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Terrifying Tales from The Code: The Anti-Comics Movement, Mass Culture, and the Impact of the Comics Code on American Comic Books

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TERRIFYING TALES FROM THE CODE: THE ANTI-COMICS MOVEMENT, MASS CULTURE, AND THE IMPACT OF THE COMICS CODE ON AMERICAN COMIC BOOKS

BY
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AMERICAN COMIC BOOKS

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The year is 1954. In the wake of a heated congressional hearing, the comic book publishers of the United States are issued an ultimatum: clean up your act or the government will do it for you. Their decision, to create and implement the Comics Code Authority (CCA), would drastically alter the role of comic books in American culture. But how did it come to this? In order to understand the true weight of the Comics Code on the comics medium, we must look to the decades of controversy leading up to its creation. Scandalized moralists and literary intellectuals alike teamed up to scrutinize comic books and their impact on American children in the 1940’s and ‘50’s. Their crusade against comics resulted in the creation of a restrictive state of self-imposed censorship and a weakening of the medium. This censorship, in conjunction with the rise of 1960’s counterculture, birthed a new comics movement. This thesis will analyze the power of censorship on American comics through the lens of the Comics Code, the rise of underground comix, and the role of profit-seeking and debates of mass culture and high/low hierarchies of media in this history. These factors all contribute to the long history of American comics and continue to hold sway over the medium to this day.

Comics, for the purposes of this thesis, refer to the American practice of sequential art in panels, collected in short magazines (aka comic books). Rather than looking back farther in time for the origin of the comic book, I will place Funnies on Parade (1933), the first book-length collection of comic strips published, as the starting point for this history.¹ While it may be a controversial choice, as many scholars of comics are wont to set comics as far back as Egyptian hieroglyphs², it is vital to the history of the American anti-comics movement to understand the

unique circumstances within which the modern American comic book was born. The early predecessor to the comic book was the newspaper comic strip (and the first comic book, as mentioned, was a collection of strips). These strips were for and by the working-class immigrant populations of urban America, particularly New York City. Early comics depicted rowdy immigrant children playing pranks, committing petty crimes, and speaking with little regard for ‘proper’ English grammar.\(^3\) Children adored comics, and their parents did not. Once the comic book format hit the stands, comics became even more directly accessible to American youth. For the lower classes, comics were the beginning and end of children’s art education.\(^4\) Once comic books as we know them today hit the market, their popularity only grew. Unlike the strips in newspapers, children could buy comics themselves with change they could pick up off of the street.\(^5\) For just ten cents, a child could read four or five stories, printed using the four-color technique that gives older comics their classic dot patterns.

\(^3\) Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague*. 9-10. Examples include the very popular *Yellow Kid*, which followed the misadventures of the titular boy and his young friends.

\(^4\) Hajdu. 16.

\(^5\) Hajdu. 21.
Comics in the 1930’s, ‘40’s, and ‘50’s were considerably different from what one might see on the shelves of a modern comic book shop. Early comics ranged from 20 to 60 pages in length, some containing upwards of 8 individual stories. They featured large, scintillating titles, designed to draw in curious eyes. Exciting images of impossible feats featured on every page, all formatted into unique panel structures. Characters spoke phonetically, eschewing grammar conventions in favor of immersion. Text and image went hand-in-hand, pulling the reader into a story in a way that novels, radio, and other storytelling formats could not. Early comic books sat side by side with traditional newspapers and magazines, bursts of color in seas of black and white.

Unlike the overwhelming monopoly of superhero ‘cape’ comics of today, the comics of the first half of the 20th century varied in genre and style. The king genre of comics in the 1930’s and ‘40’s was crime, and in the 1940’s, true crime. Crime comics arose out of the noir traditions built by dime novels and radio plays and intended to be every bit as salacious and sensational as their non-comic counterparts. The best-selling of all crime comics was Crime Does Not Pay, a true crime comic book published between 1942 and 1955 by Lev Gleason Publications. Crime Does Not Pay (stylized with the word CRIME taking up at least one third of the cover) detailed stories ripped from the headlines, and the editors, Charles Biro and Bob Wood, would task artists with maintaining the utmost realism. Crime comics were so popular at their height in the late 1940’s that several comics publishers cancelled cape comics in favor of more crime titles. Other popular genres of the time were the first superhero comic books, beginning with 1938’s Action

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6 Hajdu. 6, 59-60.
7 Hajdu. 69. Charles Biro was notorious for pushing his artists to do real world research for his comics, including but not limited to the purchasing of various guns solely so that they would be drawn correctly in the comic.
Comics and the first appearance of Superman. Superman’s heroics inspired a litany of other caped crusaders, including Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America. Cape comics were most popular during World War II, when they served both as cheap entertainment that could be shipped to overseas soldiers and as propaganda for the American war effort. Characters like Superman and Captain America fought the Axis Powers in their comics and encouraged their young readers to contribute however they could to support the US.

