddiction,” *Time* (7 July 1958), 53. Ironically, *Time* more than ate its own words; it now owns *Mad* magazine. *Mad* writer Dick BeBartolo recalled that in reaction to *Time's* slight, “To get even, every Friday night, each *Mad* staff member steals six *Time* magazine legal pads from the supply closet. Sooner, or later, they’ll feel the pinch!” See his *Good Days and Mad: A Hysterical Tour Behind the Scenes at MAD Magazine* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1995), 286.

¹⁰ Paul Goodman, *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 278.

¹¹ Reidelbach, *Completely Mad*, 117.

¹² Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1996), 68; for further detail see J. A. Gilbert, *Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Savage, *Comic Books and America*, esp. Chap. 7, ‘Blaming Comic Book: The Wertham Assault’, 95–103.

“education to violence” and thus “may be helping to educate a whole generation for an authoritarian rather than a democratic society.”¹³ Eventually, the Senate Judiciary Committee heeded the public outcry and conducted hearings investigating the need for legislation to ban certain comic books.

In order to avoid government censorship, Gaines together with his business manager Lyle Stuart created a self-regulatory agency in 1954 – the Comics Magazines Association of America. Modelled on the Production Code of the motion-picture industry, the Association discharged a code of conduct, administered by a review body called the Comics Code Authority (CCA) established 16 September 1954. Like its movie predecessor, the code was composed of a series of prohibitions outlawing allusions to sex, excessive violence, and challenges to authority.¹⁴ The CCA required a stamp of approval on the cover of every comic book, guaranteeing that the contents were “wholesome, entertaining and educational.” Without such approval the comic was not distributed. Rather than risk the loss of distribution, publishers toned down their material to meet the Association’s standards.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Wertham’s attacks succeeded in decimating the comic book industry and the number of titles appearing on news stands fell from roughly 650 in 1953/54 to nearly 250 in 1956.¹⁶

Mad, however, refused to dilute its characteristic disrespect for American institutions to meet the CCA’s criteria. As Kurtzman put it: “Of course, we had the big problem: could we ever live under the censorship of the Comics Code? We decided, absolutely *no*. We could not go on as a comic book.”¹⁷ Indeed, as a comic book, *Mad* was “doomed” suggested Kurtzman.¹⁸ So in 1955 *Mad* was transformed into a magazine. *Mad*’s shift from “comic” to “magazine” was accompanied by a change from hand lettering to set type thus lending it the appearance of class.¹⁹ Whether this was an intuitive marketing ploy or a ruse to circumvent the newly established CCA is not clear, but *Mad Magazine* as we know it was born. Robert Lovejoy saw the impact of *Mad* (and the later underground comics) resulting from the reputation of the comic book as a medium. “Newspapers are bought by adults, thus the

¹³ See Muhlen, “Comic Books and Other Horrors,” 80–87.

¹⁴ Sabin, *Comics, Comic and Graphic Novels*, 68.

¹⁵ Paul Krassner, *Los Angeles Times*, 7 December 1997, 21; James Barron, *New York Times*, 4 June 1992, B, 11.

¹⁶ Savage, *Comic Books and America*, 100.

¹⁷ Harvey Kurtzman, interviewed by Kim Thompson and Gary Groth, “An Interview with the man who brought truth to the comics: Harvey Kurtzman,” *The Comics Journal*, 67 (October 1981), 81.

¹⁸ Harvey Kurtzman interviewed by J. P. C. James, “Harvey Kurtzman Interview: 1965,” *The Comics Journal*, 153 (October 1992), 52.

¹⁹ Reidelbach, *Completely Mad*, 32.

comic strips are designed and expected to appeal to adult buyers. Comic books were and are considered a medium for kids, thus the attack on the EC books ignored the quality of the writing in favor of attacking adult content in a kids' medium. When *Mad* became a magazine, it did not cease to attack the same targets it had as a comic book, but it had metaphorically turned in its short pants for trousers when it changed formats."²⁰ Years later *Mad* got its revenge on Wertham when it published a spoof article by Frederick Werthless, MD that attributed juvenile delinquency to prolonged exposure to baseball.²¹

