Harvey Kurtzman and the influence of *Mad* magazine

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The influence of *Mad* can be thought of as both general and specific. It was general in the ways it impacted on the “popular culture of the adolescent white American male in the second half of the twentieth century, a whole realm of pubescent transgression that has marked the maturation of boys in this country since the 1950s.”[[1]](#endnote-1) *Mad*’s influence is more specific in terms of the impact it has had on the development of the field of contemporary comics and graphic novels. *Mad* opened up spaces of possibility, as Hilary Chute has made clear: “*Mad* ushered in a new era for the complexity of comic books.”[[2]](#endnote-2) It did so through “a rigorous self-consciousness about the comic book form; it attended to, and established, a formal self-reflexive grammar.”[[3]](#endnote-3) For Chute, *Mad* was the point when comics, at least in a North American context, achieved not only a marked level of sophistication but also established a mode for both engaging in and reflecting reality.

As a magazine, *Mad* has changed little since 1960.[[4]](#endnote-4) Each issue’s cover incorporating the grinning face of a boy named Alfred E Neuman, the magazine continues to make use of a set of formats and concepts that were refined during the latter years of the 1950s under the editorial control of Al Feldstein. Together with publisher Bill Gaines, Feldstein sought to improve the magazine’s sales through identifying successful elements, accentuating them, adding some more of a similar nature, and generally broadening the humor. Feldstein’s fine tuning of *Mad* worked, setting out the formulaic approach that can still be found by picking up the current issue. Superficially, *Mad* still resembles the magazine that Marshall McLuhan wrote about in the 1964 book *Understanding Media*. McLuhan wrote that *Mad* replayed in print what existed in forms such as film, radio and photography. In particular, it incorporated the methods and languages of advertising, doing so when television threatened the comics industry as a rival for attention.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, it would be hard to consider the magazine that is on sale today as occupying the same status that it did in previous decades.

The general cultural impact of *Mad* can be further understood through Ethan Thompson’s discussion of a letter from 1963 to FBI director J Edgar Hoover, one of a number of letters dating back to 1955, that asked whether *Mad* was to be feared as communistic: “Was it dangerous, subversive propaganda, bent on undermining the American way of life, or just good fun?”[[6]](#endnote-6) The period from the late 1950s to the early 1960s saw the rise of *Mad*, and the full realisation of this question as to whether it was fun or dangerous, to the extent that to become a target of parody was evidence of fame and status: “Even as worried youngsters and concerned mothers wrote Hoover to condemn *MAD* or seek his advice, celebrities wrote *MAD* to publicly thank the magazine for honouring them with a parody.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Thompson argues that *Mad* used parody to negotiate tensions and conflicts in life in the postwar United States. Tensions articulated in television, aspirational consumerism and visions of lifestyle.

Parody could allow for taking pleasure in one’s cultural surroundings while simultaneously demonstrating that one is not taken in by it. Feldstein’s *Mad* was defined by this kind of parodic engagement with popular culture. Thompson argues that *Mad* played on the argument made in Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders*,(1957) which made popular the idea that people were manipulated by advertising, their desires exploited through unseen mechanisms.[[8]](#endnote-8) Through the late 1950s to the early 1960s, *Mad* went on to establish itself “as a monument to irreverence - as well as a cleverly disguised venue for cultural criticism.”[[9]](#endnote-9) As sales of *Mad* increased, surpassing 1 million by 1960, it questioned the order of things in a political climate that for many appeared oppressive,[[10]](#endnote-10) as part of a broader growth of youth culture, a popularization of “‘underground’ or ‘countercultural’”[[11]](#endnote-11) forms of humor.