After the war, crime continued its rise in popularity, but enthusiasm waned in the late 1940’s due to rising anti-comics sentiments. In order to fill the space left by crime comics, publishers appealed to readers on two fronts. To satiate the need for adventure (and bloodlust), horror comics like Tales from the Crypt featured monsters of every shape and size committing atrocities. On the flip side, in an attempt to hold on to an aging audience, publishers began to put out romance comics aimed at young adults. Romance comics used sex and drama where horror used gore and violence. With every passing year, more and more comics were published and sold. As the medium’s popularity rose, so too did comic books draw the attention of those who would see them eradicated.

Anti-comics criticism had existed since the initial newspaper strips gained a following in the early 1910’s, but a coherent anti-comics movement began in earnest at the end of the 1930’s, in conjunction with the explosion of the comic book format’s popularity. The two main schools of thought behind the movement were those who had objections to the morality of comics, and those who had intellectual objections to comics. Initially, the movement was regional and primarily concerned with morality. Parents, teachers, and other adults involved in the lives of Superman was not the first masked vigilante in comic books, that title belongs to the Phantom. However, Superman is the basis on which the genre as a whole is born from.

Hajdu, The Ten-Cent Plague. 156.
children saw comics as too violent, too sexual, full of bigotry, and pervaded by poor moral choices. Criticisms ranged from encouraging juvenile delinquency to worsening children’s eyesight. The Catholic Church also got involved, producing ban lists of comics for various American dioceses.

Conservative groups in a moral panic over the content of comic books did not make up the whole of the anti-comics movement. There was another group of vocal critics among the intellectual elites, especially the circle self-titled the New York Intellectuals. This group, primarily made up of literary scholars, led media discourse in the United States during the transformative period in American culture between the 1930’s and 1950’s. Starting in the wake of World War I, intellectuals in urban America began to take note of the rise of new mass media: radio, film, and comics. Comics as a whole were exemplary of mass culture, something most American intellectuals found to be wholly distasteful, for a variety of different reasons. Mass culture, as seen by intellectuals, had four defining characteristics: mass-production and profit-mindedness, a negative effect on high culture, a negative effect on the audience, and societal effects leading towards totalitarianism and populism. These four criteria were the cornerstones of post-World War II mass culture criticism. Comic books fit these descriptors to a tee, even more so than their strip predecessors, as they were commodities in their own right (and not part of a larger publication). The American intellectuals did not invent these criticisms of mass culture, rather, they built their work upon the previous work of the European intellectual group,

13 Intellectuals were wary of comics in both strip and book form. Some strips, such as the surrealism inspired *Krazy Kat*, gained a certain popularity in intellectual circles, but the majority of comic strips were considered suspect.
14 Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*. 50.
15 Beaty. 50.
The Frankfurt School’s consensus was that mass culture was like junk food for the mind, simplified and watered down for the working-class consumer. This threatened the integrity of high art/culture in a new way, as mass production and globalization of media propagated low art/culture. If a consumer has easy and cheap access to low art, like a comic book, the belief was that they would choose that over high art, like a novel. This would lead to an overall cultural regression by the masses. Post-war American intellectuals integrated the Frankfurt School’s criticisms into their critique of the new mass media formats. These American intellectuals were from the right and the left, and as time went on, their critiques evolved. Initial mass culture criticism focused on the left-leaning European viewpoints, and this included a sense of American inferiority, built upon the idea of American culture tending to fall into the trap of mass culture much more than their European counterparts. However, as the mass culture critique entered the Cold War period of the late 1940’s, this anti-Americanism disappeared. America had earned its place as a world superpower, and the 1950’s saw a resurgence of power for American intellectuals. This post-war wave was very concerned with a specifically American viewpoint on mass culture, and the conservative voices were more prominent than in the pre-war era debates. Where earlier critics saw democracy as antithetical to high art, these Cold War Americans, like Lionel Trilling, argued that democracy (as opposed to Communism) was actually the ideal atmosphere for artistic and cultural growth.

The anti-comics movement hit the national stage with the publication of an inflammatory editorial by Sterling North in the Chicago Tribune in 1940. North was a prominent member of

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16 Beaty. 57.
17 Beaty. 57.
18 Beaty. 57.
19 Beaty. 74-75.
20 Beaty. 55, 75.
21 Nyberg, Seal of Approval. 3.
the children’s literature publishing world, who felt threatened by the rising popularity of comics. Building on the work of regional anti-comics groups, North saw comics as a threat to American children and a discredit to both art and publishing. A rightward shift among the American intellectual scene backed his conservative views on mass culture. The post-war New York Intellectuals argued that new media such as radio or comics threatened the integrity of high art/culture in a new way, as mass production and globalization of media made the spread of low art/culture easier than ever before. There was a belief that comic books would grow to replace traditional literature, like novels, and discourage reading altogether. This concern spread from the intellectuals to powerful figures like North and then to educators, particularly librarians and primary school teachers, who saw themselves as the first line of defense for young minds. The primary response of the anti-comics movement was to ban comics of all kinds, in an effort to prevent children from engaging with the medium in its entirety. As the movement evolved, earlier moralistic arguments began to fuse with conservative intellectual views on mass culture, resulting in a strengthened push for bans. These bans ranged from selective, like the lists made by the Catholic Church, to mass book burnings, hosted and organized by Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts. However, outright bans were difficult to enforce, and had little effect on comics consumption.