THE ALTERNATIVE NEW YORK INTELLECTUALS

In many ways *Mad* represented a group of alternative New York Jewish intellectuals. Like their intellectual co-religionists, many of *Mad's* staff were Jewish, either native New Yorkers or émigrés from Europe, a high proportion of them survivors of Nazi Germany. Like the New York intellectual milieu, many of them had come to political awareness during the Depression.²² Similarly, the religious background of *Mad's* editors had a direct and important influence. Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter state: "From the beginning *Mad's* editors have been Jewish and, as they themselves would agree, hostile to the American civic myth."²³ *Mad* was very much humour in a Jewish vein, not least because it employed a whole lexicon of Yiddish phrases, both real and imaginary: "borscht," "ganef," "bveebleftzer," "farshimmelt" and "halavah." Readers often wrote in and complained of such strange and exotic-sounding words that saturated the text of the magazine. In some senses, Leo Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish* (1968) was a required companion text. But *Mad* was "Jewish" in more ways than its choice of language. In 1967, theologian Vernard Eller detected an Old Testament morality lying beneath the magazine's surface: "*Mad* is every bit as preachy as that old codifier Moses. Beneath the pile of garbage that is *Mad*, there beats, I suspect, the heart of a rabbi." He noted that *Mad* often railed

²⁰ Robert Lovejoy, email to author, 10 October 2002.

²¹ "Baseball is Ruining Our Children," in *Mad Forever: A New Collection of the Best from Mad Magazine* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1959), 22–23.

²² Al Feldstein, Kurtzman's successor as editor of *Mad* recalled: "I was an ultra-liberal when I was young, and a socially conscious person, having grown up in the Depression and seeing my parents lose their home, etc., etc." Al Feldstein, interviewed by S. C. Ringenberg, "Jolting words with Al Feldstein in the EC Tradition!," *The Comics Journal*, 177 (May 1995), 82.

²³ Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, *Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christians, and the New Left* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 108.

against alcohol, drugs, tobacco, licentiousness, deceit, and hypocrisy. Overall, he concluded that “*Mad* is teaching an old, a real old morality.”²⁴

But unlike the New York intellectuals, as I shall argue, *Mad*'s staff was a group that was unafraid to criticise or dissent from aspects of Cold War America. *Mad* actually appeared to fulfil the function of the critic more often than did the organs of the New York intellectuals such as *Commentary*, *Dissent*, *Partisan Review*, and *The New Leader*.²⁵ *Dissent* was purportedly established to provide that type of social and political criticism that *Mad* pioneered in the 1950s and which other New York intellectual journals had so conspicuously failed to do at that time. It was *Dissent*'s aim “to dissent from the bleak atmosphere of conformism that pervades the political and intellectual life of the US; to dissent from the support of the *status quo* now so noticeable on the part of many former radicals and socialists.”²⁶ *Dissent* was designed to provide an opposing viewpoint to that of magazines like *Commentary*, which, in *Dissent*'s opinion, had become so affirmative that it was felt that it had lost its critical perspective.²⁷ In contrast, I contend that *Mad* fulfilled this critical function far more effectively than its more “serious” counterparts did, deservedly building up a reputation for satire and social commentary. Furthermore, *Mad* consistently refused to take any political position: *Mad*'s publisher, William Gaines, stated that “we like to say that *Mad* has no politics

²⁴ Vernard Eller, “The “MAD” Morality: An Exposé,” *The Christian Century*, 27 December 1967, 1647–49.

²⁵ In some senses *Mad* operated under greater editorial freedom than say, *Commentary*. Where *Commentary* was subject to indirect pressures from its sponsoring organization, the American Jewish Committee, *Mad* was pretty much left alone by its publisher. William Gaines unequivocally stated: “*Mad* should not be political and I certainly shouldn't impose my political beliefs on the magazine.” Gaines, in William M. Gaines in Dwight R. Decker and Gary Groth, “An Interview with the Man Behind EC,” *The Comics Journal*, 81 (May 1983), 83. Feldstein added: “When the magazine went to press, he would get the dummy, the mechanicals, and he would read it for the first time. He had no idea what was going to be in it or anything like that. He rarely instituted any kind of censorship except where I might have overstepped the legal bounds, or he thought he might get sued for copyright or something like that. But aside from that, he never said a word. We were at different poles politically, and some of the things he didn't agree with politically, but he still let it go because it was a cultural, social comment magazine and he knew it had to cover all bases.” Feldstein, interviewed by Ringgenberg, “Jolting words with Al Feldstein,” 88. One of *Mad*'s chief artists, Will Elder, thrived under “this complete freedom.” Will Elder, “An Interview with Will Elder conducted by Rob Veri,” *The Comics Journal*, 177 (May 1995), 110. This compares very favourably with the situation under which *Commentary* operated. For further detail see my unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, “Struggling for Freedom: Arthur Miller, the *Commentary* Community, and the Cultural Cold War” (University of Birmingham, 1998), esp. chap. 2.

