

clusively with daytime. The show features no gunfights or car chases; there are moments of leisurely, uneventful conversation between the younger and older generations.

It is a curious inversion: Where once daytime TV fled prime time, prime time now copies daytime. The evidence is everywhere, from the success of *The Forsyte Saga* and *Upstairs Downstairs* (soap operas with extra starch) to major television serials like *Rich Man Poor Man*, *Roots*, and *Captains and Kings*. Spectaculars aside, even a regular offering such as *Family* reflects a soap-opera sense of continuity. The major characters suffer. They have affairs, consider marriage, drop out of school, worry about mortality.

It goes too far to say that daytime dramas are genuinely realistic. The necessities of the form require too many brushes with the kinds of crises that most families would suffer only a few times in a generation. But both soaps and game shows have certainly tried to move television closer to what Paddy Chayefsky called "the marvelous world of the ordinary." What daytime TV has given prime time is the possibility of exploring characters not through the prism of fantasy, but through a focus closer to the way most of us spend our lives. And that is no mean contribution.



TAKING COMICS SERIOUSLY

by Arthur Asa Berger

New art forms are often greeted with derision. Attic tragedy was denounced by conservative Greeks, impressionism by high-brow Parisians. Americans, too, have snubbed new, indigenous art forms. The comics, for example, like jazz music, are a home-grown American product; and like jazz, they were long ignored by "serious" critics.

As critic John Canaday recently noted, the pendulum has now swung to the other extreme: The comics have changed from

“entertainments to be read while lying on the floor” into “sociological testaments for intellectual evaluation.” Perhaps the pendulum has swung too far. Where once Mussolini banned *Popeye* for being antifascist, latter-day commentators point to a perverse relationship between Batman and Robin; an oral fixation in husband Dagwood’s eating jags in *Blondie*; and (as the government of Finland helpfully pointed out) an apotheosis of “bourgeois” capitalism in *Donald Duck*.

No longer dismissed as trivial, the comics have other feints to parry. Journalists have great sport with academics who “read meaning” into the comics, and the creators of many comic strips vehemently deny that their work is worth fussing over. We are told, constantly, that comics (or film, or television) should be enjoyed and not analyzed—because there is nothing to analyze.

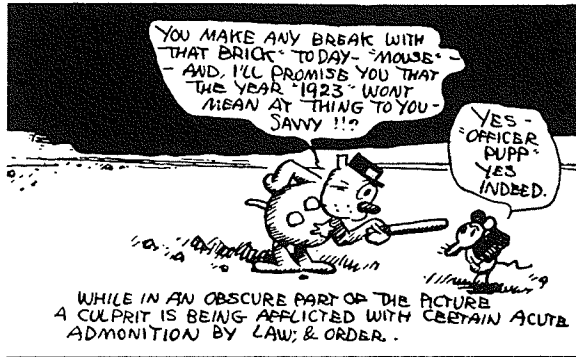
This “know-nothingism” is naive. Like slips of the tongue or dreams, the comics have much to tell us if only we will ask.

One of the first scholarly works to consider the comics was Gilbert Seldes’ *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924). Seldes’ paen to *Krazy Kat* at once boosted the strip into the comic Olympus and created a cult in its honor back on earth. In *The American Language*, meanwhile, H. L. Mencken began tracing the words and phrases comics have given to English such as “jeep,” “wow,” and “grr.” But until recently, most work in the field was done by non-Americans—Italians in particular—who took the same proprietary attitude toward U.S. comics that Britain’s Lord Elgin took toward ancient Greek statuary.

Is a Barnacle a Ship?

The comics themselves are relatively ancient—by pop culture’s standards. They have been with us for more than 80 years, and some have been appearing continuously for 50 or 60. *Mutt and Jeff* started in 1907, *The Captain and the Kids* appeared in 1914, *Blondie* in 1930, *Dick Tracy* in 1931. So rich is the heritage that in 1962, cartoonist Jerry Dumas could introduce *Sam’s Strip*, a feature that depended for much of its humor on a kind of camp familiarity with the comics of the past.

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George Herriman's vaudevillian *Krazy Kat* (1913). Now hailed as a pop-culture classic, the strip was a commercial failure in its own lifetime.