In response to the failure of the bans, educators and other concerned parties (including publishers like North) attempted to fight fire with fire by publishing their own comic books with content they deemed acceptable. The first of these “replacement” comics was True Comics,

22 Beaty, Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture. 76-77.
25 Nyberg, Seal of Approval. 7.
which replaced fictional heroes with real world figures, such as Winston Churchill.\textsuperscript{26} The idea behind *True Comics*, and others like it, was to replace the reprehensible comics with comics that had high moral standards, superior art and lettering, and could still engage with children in the same way as the “bad” comics could. Over time, the plan was to slowly make the “good” comic books less and less like comics, in order to wean children into more respectable reading habits (like picture books and novels). At first, these replacement comic books seemed like a success, selling millions of issues each month, often at higher rates than traditional books. But, the success of the replacement comics did not actually replace the role of the regular comic books, which were only continuing to grow in popularity. Instead of only reading the “good” replacement comics, sales showed that children were simply reading both.\textsuperscript{27}

As concerns about juvenile delinquency in the United States rose after World War II, mass culture was coming under closer and closer scrutiny. Concerned groups previously targeted film and radio significantly, and censorship was on the rise.\textsuperscript{28} Comic books entered the public crosshairs thanks in large part to the work of child psychologist Fredric Wertham. In 1948, Dr. Wertham published his first anti-comics article (“Comics, Very Funny”) in *Saturday Review of Literature*, which was later republished in *Readers’ Digest*. That year, Wertham published another anti-comics article in *Ladies’ Home Journal* and led a symposium with the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy on the dangers of comic books. In the abstract from the symposium, published in the *American Journal for Psychotherapy*, Wertham detailed his concerns about comics. Primarily, he was concerned about the high amounts of violence featured in comics, claiming that “[a]ll comic books without exception are principally, if not wholly,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Nyberg. 7.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Nyberg. 8.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Nyberg. viii-ix.
\end{itemize}
devoted to violence.”29 This constant inundation of violent imagery into the minds of children resulted in “an entire generation of adolescents who have felt… all the sensations and emotions of committing murder, except pulling the trigger,” argued Wertham.30 Other concerns of his included the simultaneous hyper-sexualization of, and violence against, women omnipresent in comics, an encouragement towards “lynching” stemming from “heroes” like Superman, as well as a general promotion of Nazism through the glorification of pagan gods, “thick necks and ape-jaws,” and overtones of sadomasochism and homosexuality.31 Wertham was never a part of the New York Intellectuals, but his work with mass culture and comic books crossed paths with these elites many times at the height of anti-comics panic in the early 1950’s. Wertham was seen as too European or Germanic for most American intellectuals at the time, due to a combination of a recent mass immigration of European psychologists to the United States and the pro-American bent shaping Cold War American intellectualism.32 This did not stop Wertham from incorporating their rhetoric against mass culture into his anti-comics work. His psychological arguments combined the moral panic of the anti-comics conservatives and the devaluation of high culture arguments of the intellectuals into a concise, digestible argument any American could understand. The comics industry faced a perfect storm in Wertham, and they could not stop him.

Titled in a way that parodied the true crime comics of the early 1950’s, Wertham’s magnum opus, Seduction of the Innocent, was a 300-plus-page tome dedicated to expanding

30 Wertham, “Psychopathology.”
31 Wertham, “Psychopathology.”
32 Beaty, Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture. 9-10, 51.
upon the points made in his previous writings. In it, he cited hundreds of individual comics as well as research he had done through observing his young patients. Wertham’s concerns with comics were a mixture of their mass production and their amoral content. He felt that comics exposed children to violent, dangerous content in overwhelming quantities, and that by reading them, children would become desensitized to it.\textsuperscript{33} Wertham made it clear in \textit{Seduction of the Innocent} that sole blame for the rise in juvenile delinquency cannot be on comic books, and he raised concerns about other mass media, like radio, much like other intellectuals.\textsuperscript{34} Unlike the conservative voices leading the intellectual discourse at the time, Wertham did not want to stop comics because of the perceived threat they posed to American values.\textsuperscript{35} His approach was rooted more so in the pre-Cold War disdain for mass culture, that is, it was a threat to the evolution of high culture rooted in populism and totalitarianism.\textsuperscript{36} By fusing the older intellectual arguments with moral panic, Wertham was able to draw the bridge between all of the anti-comics factions (the post-war conservative intellectuals, the pre-war liberal intellectuals, and the fearful moralists). This made \textit{Seduction of the Innocent} appeal to the widest possible audience, concerned parents and literary intellectuals alike. The impact at the time was massive. Having a venerated and accomplished child psychologist join the forefront of the anti-comics movement legitimized concerns in a new way. For comics publishers, an expert’s book was something too large to ignore.\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Seduction of the Innocent} got so much attention, Dr. Wertham was called in to testify before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1954. The hearings that followed would forever change American comics.