²⁶ “A Word to Our Readers” (editorial), *Dissent*, 1 (1954), 3.

²⁷ Irving Howe, “Does It Hurt When You Laugh?” *Dissent*, 1 (1954), 6, 7.

and that we take no point of view.”²⁸ It may have been abusive of Cold War America, but it never sympathised with the New Left revolt against it. Indeed, student radicalism also became its eventual target. This consistent inconsistency ran counter to the dynamics that formed the New York intellectual community, which were clearly aligned on ideological and political grounds. Neither did *Mad* offer any affirmations or alternatives to the American way of life that it held in such contempt. Thus, in its failure to affirm or support anything, *Mad* possibly deserved the title of “dissent” more than *Dissent* magazine itself.

“NOT EATING THE PREVAILING BULLSHIT”: *MAD*’S CRITIQUE OF 1950S AMERICA²⁹

Kurtzman developed a style for *Mad* that was so influential it “revolutionized” the field of comic-book satire.³⁰ Under its rowdy surface, *Mad* was “necessarily thoughtful,” accurately targeting its subject by revealing its fundamental flaws or untruths. Kurtzman sought not merely to entertain, but to remind his audience “of what the real world is like.”³¹ “Kurtzman introduced a host of innovations to comics; he was the first to use mainstream humorists as writers; he parodied many aspects of life, including movies, television, magazines, and advertising. In the *Mad* comics he pushed the boundaries of what a comic was supposed to look like, incorporating photographs, fine art, and pop iconography.”³²

Perhaps one of the most conspicuous features of the magazine during the 1950s was its lack of advertising. In the consumer-driven boom of the time, advertising played a key role in selling new products to the American public dominating the pages of many magazines; product advertising even appeared on the pages of highbrow intellectual magazines, such as *Commentary*. Although, somewhat ironically, the magazine’s offices were located in the heart of American corporate advertising, Madison Avenue, *Mad* did

²⁸ Gaines in Decker and Groth, “William Gaines,” 83. Despite this denial of political bias, Gaines goes on to say, “I think the magazine is more liberal than not liberal, it certainly is not left like the *Lampoon*.”

²⁹ *Playboy* (January 1979). The full quote reads, “*Playboy* came out of aspects of the same energy that created the beat crowd, the first rock-’n’-rollers, Holden Caulfield, James Dean, *Mad* magazine – and anything else that was interesting by virtue of not eating the prevailing bullshit and being therefore slightly dangerous.”

³⁰ Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comic and Graphic Novels*, 38.

³¹ Harvey Kurtzman, *From Aargh! to Zap!* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 41.

³² Reidelbach, *Completely Mad*, 22.

not succumb to contemporary pressures. This lack of advertising gave the magazine a freedom that other publications and media of the time possibly did not possess. Furthermore, its lack of corporate control freed it from strict processes of regulation. Having neither advertising nor strict regulation *Mad* could target almost anything that it wished and indeed the major icons and iconography of 1950s America came into its sights.

Initially, *Mad* sent up other comics as a comic book parody. It “cannibalised” its rivals, “dismembering” them, and sending up anything which seemed “traditional” or “innocent” about them.³³ In “Starchie” the innocent teenagers Archie and Jughead became chain-smoking juvenile delinquents; the western hero, “The Lone Stranger” is transformed into a *schlemiel* (a simpleton); in “Superduper Man!” the triumphant superhero (also the creation of American Jews) is turned into a *sblmazel* (a loser). Immediately, National Periodicals, the owners of *Superman*, threatened a lawsuit.³⁴ Sinisterly, Superman’s feminine counterpart, Wonder Woman, became “Woman Wonder,” locked into permanent battle against her boyfriend’s alter ego Steve Adore. In particular, *Mad* turned its sights on the Disney Corporation, lampooning its central icon Mickey Mouse. A grizzled, rat-faced, thug vermin renamed “Mickey Rodent” replaced the wholesome androgyny of Mickey Mouse. In an impressively close repetition of the Disney style, *Mad* not only sent up all of Disney’s peculiarities, but also embellished them with a variety of visual jokes: Mickey’s fingers and tails are caught in mouse traps while another character has a pet human on a lead. The introductory statement reads: “though we are repelled at the sight of man turned beast ... we revel to see beast turn man!”³⁵ The whole strip came together to form what Maria Reidelbach called a “biting parody,” assailing one of America’s most respected institutions during the fifties.³⁶