However, the magazine that Feldstein inherited had already been created and shaped by Harvey Kurtzman, who wrote and edited *Mad* until Feldstein took over in 1956. Kurtzman’s black and white magazine had itself grown out of the *Mad*’s earlier incarnation as a comic printed in color, the first humour title to be introduced to EC’s New Trend line of publications. Today’s version of the magazine is still very much a descendant of Kurtzman’s comic, an influence suggested in the testimony of actor Harry Shearer:

I still remember the first edition of *MAD* being passed furtively along the rows of desks in school. Harvey and his crew lit a fire of subversive laughter. They taught us to pay attention to sloppiness of thought and execution in our politics and culture, and they taught us that ‘popular’ need not, for a magical moment at least, be synonymous with ‘lowest common denominator.’[[12]](#endnote-12)

Shearer makes the point firstly that without Kurtzman’s *Mad*, not only would there be no *Saturday Night Live*, there would be no *Simpsons*.[[13]](#endnote-13) Shearer relates his memoirs of *Mad* to the education of generations of young, mostly male, readers, who were taught what to laugh at: “politics, popular culture, authority figures.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

The influence of this comic has also become a point of reminiscence for Robert Crumb. As a teenager in the late 1950s, he and his brother produced *Foo*, a fanzine that focused on Kurtzman’s *Mad* and selected other comics that pre-dated the Comics Code Authority. This self-imposed set of restrictions, established in 1954, dramatically changed the tone and content of comics in the United States. Once established, distributors would only handle and display comics that presented the seal of the Comics Code Authority on their covers. These comics had been subject to adequate scrutiny. The content would have to be free of any elements that could be interpreted as immoral, unsavory or generally disrespectful to authority. The Code was the consequence of a succession of events that reshaped the landscape of the comics industry in the United States. Following the publication in 1954 of Frederic Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent*, which depicted comics as sources of delinquency, crime and suicide, a climate of fear escalated. Jared Gardner places *Seduction of the Innocent* within a wider context that saw comics as subversive and dangerous.[[15]](#endnote-15) Bart Beaty has also drawn attention to Wertham’s attack on comics as only one facet of a pervasive hostility towards the form, but argues that Wertham’s position can be distinguished from a general fear of subversion.[[16]](#endnote-16) Beaty suggests that Wertham was interested in combating the perpetuation of violence in comics, not in a politically conservative or reactionary attack. Nevertheless, his appearance as a witness before Estes Kefauver at the Senate Subcomitee Hearing into Juvenile Delinquency was devastating. EC publisher Bill Gaines appeared as a witness to defend his comics, but failed to diffuse the hostility. It was clear to others in the industry that if there was no self-regulation, then not only might censorship be imposed by the government, but the distribution and sale of comics could be made impossible. Despite their comics being popular with adult audiences, EC’s New Trend titles could not survive the imposition of these new restrictions on allusions to sex, violence, and forms of explicit disrespect for authority.

Robert Crumb and his brother were of a generation of readers who were just a little too late. The comics now produced for them in the latter half of the 1950s were of a different breed to those that had come before the Code. Stumbling across these comics from the recent past, the Crumbs developed a reverie for them as lost objects that emitted an aura of romantic martyrdom.[[17]](#endnote-17) They were relics from an era that Crumb felt that he had missed out on. He became nostalgic and started to seek out the material traces of the past. The Code-approved comics of the late 1950s and early 1960s read as vacuous and juvenile for Crumb and his peers, who found their inspiration in the comics of the pre-Code era. David Hadju argues that “those who grew up to be comic-book artists and writers themselves carried the work’s irreverence, idiosyncrasy, and ambitions into underground comics and the graphic-novel movement.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Crumb also points out that it was not just him who had been influenced by *Mad*, that many artists who would go on to draw underground comics grew up with a love of the vitality of comics from the pre-Code period. Out of all of these, *Mad* can be seen as the biggest influence, embodying what was appealing about EC and other pre-Code comics:

The first issue that I saw on the stands when I was a little kid confused me. I had never seen respectable American institutions made fun of publicly that way. Here was a publication making fun of highly respected American institutions in the square, military, post-World War II environment and doing so in a crude, weird way. Here was this vision of America that countered all the stifling, goody-two-shoes fifties-propaganda totalitarian vision that was put forth in the media, the schools, and everything.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Not only did he find the artwork beautiful, but it was also strange, esoteric and outside of his expectations of all things mainstream. For Crumb, *Mad* took something that may have been in the air more generally, not entirely unique, and “‘brought it to a kind of perfection. It was such a weird, quirky, freaky thing. Me and my brother and a lot of people in our generation never got over it.’”[[20]](#endnote-20) Crumb has narrated his discovery of Kurtzman’s *Mad* in a strip titled ‘Ode to Harvey Kurtz.’ The nine-year old Crumb encounters the first issue of *Mad* in October 1952, then is later stuck by the ugliness of Basil Wolverton’s cover image of issue 11, a painstakingly detailed subversion of the Mona Lisa.[[21]](#endnote-21) He cites his aspirations to write satire like Kurtzman, and draw like the *Mad* artists.[[22]](#endnote-22) The strip also makes clear the extent that Kurtzman acted as a mentor for Crumb.

Kurtzman joined EC, short for Entertaining Comics, on the cusp of change. The company was about to enter into the phase of production for which it is famous. Kurtzman himself had no reservations about citing the period of the early 1950s as one of significance in the history of comics in the United States: “At no time in the preceding fifteen years had so much pure artistic talent been unleashed with such intensity. For the first time, a publisher brought out a whole line of comics that could hold an adult reader’s interest.”[[23]](#endnote-23) That publisher was William M. Gaines, or Bill Gaines as he is generally known. Kurtzman sought work with Gaines under the misapprehension that ‘EC’ still stood for Educational Comics, as it had when the company was founded by Bill’s father Max Gaines. Approaching the company as a young freelancer in 1949, Kurtzman was looking to work on educational non-fiction. His portfolio contained stories that had been drawn for Stan Lee at Timely, the company that would subsequently be known as Marvel. After his discharge from service at the end of war, Kurtzman wrote and drew over 150 single page comedic strips called ‘Hey Look!’ for Lee. Gaines apparently spent over an hour going through the ‘Hey Look!’ material while he “howled with laughter.”[[24]](#endnote-24) He was initially given work drawing ‘Lucky Fights It Through’, a western story with an educational message warning readers of the dangers of syphilis, before becoming a regular freelance contributor to EC.

Kurtzman drew stories across EC’s various genre titles in 1950 and in 1951, sometimes also taking on writing duties. After working on crime, horror and science fiction stories, Gaines made use of Kurtzman’s ability to write, subsequently making him editor of two new bi-monthly titles: *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*. The former was first published with a cover date of November/December 1950, running until March 1955. The first issue was edited by Gaines and Feldstein, but Kurtzman was credited as editor by issue 3. *Frontline Combat* was first published with the cover date July/August 1951, and ran until January 1954. Kurtzman was eager to create a new kind of war comic. He was reading about the Korean war while fostering an increasing sense of dissatisfaction with stories that glamorized military conflict and saw his own titles as an opportunity to innovate. For Baetens and Frey, these titles formally preceded both thematic territory and formal techniques used in contemporary graphic novels.[[25]](#endnote-25) Kurtzman’s war comics offered something fundamentally different from the more simplistic tales of patriotic valor that dominated the genre. For example, he included non-American protagonists, in order to depict the enemy as human rather than as one-dimensional villains. Hajdu describes Kurtzman’s battlefields as places where “(..) the gallant American knights who marched through most war comics gave way to jittery, ambivalent GIs, sympathetic enemies who felt pain when they were shot, devastating losses, and pointless victories.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Overseeing much of the production, Kurtzman’s labor on these books was intense. He wrote the majority of stories in both books, and produced tissue paper overlays of the panels, laying out the stories for the artists to follow, and castigating those who strayed too far from his designs. Kurtzman also supplied his artists with drawings and photographs to work from, and even read his scripts aloud to emphasize their dramatic tension. His attention to the narrative impact of the stories extended to the use of color, sometimes experimenting with one-color backgrounds, single-color panels, or varieties of color that contrasted from panel to panel.[[27]](#endnote-27) He drew many of the covers for the EC war comics and produced the finished art for 11 stories across the two titles.