\textsuperscript{34} Wertham, \textit{Seduction of the Innocent}.
\textsuperscript{35} Beaty, \textit{Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture}. 77.
\textsuperscript{36} Beaty. 51.
\textsuperscript{37} Hajdu, \textit{The Ten-Cent Plague}. 243-244.
The 1954 Senate hearing on comic books was the culmination of the nearly twenty-year efforts of the anti-comics movement. As concerns about rising statistics of juvenile delinquency came to the foreground in the 1950’s, comics (as well as other forms of mass media, like film and radio) came under heavy scrutiny. On a regional basis, comics were already facing legislative backlash and pressure to clean up their act, but the Senate hearing put the industry on a national stage. The hearing was held in New York City (where a majority of comics were being published) and broadcast over radio, and for the first time, broadcast on national television. While the anti-comics movement was against all comic books as a medium, the Senate subcommittee hearing was only concerned with horror and crime comics. Those two genres, infamous for their explicit gore and violence, were under scrutiny specifically because of claims like Wertham’s that charged them as culpable in the rise of juvenile delinquency. To their credit, the senators presiding over the hearing wanted the proceedings to be a fair assessment of the potential harm of violent comics. The hearing was never intended to condemn the medium as a whole, nor was it seeking sweeping censorship. The hearing on comics was merely the first in a series of investigations of mass media; radio and film were next in line.

It is clear that the Senate subcommittee was well aware of the arguments of the anti-comics movement, and at least somewhat aware of the contents of some popular comic books. Anxious parents had submitted thousands of letters to Congress, concerned about the impact of

38 Nyberg, Seal of Approval. 20.
40 Hajdu. 245-246. The senate hearings were the first legislative hearing broadcast nationally, as inspired by regionally televised hearings held previously on sensational topics.
42 U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books), 1.
43 U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books), 2.
comics on their children. There had been national news coverage of supposedly comic book-related crimes, and prominent voices like those of Wertham and Sterling North continued to sound off in newspaper editorials. Over the course of the hearing (which lasted a total of three days, with the third day happening a few months after the initial proceedings), witnesses from both sides of the debate were heard from.

The star witness for the anti-comics movement was Wertham himself. His testimony followed the same themes and arguments as *Seduction of the Innocent*, and his other anti-comics articles. For the hearing, he broke down his argument into four questions to be answered:

First, what is in comic books? How can one classify them clinically?

Secondly, are there any bad effects of comic books? …

The third problem is how far-reaching are these bad effects? …

A fourth part is: Is there any remedy? To answer his first question, Wertham first lamented that the hearing would only be scrutinizing comic books, not all comics (like newspaper strips), for he felt that there was questionable content across platforms. His primary concern was with the nature of the content. Here, he used the arguments of moral corruption, and advocated for the definition of crime comics to be expanded to include all comics that have crimes in them. This would have expanded the purview of the hearing (which was meant to be examining the impacts of crime and horror comics) to include superhero comics, westerns, and even some romances. Wertham played up

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45 Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague*. 109. In 1948, two separate instances of child suicides were linked to the deceased’s love of comic books. One of the cases was a hanging that appeared to be a recreation of a panel of a comic gone wrong.
47 U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, *Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)*, 81-82.
48 U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, *Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)*, 82.
the criminal aspect found across genres saying, “[sic]…if a girl is raped she is raped whether it is in a spaceship or on the prairie. If a man is killed he is killed whether he comes from Mars or somewhere else.”\textsuperscript{49} This argument lined up exactly with the rhetoric of the moral critics that all comics were bad, not just a few.

Having established his moral concerns with comics, Wertham addressed his next two points using a combination of intellectual and moral criticism, much in the same style as in his book. In fact, much of his testimony was summarizing the findings of his research for \textit{Seduction of the Innocent}. He explained to the committee that he believed that the comics were normalizing violence and crime in the minds of impressionable children, and on top of that, comics often (according to his observations) also included executable plans and tips for wannabe child delinquents.\textsuperscript{50} Wertham acknowledged that these depictions of violence were not unique to comic books, but it was how cheap and abundant comics were for children that made their contents all the more dangerous. He also used the intellectual argument that mass culture (in this case comics) were not only replacing “good” media (like novels), but they were actively harming literacy rates.\textsuperscript{51} Wertham believed that the use of word balloons and panel structure, children would not learn to read in the normal left-to-right pattern.\textsuperscript{52} By appealing to all sides of the anti-comics movement, Wertham was able to create a compelling narrative of the dire impact of comics on American youth.