When it had exhausted other comic books *Mad* branched out into other media. It was not afraid of directing its satirical talents at any target, including movie stars, pop singers, politicians, and even the British royal family. For some time EC comics had “delivered devastating critiques” and *Mad*’s second editor, Al Feldstein had been practising the art of social commentary in such comic books as *Crime Suspensories* and *Shock Suspensories*, which, according to comic-book historian, William W. Savage, had “laid waste to the American family in a variety of ways.”³⁷ *Mad* not only continued this trend but took it a step further. Significantly, key American icons were often the subjects of its humour. Even the “Father of Our Country,” George

³³ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁵ “Mickey Rodent,” *Mad*, 19.

³⁶ Reidelbach, *Completely Mad*, 29.

³⁷ Savage, *Comic Books and America*, 98, 80.

Washington was not safe. Media, promotions, television, movies, and advertising were favourite topics of the magazine and all became subjects for parody. *Mad* turned its “mocking voice” on the “artifacts and cultural forms of the good life” of the 1950s “and began to devour them with unparalleled comic relish.”³⁸ *Mad*’s grotesque exaggerations and eccentricities provided much-copied material for other comic book authors and satirists. Reitberger and Fuchs point out how: “By satirical exaggeration *MAD* shows what a humbug most of what the media produce is. Besides the media it also exposes and attacks the leisure and consumer habits of the American citizen.”³⁹ From the very heart of the American advertising industry – Madison Avenue – *Mad* battered the companies that surrounded it.

Mad consistently refused to include advertisements; in their place a series of spoof ads appeared. In March 1955 the cover imitated a mail order catalogue, filled with small black-and white illustrations and fine type. Inside bogus products such as “Ded Ryder Cowboy Carbine” rifles and “Shmeer’s Rubber Bubble Gum” were advertised. Thereafter each issue contained at least two full-page cartoons that were very familiar to its readership. Much of the artwork used in these fake adverts was directly copied from the originals themselves.⁴⁰ In a remarkable simulacrum of the series of Norman Rockwell covers that adorned the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine, *Mad* advertised “Crust” toothpaste that not only prevented against tooth decay, but also played upon the 1950s fears of teenage delinquency that had been raised several years earlier by Wertham’s critique of comic books. Advertising parodies had become a regular feature in *Mad*, and in the fifth anniversary issue in 1957 this trend was celebrated on the cover, which depicted Alfred W. Neumann’s birthday party, including one hundred product logo icons such as Betty Crocker, Uncle Ben, the Smith Brothers, and Bossie and Elmer. In 1958 *Time* magazine noted with admiration that, “In fact, the essence of *Mad*’s success is its nimble spoofing of promotions of all kinds.” The article continued: “In its parodies of advertisements and travel stickers, vending machines and lovelorn columnists, *Mad* is a refreshingly impudent reaction against all the slick stock in trade of twentieth-century hucksterism, its hopped up sensationalism, its visible and hidden persuaders.”⁴¹

Mad’s writers went to great lengths to achieve a significant level of satire for their mock advertising. According to Sabin, “This kind of iconoclasm

³⁸ Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 139.

³⁹ Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs, *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium* (London: Studio Vista, 1972), 216–17.

⁴⁰ Reidelbach, *Completely Mad*, 50.

⁴¹ ‘Maddiction’, *Time* (7 July 1958), 53.

was unusual enough, but *Mad* was also notable for the quality of its artwork.⁴² In the new magazine format, Kurtzman was able to reproduce drawings in much greater detail and subtlety. Feldstein adopted Kurtzman's style and sharpened it, exploiting the extended thematic campaigns in vogue during the 1950s by focusing on a single image, idea, or gimmick and inflating it to ridiculous proportions.⁴³ Feldstein went even further by using photographs rather than drawings to make the parodies appear more authentic. In this way, *Mad's* cannibalisation of a range of media (drawings, art, films, television, comics, newspapers photography, and advertising) pre-figured the postmodern pastiche, as well as anticipating pop art's privileging of product commodification as the central focus for reproduction.⁴⁴ Indeed, *Mad* possibly both preempted and provided the platform for pop art to emerge in the 1960s. Like pop art *Mad* was rooted in pop culture, drawing upon it for its satire. It too sought to break down the barriers between "high" and "low" art by favouring the mundane and the everyday as a valid subject for artistic representation, and it always sought to demonstrate the vacuity of the contemporary consumer culture. A great deal of the magazine's humour was based on the ability of *Mad's* artists to mimic the style of the original artwork. Such "authenticity" was at the heart of the magazine's satiric edge.