Beyond a common affection for the medium, however, cartoonists and scholars approach the comics from different directions. For example, by and large the jokes in the humorous or “bigfoot” funnies are culled from the absurdities of everyday life. To the scholar, this represents a gold mine he can sift for clues to the *Zeitgeist*. To the cartoonist, it represents hours of staring at the ceiling. As Mrs. Thurber would say when she caught her husband in a trance at the dinner table: “James, you’re writing again!”

The other kind of comic strip—the serial or narrative adventure stories like *Rip Kirby* or *Apartment 3-G*—relies on a different kind of formula and tells us different kinds of things, both about today’s world and the worlds we have lost. Here the problem for the cartoonist is sustaining reader interest over a period of months, and it is solved not by rooting the story in everyday life but by combining fantastic plots with lifelike characters who share the hopes and fears of us all.

Be it through humor or adventure, the comics open a special window onto the past whether they are overtly opinionated (as in *Little Orphan Annie*) or seemingly not opinionated at all (as in *Beetle Bailey*). Indeed, the “value-free” comics may prove the most valuable, for they constitute an implicit record of their audience’s attitudes, not an explicit record of their authors’.

It is doubtful, for example, that Richard Outcault intended to leave posterity a record of the tumultuous 1890s when he first penned *The Yellow Kid*. And yet it was inevitable that the waves of immigration and the crowding of laborers into city and factory would leave their mark on his work. And so we find beneath the ostensible humor that the hero of the strip—a strange, bald,

jug-eared youth who always wears a yellow nightshirt—inhabits a squalid slum called Hogan's Alley. It is packed with children who are decidedly not childish: They wear derbies, smoke cigars, and may even be bearded. There is something poignant and heroic about the Kid and his friends; they are the first in a long line of spiritual orphans in the comics.

Unlike Outcault, Harold Gray in *Little Orphan Annie* had no qualms about putting his beliefs on the line. But like Outcault's Kid, Gray's Annie is an orphan, not the least because her philosophy is outworn and outdated. Annie spent over 40 years (beginning in 1924) railing against the direction American society was taking and championing the old, small-town virtues of yesteryear. As James Kehl observed in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, "she is more than a modern Robin Hood with a heart of gold and a wicked left; she is an outlet for the expression of the political and economic philosophy of her creator and legal guardian, Harold Gray." An extract from a 1945 strip:

Annie: But *why* did some papers and commentators say such terrible things?

Daddy Warbucks: Oh, I guess it was fashionable to sneer at "big incomes." They fail to mention that most of those big incomes go to pay everyone's bills and make the load lighter for everyone else. I believe that the more a man makes honestly, the more he helps this country and everybody in it. What I think we need is a lot more million-a-year men! Mighty little *they* can keep anyway.

Consciously or unconsciously, "liberal" or "conservative," the comics *do* speak to the daydreams and ambitions of the many, and they survive only when they do. The comics are a populist institution that depends on a powerful but fickle mass audience. Skeptical newspaper editors are forever "dropping" comics to test their readers' reaction. (When *Prince Valiant* was cut from the *San Francisco Chronicle* last year, the newspaper received over 1,000 phone calls. The strip was restored and the editors apologized on page one.) These men trace their roots back to editor Arthur Brisbane of the *New York Journal*, who in 1910 refused to let cartoonist Harry Hershfield sign his own strip, *Desperate Desmond*, on the grounds that only "newspapermen" could have bylines.

"But my strip appears in the newspapers," argued Hershfield. "Doesn't that make me a newspaperman?"

"Is a barnacle a ship?" Brisbane retorted.

THE KID IS FATHER TO THE COMICS

There is considerable disagreement over when the prototype of the comic strip appeared. Some point to Cleopatra's Needle, others to Trajan's Column, still others to the Bayeux Tapestry. Encyclopedist Maurice Horn suggests that the "first strivings" toward the art form (if it is one) are to be found in Leonardo's *Notebooks*, though it was English illustrator William Hogarth (1697–1764), he adds, who first assembled the elements of text and image "into a single whole."

As far as American comics are concerned, however, there is no dispute. On May 5, 1895, Joseph Pulitzer splashed some yellow ink on a cartoon by Richard Outcault and published the result in his *New York World*. *The Yellow Kid* was an immediate sensation, and, according to cartoon historian Stephen Becker, evoked "that first gentle wave of mass hysteria which accompanies the birth of popular art forms."