His fourth question of how to remedy the situation was where Wertham delivered his final, comprehensive blow. Wertham began by giving an example of how in Canada, an attempt

\textsuperscript{49} U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, \textit{Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)}, 82.
\textsuperscript{50} U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, \textit{Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)}, 87.
\textsuperscript{51} U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, \textit{Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)}, 89.
\textsuperscript{52} U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, \textit{Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)}, 89.
to create a blacklist of titles to ban importing failed to stop the influence of comics because there was no ability to screen every book before it went to print.\textsuperscript{53} Children, in Wertham’s opinion, are too clever for band-aid solutions like a partial ban, so there could only be one solution: stop children from buying comics entirely. Now, Wertham was not calling for the complete destruction of the comics industry; he meant that only discerning adults should have the ability to purchase comic books for their children. Wertham furthered his point, saying how he felt censorship was dangerous, but what he was calling for was not censorship, but \textit{supervision}.\textsuperscript{54}

Several comics publishers testified in defense of the medium, but the many loud voices of the anti-comics movement drowned them out. One notable witness was William Gaines, the publisher of Entertainment Comics (more commonly known as EC, and the first publisher to put out horror comics).\textsuperscript{55} Gaines appeared voluntarily to defend his and his father’s (the founder of EC) life’s work. During his testimony, Gaines argued that the claims of Dr. Wertham (who testified immediately before Gaines) were purposefully taken out of context, and that children are not so impressionable that a comic book could turn a “normal” child into a “perverted little monster.”\textsuperscript{56} He also argued that to censor comics was a slippery slope that could end up resulting in a media environment like that of Communist Russia or China, in which crime is not permitted to be reported in any manner.\textsuperscript{57} Gaines’ testimony was solid, and his arguments held, until the end, when he was caught in a trap of his own making. During his testimony, Gaines stated that the only limitations he put on the contents of his comics are salability and his own personal sense of “good taste.”\textsuperscript{58} The phrase “good taste” was then used against him by Sen. C. Estes Kefauver

\textsuperscript{53} U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, \textit{Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)}, 91.
\textsuperscript{54} U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, \textit{Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)}, 91-92.
\textsuperscript{55} U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, \textit{Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)}, 97.
\textsuperscript{56} U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, \textit{Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)}, 98.
\textsuperscript{57} U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, \textit{Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)}, 100.
\textsuperscript{58} U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, \textit{Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)}, 103.
(TN), who sided primarily with the anti-comics movement during the hearing. Sen. Kefauver presented the cover of a recent issue from EC’s horror line, which featured a woman’s severed head and a bloody axe.\(^{59}\) The senator asked Gaines if this cover fell within the realms of “good taste”, and with his response, that it was in good taste “for a horror comic”\(^{60}\), Gaines delivered the killing blow to his industry. It was clear to everyone that Gaines had only confirmed the worst claims by his opposition, that not only were comics bad, but the creators were, too. Many comics creators of the time watched the proceedings on television, including Joe Simon (one of the creators of Superman) and Jack Kirby (co-creator of many Marvel characters, including the X-Men, the Fantastic Four, and others). Both Kirby and Simon, who watched the hearing on TV together, knew Gaines had made a massive mistake.\(^{61}\)

Having heard all of the witnesses, the subcommittee chairman, Sen. William Langer (ND), issued the final words on the matter, “[a] competent job of self-policing within the industry will accomplish much.”\(^{62}\) With this, the comics industry was faced with a choice: self-censor, or risk action being taken by a higher power. In the months following the hearing, comics saw a massive drop in sales, and publishers were having their books returned, unopened, by retailers.\(^{63}\) Something had to be done to soothe the retailers, the anti-comics crowd, and the federal government before it was too late. William Gaines, who had dug his own grave, set out to make things right and take control of the narrative.\(^{64}\) He drafted a letter to all of his fellow publishers with one goal: to band together and clean up their acts. Out of this was born the Comics Code and its governing body, the Comics Code Authority. Initially, this comics industry

\(^{59}\) U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, *Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)*, 103.
\(^{60}\) U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, *Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)*, 103.
\(^{64}\) Hajdu. 284-285.
trade group called themselves the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA). 65 The CMAA, at first just a collection of comics publishers, began to create a content code. Gaines would quickly leave the CMAA, despite being the one to call them together, for he felt that his horror titles were being unfairly targeted by the council. 66 Dr. Wertham was initially offered a position with the CMAA, but he was never an actual member. 67 Charles F. Murphy was hired as ‘code administrator’ instead. Prior to the publication of the Comics Code by the CMAA, William Gaines of EC announced that EC would cease all publication of horror and crime comics. 68 Gaines decided it was better if EC’s main line went out on its own terms because either way, it was the end of the road. The Comics Code of 1954 would be one of the strictest and most sweeping self-censorship codes in American media, going above and beyond FCC and even Hays’ Code standards. The Code banned all monsters, the glorification of crime or divorce, the use of certain words in titles, among many, many others. 69 Included under the Code’s purview was everything from cover art to acceptable advertising. In one fell swoop, the Code effectively put an end to horror and crime comics, and severely limited romance and cape comics. A team of trained censors who would review a comic at every stage of publication, from pencils to print, enforced the Code. 70

The direct impact of the Comics Code was immediate for the comics industry, with a total industry shakeup by the 1960’s. The industry did not immediately adopt the Code and put it into place after the hearings, and its rocky birth story has already been told. However, once in place, all major publishers used the Code – except for one, Dell Comics. Dell Comics was one of

65 Hajdu. 285.
66 Hajdu. 286.
67 Hajdu. 286. It is unclear as to whether Wertham declined the position, or if the offer was rescinded.
68 Hajdu. 287-288.
70 Hajdu, The Ten-Cent Plague. 290-291.
the largest comics publishers of the Golden Age of Comics (beginning in 1938 with the creation of Superman and ending roughly between 1954-1956). Dell was the publisher behind the first true comic book (*Funnies on Parade*) published in 1933 and were the publishers for a large variety of licensed character comics, such as Mickey Mouse. Their anthology comic *Four Color* was one of the best-selling comics of the time. Dell insisted that the Code did not need to be applied to their comic books because their in-house editorial guidelines were superior. They even took out ads in newspapers and magazines to boast about how wholesome their books were. However, in 1962, Dell’s main comics partner Western broke things off, essentially ending the majority of Dell’s original comics line. By 1974, loss of sales forced Dell to shut down.