According to Marshall McLuhan, *Mad* had "simply transferred the world of ads into the world of the comic book, and it did this just when the TV image was beginning to eliminate the comic book by direct rivalry."⁴⁵ It is, then, probably no accident that *Mad Magazine* appeared exactly at the point that TV was becoming widespread in America.⁴⁶ Accordingly, *Mad* turned its attention to product placement within film and television. *Mad* began to spot the unexpected and unannounced close-ups of consumer products. Not long after *Mad* ran an exposé of the racket the Federal Communications Commission began to scrutinise the practice and a subsequent congressional investigation pressured the networks to reduce such plugging.⁴⁷ Thus,

⁴² Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*, 38. ⁴³ Reidelbach, *Completely Mad*, 50–53.

⁴⁴ Richard Leslie, who notes that the Chicago school of pop art was "more *Mad Magazine*," acknowledges this debt to *Mad* (although in a limited fashion). See his *Pop Art: A New Generation of Style* (London: Tiger Books International, 1997), 81. In other artistic fields, Stephen Whitfield believes that Art Spiegelman's *Maus* "was a product of the detritus of the graphic arts and other bits of vernacular culture" such as *Mad*. See his *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), 185–86.

⁴⁵ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 178.

⁴⁶ Tony Hiss and Jeff Lewis, "The 'Mad' Generation," *The New York Times* magazine (31 July 1977), 14–20.

⁴⁷ Reidelbach, *Completely Mad*, 80.

McLuhan concluded: “*MAD* is a kind of newspaper mosaic of the ad as entertainment, and entertainment as a form of madness.”⁴⁸

Mad was not afraid to depict life as it was thereby undermining the fantasised domestic containment of the fifties. According to Reidelbach, “Fathers sometimes came home drunk, mothers were lousy cooks, and sullen teenagers hung out on street corners looking for trouble”; and further, “By not only mentioning these unspeakable events, but chortling, guffawing, and belly-laughing at them, *Mad* helped alleviate the stresses of modern living.”⁴⁹ But *Mad's* satire went further than Reidelbach suggested doing more than simply alleviating the stresses the modern living. *Mad* contemporaneously and contemptuously began to unpick the very threads that upheld domestic US society during the Cold War years, while those very strands were being woven. As Gitlin observed the “grinning caricature” of Alfred E. Neuman contained both the “nihilism of the late Fifties – and its refutation.”⁵⁰ The “experts” of the 1950s, whose advice ensured the careful prescription of gender roles, were taken on by *Mad* magazine. Their “extreme claims,” wrote Reidelbach, “were like rocket fuel for the *Mad* satirists, mostly middle-class men who were facing the same pressures themselves. The Madmen not only satirized the mores of the times, but also offered alternatives that were as ridiculous as their inspirations.”⁵¹ In “How to be Smart” *Mad* posits the importance of image over substance: “Odd clothing, a strange textured jacket, cleverly fastened drop seat, create smart impressions.” As Reidelbach observed: ““How to be Smart” pokes fun at self-styled intellectuals, but in fact, the quest of the middle-class throughout the 1950s and early 1960s was to be “normal,” and *Mad* contained a plethora of articles providing antidotes to the images of perfect normality espoused in the mass media.”⁵²

Soon *Mad's* creators turned their attention to politics. Despite the hesitance of *Mad's* editors to acknowledge the magazine’s involvement in political satire (*Mad's* publisher, William M. Gaines, always maintained that “we like to say that *Mad* has no politics and that we take no point of view,”⁵³) *Mad* was not afraid to tackle political issues. Indeed, a high level of political content was a distinctive feature of the magazine, which was particularly significant since it was usually assumed that comics were targeted at youth. Perhaps its most important and potentially far-reaching contribution to this was its 1954 attack on Senator Joseph McCarthy entitled, “What’s My

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁵⁰ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 36.

⁵¹ Reidelbach, *Completely Mad*, 102.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Gaines in Decker and Groth, “William Gaines,” *The Comics Journal*, 81 (May 1983), 83.