The comics survive such occasional hostility because they appeal to a constituency the newspapers will never overrule. To be sure, this may have its drawbacks. *The Gumps*, premier symbol of the "Roaring '20s," declined as the Depression advanced. *Terry and the Pirates* and its unrelievedly cold-warrior outlook sank during Vietnam and détente. Still, dependence on a mass audience can also have its strengths. The same gangster-ridden Depression that weakened *The Gumps* spawned *Dick Tracy*; the tumultuous Vietnam era that toppled *Terry* and angered *Abner's* Al Capp helped to launch Garry Trudeau's irreverent *Doonesbury*.

Mocking Rhetoric

To what kinds of aspirations do the comics appeal? George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* dealt with two themes that emerge continually in the later strips: the triumph of illusion over reality and the victory of rebelliousness over authority.

For 35 years Herriman's willful, anarchistic mouse (Ignatz) threw bricks at a lovesick *Krazy Kat* who took the bricks as

signs of love. She in turn was pursued by Offissa Pup who tried desperately and to no avail to keep Ignatz behind bars. Herriman's use of shifting, semi-abstract backgrounds and his remarkable rhetoric show the possibilities of the comic art form. Listen to one of Herriman's characters rhapsodize about work:

Indolence—the sin of the century . . . the error of the era—And labor is so lovely . . . toil so transcendent . . . the witchery of work so wondrous . . . industry looks upon the world with beauty . . . Diligence is a dainty delight . . . Endeavour is an enchanting endowment . . . effort effuses an affluent afflorescent effulgence . . . it is noble to strive, brave to strain, kingly to struggle. . . .

Interestingly, *Krazy Kat*, hailed today as the great comic classic, is more highly regarded now than it was when it was "alive." That it lasted so long was due to the rare intervention of a newspaperman: Publisher William Randolph Hearst so enjoyed the strip that he subsidized its publication for 20 years after it had stopped making money for the Hearst-owned King Features Syndicate.

Some of the other more familiar themes in the comics—the triumph of good over evil, for one—are relative newcomers, arriving with the great adventure strips of the 1930s: *Flash Gordon*, *Jungle Jim*, *Secret Agent X-9*, and *Tarzan*. These strips were drawn by master draftsmen like Alex Raymond and Harold Foster and written with skill and imagination (even Dashiell Hammett tried his hand—on *X-9*).

A Fear of Utopia?

In the adventure strips, the good guys always win. We know that Dick Tracy, who in his 47-year career has been maimed, crippled, and shot countless times, will get his man in the end. But there are many recurrent though less obvious themes: a distrust of rationally ordered societies, of technology, of grand visions. Tarzan prefers the jungle to the encroachments of civilization; X-9 takes aim at totalitarian scheming; and Flash Gordon, who relies on space-age gadgetry, must ever contend with dark forces who put that gadgetry to evil ends. In short, the adventure strips reveal a fear of utopia gone awry.

In most strips, these ideas are never spelled out in so many words. In some, however, the political or ideological content, so submerged in *Krazy Kat* or *Flash Gordon*, appears overtly. So it is with *Doonesbury*, our most important new comic strip (though not the most successful commercially; that distinction

DOONESBURY



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goes to Dik Browne's *Hagar the Horrible*). Here, the political content is so direct and obvious that the line between comics and political cartoons almost disappears. To the Pulitzer committee which awarded Trudeau a prize for editorial cartooning in 1975 the distinction seems to have already disappeared. Writing social comment under the cover of humor, Trudeau satirizes a number of contemporary figures, ranging from TV correspondents to ex-flower children to Army recruiters. Since his allusions are so immediate, he is a very good guide to the contemporary social scene in America.

Does *Doonesbury* represent the swan song of a dying art form? Some observers think so. They note that many of the adventure strips have been casualties of television, that the syndicates have lagged in developing new talent, and that the edge in innovation has passed from the United States to Latin America, the Philippines, and Japan.

Even if those observers are right, the heritage of eight decades of comic art—and its reflections of our evolving culture—remains. And they may well be wrong: One could as easily interpret the growth of the foreign comic-strip industry as a sign of vigor. The comics are now read by hundreds of millions of people in more than 50 countries. As *Beetle Bailey's* Mort Walker has noted, that's probably the largest number of countries ever to agree on any one thing. That fact alone deserves some scholarly attention.