Dell was one of many comics publishers that failed to thrive under the Code. Before 1954, there were over 50 American comics publishers, all producing several titles each month. Only ten of them would survive to 1960. Of those ten, only three still exist today: DC, Archie, and Marvel. Most of the smaller companies relied on horror, romance, and crime comics to stay afloat, all genres that the Code targeted. This led to a massive downsizing of the comics industry in the 1950’s, and the growth of power by larger publishers like DC (then known as National). If a small publisher could no longer profit under Code authority, they either died out completely, or a larger group bought them up. Those who survived the initial culling of the 1950’s struggled to

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71 Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*. 161-162.

While publishers dropped like flies, so too did genres. Under the rules of the Code, it was nearly impossible to publish horror, crime, or romance comics. Humor comics had never been chart-toppers, and sci-fi struggled without horror to fill it out. This left a vacuum that superhero comics filled. These ‘cape’ comics had peaked during WWII with some titles, like Superman,
selling over a million issues a month. In the 1960’s, comics revived many of the heroes of WWII era comics, such as Captain America, the Flash, and Captain Marvel. Unfortunately, all the superheroes in imagination could not save the comics industry from a future of bad business decisions.

As the industry shrunk to a handful of ever-more powerful groups, comics were a volatile profession to be in. There were very few creator-owned comics in existence, so creators often saw very little of the profits made from their ideas. The assembly-line style of creation was grueling work, and creators often struggled with poverty. In 1968, the writers at DC came together in an attempt to unionize and receive benefits and consistent wages for their work. An attempt to unionize had happened once before, and the company had simply fired them all, given the abundance of creators prior to post-code shrinkage. Some of DC’s most popular and prolific writers led the second unionization attempt, including Bill Finger (co.creator of Batman), Gardner Fox (creator of Hawkman, Adam Strange, and the new Flash), and Arnold Drake (co-creator of Doom Patrol). Negotiations were rough, and the consequences were dire. The attempt to unionize failed, due to a lack of a united front between the writers and the artists. DC attempted to assuage those who were on the fence with a small raise per page. This would set the standard of per page freelancing for all comics creators to the present day. As punishment for the attempt at unionization, DC fired and blacklisted the leaders, despite their popularity with audiences. This left many, including Finger, who died in obscurity without seeing proper credit

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74 Barr.
75 Barr.
76 Barr.
for his work in the creation of Batman, in poverty and in need of healthcare they could not access.

This example of DC’s corporate greed winning over creators and fan opinion perfectly captures how the Code pushed comics farther into the realm of mass production. Truly, there were no winners in the debate over comics that led to the censorship of the Code. Intellectuals who were critical of mass culture and comics as a part of the rise of mass media saw their worst fears coming true. Profits drove comics so much that they suffered creatively under the restrictions of the Code. If mass culture is lesser because it is profit seeking and not “art for the sake of art,” post-code comics actually fit that description even better than their pre-code predecessors. The loss of genre diversity and the aggregation of publishers pushed comics farther and farther away from the ideals of culture held by intellectuals. This led to nearly a decade long stagnation-period between the mid 1950’s and 1960’s in which little artistic innovation of creativity existed in comics.

Not even anti-comics moralists benefited from the Code. While they were the party whose concerns were met most directly by the Code, their goal was not to ‘clean up’ comics, but to stop them altogether. Children did not stop reading comic books after the Code, although sales would never return to the levels of WWII. Instead of returning to ‘good’ books, children began to turn to new media that their parents hated, like TV and rock ‘n’ roll. The morality protestors

78 Howe, “Notes on Mass Culture.”
79 Jared Gardner, Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012). 196-108. This is not entirely accurate, as certain issues during the 1990’s collector boom sold approximately 5 million copies, and Golden Age comics peaked at around 1.5 million. However, the sales levels of the Golden Age were consistent, unlike those of the 1990’s, which were spikes around specific issues.
were not even able to rid comics of impropriety because of the rise of underground comix. Underground comix would take up the mantle of horror’s gore and romance’s sex and turn it all the way up.

With the Code hobbling creativity in comics, the medium split into divergent paths. The remains of the bigger comics publishing houses would follow the Code and become what is now called “mainstream” comics, and those who refused to bow to the code would find refuge in the growth of 1960’s counterculture. MAD, the sole Code survivor of EC, rebranded as a magazine instead of a comic book in order to avoid censorship, and continued its satirical ways for decades. The comics of the counterculture came from outside of the major publishers, growing from the ground up.