Shine!” The strip was a combination of the long-running game show *What’s My Line* and the series of daily live broadcasts of the Army-McCarthy hearings that had occupied America for most of the summer. The title was a suitable pun on not only the game show, but also one of McCarthy’s closest aides, David Schine. *Mad* focused upon McCarthy’s sensationalism and use of the media, particularly television: “And so, as Mr. Smurdly is gently propelled from the studio, we switch to #2 camera ... and procede [sic] with the proceedings!” Using the game-show format, Kurtzman and Davis parodied McCarthy’s (“McCartaway”) endless points of order (“One ham on rye ... no lettuce or butter! ... container of milk and a Danish! ... tell the boy to bring a couple of straws”); Roy Cohn constantly whispering in his ear; and the adoration with which the assembled journalists hung onto his every word. *Mad* even satirised McCarthy’s infamously doctored photograph of Army Secretary Robert T. Stevens.⁵⁴

Although Kurtzman sought to downplay the significance of the satire (“McCarthy was a special case. He was so obvious. And so evil. It was like doing a satire on Hitler,”⁵⁵) *Mad* was one of the few publications to dare to criticise McCarthy at a point when he had not yet been censured by the Senate. McCarthyism may have been nearing its zenith in 1954, but other elements of the US press were still some way from publicly condemning the Senator. *Mad*’s ability to escape rebuke in this instance indicates a unique and privileged position as a social commentator, facilitated by its lack of advertising, with the result it did not have to answer to anyone. It also indicated how the magazine could accurately anticipate the public mood.

Since it was born during the height of the domestic Cold War in America, *Mad* did not fail to ignore the political context in which it operated. Indeed, its very title anticipated and played upon apocalyptic fears of nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). In 1959 it provided a phrasebook for American tourists travelling in the Soviet Union, possibly prompted by Nixon’s visit to Moscow. The phrase book parodied the contemporary American view of the USSR as a repressive totalitarian regime, as demonstrated by the following “handy phrases”:

When will I get my camera back?/Has the chambermaid finished searching my luggage?/Which corner of the room is mine?/What time is the ex-Commissar’s funeral?/What time is the new Commissar’s funeral?/Our guide is very friendly?/Why was our guide liquidated?/Waiter, there’s a dictaphone in my borscht!/The handcuffs are chafing my wrists/Do you have a cell with a view?/Will I need my

⁵⁴ *Mad*, 17 (October 1954).

⁵⁵ Kurtzman, quoted in Reidelbach, *Completely Mad*, 120.

galoshes in Siberia?/Is this how you treated Adlai Stevenson?/I demand to see the American consul!⁵⁶

While some people may have felt that these phrases accurately depicted the political situation in the Soviet Union, that *Mad* was actually upholding the US view of Soviet society rather than undermining it, and further that this was no subject for satire, *Mad* dismissed such notions with its hilarious transliterations. “*Vbat ar lit-teel gowrls may-de huv?*”/“*Vbat ist diss tzjing corld luff?*” *Mad*’s spoof simultaneously upheld and undermined American attitudes towards the USSR. The inclusion of such absurd transliterations ridiculed Cold War fears of communism and reduced them to a set of banal clichés. Elsewhere, *Mad* humoured the Cold War linkage of communism, disease, and advertising. As Todd Gitlin has pointed out, “If official America radiated health, *Mad* insisted on the importance of the ‘sick.’”⁵⁷ Where one serious advert asked, “Is Your Bathroom Breeding Bolsheviks?” *Mad* advertised “Mr. Mean: All-Commie Brainwasher.” Beneath a picture of a stern-looking Khrushchev, the text stated: “better watch him closely or he’ll clean us out of our homes, cars, offices, factories, schools, everything!”

While *Mad* parodied America’s fears of the Soviet Union, it was not afraid to deconstruct the ideas that lay behind such fears. *Mad* introspectively assailed the core values behind the construction of American identity during the Cold War years. In “The Night People vs. ‘Creeping Meatballism,’” Jean Shepherd interrogated the underlying individualism that had informed post-war American domestic and foreign policy, not least being articulated in key policy documents such as the Truman Doctrine and National Security Council Directive 68. Shepherd wrote: “The American brags about being a great individualist, when actually he’s the world’s *least* individual person.”⁵⁸ This directly attacked the privileging of individualism within Cold War discourse that simultaneously posited the differences that upheld American society and the conformity that characterised that of the USSR. As Mark Jancovich has pointed out, “the discourse of conformity was central to the cultural politics of the period.” Indeed, the search for “non-conformity,” he argues, united Americans during the 1950s.⁵⁹ Accordingly,

⁵⁶ “*Mad*’s Modern Handy Phrase Book for the American Tourist,” *Mad*, 46 (April 1959), 41–43.

⁵⁷ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 35. He cites this example as evidence: “Mrs. Anderson, can Joey come out and play?” “But you know he has no arms and legs.” “Yeah but we need a second base.”