The intensive approach to detail, realism and his desire to oversee the overall production of the comic was both exhausting and time consuming for Kurtzman. He would often disregard deadlines while he allowed himself more time for historical study to clarify details, or to correspond with GIs to gather their unwritten stories. What made the work particularly frustrating for Kurtzman was a perceived discrepancy between his income from EC and the money earned by his colleague Al Feldstein. While Kurtzman was carrying out meticulous research, Feldstein was able to edit seven titles, covering science fiction, horror and suspense. All books were published six times a year. As Feldstein and Kurtzman were paid the same amount for each book, Kurtzman was making considerably less. Pay was not linked to circulation, essentially favoring a prolific approach over Kurtzman’s method. Gaines was faced with a difficult situation. It would be unfair, he thought, to pay Kurtzman more for his two books, as it would seem as if he were paying Feldstein less for each of his titles. A humor comic was a way around the problem. Gaines believed that Kurtzman had already demonstrated an outstanding aptitude for humor in his ‘Hey Look!’ work. If Kurtzman could put together a humor comic in a week, he could increase his income by 50 percent.

However, the exact origins of *Mad* are somewhat ambiguous. Kurtzman wrote that he created *Mad* “out of desperation.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Hajdu complicates this narrative, writing that Kurtzman “embellished”[[29]](#endnote-29) the story of *Mad*’s creation in claiming that he came up with the idea for a humorous comic while hospitalized with jaundice. In this story, the illness has been brought on by overwork on the war comics. Hajdu agrees that there is evidence that Kurtzman was hospitalized for jaundice while at EC, but that this was about nine months after *Mad* had debuted. There is also some uncertainty as to exactly how *Mad* got its name*.* Maria Reidelbach argues that although Kurtzman claims that he came up with the name *Mad* on his own in a brainstorming session, Gaines offered a different account: “Gaines remembers that it was he or Feldstein who suggested ‘EC’s Mad Mag,’ a phrase often used in the letters columns to refer to EC’s horror comics, and that Kurtzman shortened it, ‘in a brilliant move,’ to simply ‘Mad’.”[[30]](#endnote-30) However, even if these origins are contested, it seems clear that Kurtzman took the general idea of a humor comic and turned it into something more specific. Kurtzman saw the possibility that *Mad* might not just be funny, but that it could be satirical. He looked to an already existing form as a model: “‘I picked up in the garbage, or somewhere, some college magazines. They impressed me as being a new kind of humor, a unique kind of humor.’”[[31]](#endnote-31) These were magazines that made by and for young people, which did not have much presence outside of student life. In these examples of satire, Kurtzman saw possibilities for a comic that could have an appeal that went further than the boundaries of beyond a campus, particularly in the articulation of anger, which seemed lacking elsewhere:

There was some satirical humor around in those days, if you looked hard - in Fred Allen’s radio show, for instance - but there wasn't any of the completely irreverent sledge-hammer satire that I found in the college stuff. Those magazines were outrageous in their approach to humor, and I wanted to be outrageous. They suggested to me not ideas but an attitude - a mood, something bigger than detailed ideas.[[32]](#endnote-32)

For Kurtzman, *Mad* developed as something that was superficially rowdy, like the college magazines that inspired him, but was “necessarily thoughtful”[[33]](#endnote-33) under the surface.

Although *Mad* was supposed to allow Kurtzman to be more prolific, by freeing him from time-consuming research, it was clear from the first issue, which went on sale in the late summer of 1952, that his approach was consistent in other respects. He continued to work with artists that had contributed to the war comics. As well as professional respect, there was often genuine friendship involved in his relationship with these artists. Kurtzman would divide up the four stories in the early issues of *Mad* between Jack Davis, John Severin, Wally Wood and Will Elder, trying to match stories to artists: “Will didn't do structures - he did bodies, faces, people, caricatures - but Wally Wood was structural. He could draw rocket ships in complex perspective and machinery that looked like it worked! His anatomy was first-rate.”[[34]](#endnote-34) The first issue contained four stories written by Kurtzman, each of which parodied one of EC’s genres, drawn by artists who had worked on the types of stories they were making fun of. Jack Davis drew ‘Hoohah!’, playing on tropes from EC’s horror titles. ‘Varmint!’, drawn by John Severin, was a western. ‘Ganefs!’ saw Will Elder doing crime, while ‘Blobs’, drawn by Wally Wood, re-imagined E.M Forster’s science fiction story ‘The Machine Stops’.