Underground comics (stylized as “comix”, both to differentiate from mainstream comics and to emphasize their adult “triple X” appeal) began with strips published in college or counterculture newspapers. The first comic book formatting of comix was by Robert Crumb, aka R. Crumb, with Zap! Comics in 1968. Crumb fused cartoonish art with explicit, illicit, and above all, ironic, content, setting a tone for underground comix. His early work was so small-scale that he would stand on the street at Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco and sell copies out of a baby carriage. But between word of mouth and the tight-knit nature of the Bay Area’s underground community, Crumb’s comics sold like hotcakes. After Zap! proved successful, other artists began to create their own adult-oriented comic books. Almost all underground comix were created by a single author who wrote and drew the entire comic, and creators were

81 Sabin. 92.
83 Sabin, Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels. 94.
keen to ensure they always held the rights to their creations.\textsuperscript{84} This was a big change from the large teams creating content at the major comics houses, where creators were little more than cogs in a machine. There were occasional collaborative works, such as \textit{Bijou Funnies} and \textit{Arcade}, but single creator comix were king.

Comix were everything the Code had tried to expunge from comics in the 1950’s. They were violent, crude, and filled with poor grammar, drugs, and anti-authority sentiment. This desire to make comix as dark and dirty as possible was born out of both a desire to stick it to the moral critics of the medium and the political debates of the 1960’s over the difference between free and ‘filthy’ speech. This reintroduction of graphic content to comics showed that comics did

\begin{center}
\textbf{Picture 6} \hspace{1cm} \textbf{Picture 7}
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An underground parody (right) of a Marvel comic (left), complete with fake Comics Code seal

\textsuperscript{84} Sabin. 94.
not have to be censored to exist. Underground comix were distributed primarily by mail and advertised through word of mouth by the communities that made them. This was a major step away from publishing standards for comic books, and comix were never created with an intent to profit. Where traditional comics encouraged creators to value the almighty dollar over their art, underground creators made comix for comix’ sake. Comix no longer fit the description of mass culture, nor did they garner the status of high art.

Comix were adult-only (as stated on most covers), and creators and dedicated fans made up the tight-knit community. This combination of community importance and exclusivity created an atmosphere not unlike that of the early comics of the 1930’s. This also resulted in an unfortunate ‘boys’ club’ amongst the most prolific artists, such as Crumb, Lynch, and Stout. This meant an overwhelmingly misogynistic tone and near constant objectification of and violence against women.\(^{85}\) There was also a lot of racist stereotyping in comix, especially of Black people.\(^{86}\) This sexist and racist work did not go uncriticized during its time, with artists’ outside the boys’ club openly disapproving.\(^{87}\)

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\(^{87}\) Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels*. 103.
Marginalized groups also made comix during the underground boom. Female comix creators made comics that promoted women’s liberation (*It Ain’t Me, Babe!*), female sex and sexuality (*Pudge: Girl Blimp*), LGBT issues (*Come Out Comics*), and even abortion (*Abortion Eve*). The difference in portrayal of women between the female and male creators is night and day. Where male artists like Crumb used women as sex objects with exaggerated breasts (complete with ever-erect nipples⁸⁸), female artists drew women as varied individuals with proportions that made sense for the artist’s style (be that cartoony, like Lee Marris⁸⁹, or semi-realistic like Chin

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⁸⁸ Crumb, *Motor City Comics*.
Lively and Joyce Sutton\textsuperscript{90}. There were also a few Black creators of underground comix, and their works focused on civil rights issues and racial inequality. Black comix were varied in genre, like their white counterparts, with everything from fantastical hero comix (\textit{Ebon}) to recent historical fiction (\textit{The Adventures of Black Eldridge The Panther}). These comix were published by Black-owned publishers/printers, either independently or in conjunction with a larger group.\textsuperscript{91}

Underground comix did not want to be associated with mainstream comics, and actively pushed away from the code by including as much banned content as possible per issue.\textsuperscript{92}


\textsuperscript{92} Sabin, \textit{Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels}. 92.
However, this did not stop comix from taking up many of the trappings of the pre-code status quo of comics. On the most basic level, underground comix were able to continue the genre expansion of a medium stifled by the Code. There were horror comix, sci-fi comix, romance comix (although these were far more explicitly sexual than the earlier romance comics), and underground comix would eventually give rise to the creation of graphic novel memoirs. The art styles implemented in comix also call back to pre-code comics, as seen in Crumb’s “big-foot” cartoons or Spiegelman’s frequent mimicry of Dick Tracy strips. W. M. Stout’s horror comix payed homage to EC horror in both visual style and the use of narrator characters, like the Crypt

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Keeper (parodied as a zombie Uncle Sam by Stout). Comix were not only visually alike to their pre-code predecessors, they also employed similar writing styles, like phonetic spellings and purposefully poor grammar. Comix were communal and cultural capital only for the initiated few, in the same way early comics functioned for urban children in the 1930’s. Together, these attributes show how underground comix picked up the mantle of pre-code comics, something the Code made impossible for the mainstream to do.