⁵⁸ Jean Shepherd, “The Night People vs. ‘Creeping Meatballism,’” *Mad*, 32 (April 1957).

⁵⁹ Marc Jancovich, “Othering Conformity in Post-War America: Intellectuals, the New Middle Classes and the Problem of Cultural Distinctions,” in *Containing America: Cultural*

Mad sought to assist its readers in this struggle to be different. Not only did *Mad* advise on how to be different, it even gave various categories for non-conformity – “ordinary” and “mad.”⁶⁰

Furthermore, advertising had even entered the political realm during the 1950s. At that time, the Eisenhower Administration adopted the use of advertising as a key tactic in fighting the Cultural Cold War. Eisenhower and his advisers contrived ways to promote American culture through free trade and consumer goods. The most effective method of achieving this they felt was through advertising and displaying a whole range of the most up-to-date products available to the American consumer.⁶¹ Not only did *Mad* parody advertising strategies, it also parodied this use of advertising in the international arena as a device for fighting the Cultural Cold War. Under the auspices of the Globaloney Department, Frank Jacobs advised:

The whole trouble with the world today is that nations have a hard time communicating with each other. That's because they keep trying the same old methods, like speeches, letters, conferences, ambassadors, war. The shape the world is in proves that none of these old approaches really work. If nations were smart, they'd take their cue from Big Business ... hire an Advertising Agency, and try ... INTERNATIONAL ADVERTISING.⁶²

The spoof juxtaposed two contrasting adverts for “Uncle Sam’s Country-Building Course” and “Red Star Insurance Company.” Alongside a picture of a pathetic, weedy-looking foreigner who is having sand kicked in his face and losing his girlfriend to another man, a muscle-bound Uncle Sam declared: “Let me build you up ... Free! Develop your industries! Build up your defenses!” The ad also usefully (and remarkably presciently in some ways) supplied a detachable application form for convenience. In contrast, a shackled Indian is told: “You’re in good hands with ‘Red Star!’” The text of the ad further informed the reader that, “The ‘Red Star Five-Year Plan’ has already protected such happy countries as Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia from War-Mongering Imperialists!” Thus, *Mad* demonstrated an astute awareness of international affairs and the diplomatic manoeuvrings of the American government, while simultaneously deploying a high level of political satire that was not afraid to critique either side in the Cold War struggle.

Production and Consumption in Fifties America, ed., Nathan Abrams and Julie Hughes (Birmingham: Birmingham University Press, 2000), 13.

⁶⁰ “How to be a Mad Non-Conformist,” *Mad*, 47 (June 1959).

⁶¹ Robert H. Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

⁶² “International Advertising,” *Mad*, 44 (January 1959), 8–9.

Mad, for example, even took repeated swipes at the current intellectual fad for psychoanalysis that had to all intents and purposes replaced Marxism by the 1950s as the primary focus of intellectual allegiance. In “The *Mad* Psychoanalysis Primer,” Stan Hart advised: “If you are in group therapy, it is important to attend every session. Because if you are absent, guess who the others talk about!” Tom Koch offered “Psychoanalysis by Mail” for those either too shy or underprivileged to visit an analyst. He offered advice such as: “Are you humiliated beyond all reason because the ink blot above looks like nothing more than an ink blot to you, while you think that we think that you should think it looks like sex?”⁶³ And yet again, the Psychology Department offered its own “Ink Blot Test” “as a service to those of you who have stopped suddenly in the middle of flapping the lower lip and wondered, *Mad* saves you money, eliminates the middle-man, and allows you, in the privacy of your own home, to find out once and for all if you’re crazy. So don’t be chicken. Go ahead.”⁶⁴

Mad’s refusal to conform led to attacks from its rivals in the New York Intellectual family. Notable critic Dwight Macdonald wrote in *The New Yorker* *Mad* expresses the teenagers’ cynicism about the world of mass media that their elders have created – so full of hypocrisy and pretense governed by formulas. But *Mad* itself has a formula. It speaks the same language, aesthetically and morally, as the media it satirizes; it is as tasteless as they are, and even more violent.⁶⁵

Ironically, *Mad* targeted the very same products of mass culture that Macdonald had spent his career up to that point railing against. Perhaps his distaste for the magazine was due to its simultaneous occupation of the same critical territory as him. Macdonald’s criticisms were echoed in a short piece in *Dissent* magazine, in which T. J. Ross tore *Mad* apart. He asserted that: “in its comic book format *Mad* is exactly like what it is supposed to be panning.” Later he added: “Rather than voicing resistance to the oppressiveness of official culture, *Mad* expresses a savage acquiescence to it.” And further: “Consistently, and perhaps unwittingly, *Mad* depicts parents as apes and family life as apish, without any upbeat compromise.”⁶⁶ Such attacks helped to confirm *Mad* as a source of an alternative critique within the intellectual milieu of New York.

⁶³ *Mad*, 82 (October 1963), 112.

⁶⁴ “*Mad*’s Ink Blot Test,” *Mad*, 31 (February 1957), 30–31.

⁶⁵ Dwight Macdonald, “Profiles: A Caste, A Culture, A Market – II,” *The New Yorker*, 29 November 1958, 76.

⁶⁶ T. J. Ross, “The Conventions of the Mad,” *Dissent*, 8:4 (1961), 502–06.

CONCLUSION: CONSTRUCTING THE COUNTER-CULTURE

Unsurprisingly, *Mad*'s iconoclasm made a significant impact on American cultural life during the 1950s. Looking back Theodore Roszak described *Mad* as a "landmark of the spirit" alongside Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, noting that its appearance was a "significant" phenomenon. He reflected that "the nasty cynicism *MAD* began applying to the American way of life – politics, advertising, mass media, education – has had its effect. *MAD* brought into the malt shops the same angry abuse of middle-class America which comics like Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce were to begin bringing into the night clubs of the mid-fifties."⁶⁷ Although Gitlin felt that *Mad* did not deserve credit as a subversive force *per se*, he acknowledged that it "pried open a cultural territory which became available for radical transmutation": "In a world that adult ideologies had defined as black and white – America versus totalitarianism, respectability versus crime, obedience versus delinquency, affluence versus barbarism, suburbia versus degradation and filth – they did help establish the possibility of gray."⁶⁸ Rothman and Lichter added that *Mad* "helped create the climate in which student protest flourished," while Marie Winn pointed out that it played a significant role in "the move toward free expression among children."⁶⁹ *Mad* certainly pre-empted or paved the way for the satires of the 1960s that are usually credited with helping to undermine the conformity of the Eisenhower years: Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, and Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H*. Turning its zany gaze on every aspect of American life in the 1950s and 1960s, *Mad* fulfilled a pivotal role, giving teenagers a political education over their breakfast cornflakes. *Mad* fermented the underground commix movement of the 1960s, from which emerged the original talents of Robert (R.) Crumb, Bill Griffith, Harvey Pekar, and Art Spiegelman, which in turn inspired the book-length comic narratives known as graphic novels.⁷⁰

Mad also helped to change the nature of comedy by redrawing the boundaries of orthodoxies of taste. Earlier Jewish humour had been dominated by the "Borscht Belt" comedians, those Jews who played the kosher resort hotels in the Catskills like Grossinger's and Concord, and who gently

⁶⁷ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 24.

⁶⁸ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 36.

⁶⁹ Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, *Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christians and the New Left* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 108; Marie Winn, "What Became of Childhood Innocence?" *New York Times Magazine*, 25 January 1981, 44.

⁷⁰ M. Thomas Inge, "Comic Strips and Comic Books," *Encyclopedia of American Studies* (New York: Grolier, 2001), 366.

poked fun at Jewish life for Jewish audiences. “Black humour” in which worst-case scenarios were considered and “sick humour” became fashionable, paving the way for iconoclastic comics like those I have mentioned above, Sahl and Bruce, as well as Ernie Kovacs and Stan Freberg. Like *Mad*, through aggressive, Yiddish-punctuated, and often foul-mouthed satire, they articulated what Alex Gordon has called a “brash urban Jewishness” and a deliberate outsider status, while challenging the status quo, highlighting its hypocrisy, and revelling in the absurdities of everyday life. They couldn’t be further disconnected from the propriety of the Borscht Belters.⁷¹

Although still around today, *Mad's* satire has become diluted. Perhaps the endless copying of the magazine has diminished its impact. Located at the margins during its early years, *Mad's* arrival at, and acceptance into, the mainstream was signalled by its absorption into Time-Warner. The very institution that had once described *Mad* as a “short-lived satirical pulp,” and was the target of its parodies, now owns it. And, *Mad* has succumbed to economic pressures and eventually accepted advertising within its covers. Nonetheless, the familiar face of Alfred E. Neuman still continues to stare out from the front page, its toothy grin a reminder of its mordant history.

⁷¹ Alex Gordon, “Jewish American Folklore and Humor,” *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, 413.