Underground comix are also where many new elements to comics began. The emphasis on individual creators saw an explosion of stylistic exploration, from cartoony to realistic, psychedelic to brooding. Comix creators were not bound by the ‘house’ styles of mainstream publishers, and the accessibility of the medium allowed for anyone who wished to produce comix. Emphasis on creators also gave rise to creator-owned content, something that had been utterly absent in comics before then. In the 1990’s, comics creators working in the major publishing houses, especially DC and Marvel, would build on the work of comix and create new publishing houses dedicated to creator-owned content, such as Image Comics. However, the creators of the 90’s were not interested in creator-owned content for the same reasons as the creators of the underground of the 60’s and 70’s. Comix creators copyrighted their work under their names to ensure they could always follow their own rules, a move meant to make their comix distinct from the corporate powers behind mainstream comics. The creators of the 90’s wanted to own their work so that they could be the ones profiting from it, not the companies they were creating for.

94 W. M. Stout, Bicentennial Gross-Outs, Yentzer and Gonif Comics, 1976, Collection of Underground comics, A18, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
95 Crumb, Motor City Comics; Lynch, Nard n’ Pat.
96 Hatfield, Alternative Comics. 16.
97 Sabin, Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels. 92.
This change from pure artistic expression to seeking wider distribution and profit was a return to the traits of mass culture that had once separated comix and those under the Code. As more and more creators ‘sold out’, comix went from being art for the sake of art to being comics to sell. This was the transition that marked the change from comix and underground to “alternative comics”. Alternative comics (alt comics, for short) still had graphic, adult content, and continued to be creator-owned, but there were distinctive differences. The primary difference was that alt comics creators worked with an audience in mind that extended beyond that of the creator and their friends. This evolved into creating content that would be the most sought after, the most profitable. The end point of this change in non-mainstream comics was with the new publishing houses of the 1990’s, when alt comics began to be referred to, as they are today, as indie comics. Indie, in this case, is referring to the individual(s) who make and own the comics’
contents. Large houses, like IDW and Image, publish indie comics en masse right alongside Marvel, DC, and Archie Comics in comic book shops across the globe.

The impact of underground comix and their contributions to the comics medium goes beyond indie publishers. Comix introduced an element of self-referential content. Crumb would feature himself as a character in his comics98 and Art Spiegelman would often put himself as the main character in his work.99 This would eventually transform into memoir comics, which came into the spotlight through Spiegelman’s masterpiece, *Maus*. Now, memoir comics and graphic

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98 Crumb, *Motor City Comics*; Crumb et al., *Bijou Funnies*.
novels regularly top best-seller lists and are often the site of heavy praise, from *Maus* to the many autobiographical works of Alison Bechdel, such as the immensely popular *Fun Home*. This transformation of comics into a medium capable of deep and poignant works would not have been possible without the work of underground comix.

However, the division between graphic novels and comic books is a symptom of a larger problem. By rebranding certain works as graphic novels, the devaluation of comics as low brow continues and the medium suffers as a whole. So called mainstream comics do not receive the acclaim of graphic novels, nor the scholarly analysis. Without these, there is no incentive for comics creators to go beyond seeking a profit. This is not to say that for-profit comic books are devoid of value. Chris Claremont’s X-Men, Brian Michael Bendis’ Spider-Man, and Tom King’s Vision were all written under the capitalist constraints of the mainstream, and they are all shining examples of incredible storytelling in comics. Bill Sienkiewicz, Stephanie Hans, and Phil Noto all used superhero comics to push the bounds of comics art and created stunning visual masterpieces. Yet, current comics discourse continues to subscribe to the hierarchies of art and culture set in the 1930’s, resulting in medium-wide stagnation.

Comic books remain firmly within the definitions of mass culture set decades ago, and an emphasis on profit is clear across the medium, from superhero mainstays to creator-owned indie productions. Monsters, violence, sex, and drugs have all returned to comic books, and a rating system akin to that of movies has replaced the ubiquitous Comics Code Seal of Approval. It would appear that neither the intellectuals nor the moral critics were successful in their efforts. However, to conclude that comics “won” or made it out unscathed is also clearly untrue. The heavy censorship of the Code led to an industry-wide downsizing, and the loss of many genres depicted in the medium. Publishers became more concerned about being able to sell at all under
the Code, at the loss of creative freedom and artistic integrity. The Code also acted as a scarlet letter for comics, permanently relegating the medium as low culture for children. This continues today in the ongoing narrative that comic books serve little literary purpose, and to be considered successful or praised by the elite, comics must be rebranded as graphic novels. The moral debate over comics is largely over, but the mass culture criticisms have not changed since the 1930’s. While it is impossible to know how comics would have grown and evolved without the Code, its impact is clear. The Code pushed comics into business practices that valued money over art, and this drive to profit spread across all corners of comics, creating the business models still in use today. Graphic novels are able to escape the machine through disassociation with comic books and publication outside of the industry and into the world of traditional publishing, but they also exacerbate the artificial divide between the “high” of graphic novels and the “low” of comic books. Until the comics industry addresses its obsession with profit and moves beyond the false dichotomy of high/low culture, the Code will remain as a shadow over the medium, a stamp on every cover.
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