Kurtzman also continued the practice of providing the artist with detailed layouts, drawn in pencil on tracing paper at the scale of the finished art. Kurtzman refrained from drawing the stories himself, although he did draw covers, including that of the first issue. Hajdu describes Kurtzman’s use of artists as setting “his old friends loose at *Mad*.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Kurtzman’s high-school friend Will Elder made a particular impact. Elder’s technical ability was directed towards an intensely detailed approach, adding an excess of material that was not called for in the script: “Zany and chaotic, it was a Marx Brothers movie come alive on the printed comic page.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Elder “overran the pages with bits of lunatic business - unscripted little stories within stories, visual non sequiturs, kooky details.”[[37]](#endnote-37) In the story ‘Ganefs!’ Hajdu counts “no fewer than three dozen sight gags not in the script. (The number increases each time one counts.)”[[38]](#endnote-38) The name that Elder gave to this element of *Mad* was “chicken fat,”[[39]](#endnote-39) the logic being that this was the part of the soup that gave it the most flavor, but that was the worst for you. Kurtzman wrote that there was a particular relationship between himself and Elder and that the artist would produce work that went far beyond what was written: “Will would take my ideas and add twenty more sub-gags in the backgrounds. And they would be funny sub-gags; he would carry my stuff forward and enrich it be a multiple of ten.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Elder’s saturation of space created expectations that are still associated with the magazine.

The earliest stories in *Mad* parodied other EC comics, and did so by genre, taking a broad approach to types of stories, scenarios and characters. For the second issue Kurtzman wrote ‘Melvin’. Drawn by John Severin, this was a parody of the character of Tarzan: “That story wasn't terribly successful - John wasn't the ideal artist for it - but it was my first parody of a specific target.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Renaming Tarzan as Melvin recalled previous appearances of the name that an observant reader might pick up on. Melvin was the unseen monster whose shadow loomed on the cover of issue 1, it was the name of one of the characters in ‘Blobs’, and sometimes artists would be credited as Melvin. Recurring word gags were as much a part of *Mad* as visual humour, and in particular, aspects of Yiddish found a place in *Mad*. Furshlugginer, a piece of battered junk, became a popular term, as did Veeblefetzer, a term used for a complicated mechanism. Ganef, a Yiddish word for a thief or a scoundrel, was used to name the crime story in issue 1. Polish also found a place in *Mad* in the use of Potrzebie. First used in issue 11, May 1954, it too became a recurring term.

Hilary Chute sees the work done on EC’s war comics, and the development of the form of *Mad*, as comprising an indivisible dual impulse. This is an impulse comprised of the need to carry out research and ensure historical accuracy combined with an impulse to satire. For Chute, this latter aspect has become commonplace in much of contemporary culture, while the former can also be found in examples of contemporary graphic novels.[[42]](#endnote-42) Kurtzman continued to develop these send-ups with a move towards more specific targets, which led to ‘Superduperman!’, published in the fourth issue. ‘Superduperman’ boosted sales, even though the threat of a lawsuit from National Periodicals, who were then the owners of Superman, might have stopped Gaines from publishing the story at all. Gaines felt certain that there was a future in parodies, and so was keen to move ahead with publication, while Kurtzman undertook research to find a legal precedent that would support the legality of *Mad*’s parody. Ultimately ignoring the threat, they published the story, and no further legal problems ensued.

As sales rose to 750,000, outselling EC’s horror titles (which had circulations of around 400,000), Kurtzman expanded his parodic approach, introducing other aspects of culture and everyday life in the United States into *Mad*, such as movies and television, magazines and advertising. He also worked at formal innovations, pushing the boundaries of how a comic was supposed to look, “incorporating photographs, fine art, and pop iconography.”[[43]](#endnote-43) After two years of *Mad*, the comic and Kurtzman were attracting attention. An article published in the June 1954 issue of *Pageant*, titled ‘Now Comics Have Gone MAD’, demonstrated reverence for Kurtzman’s *Mad*:

In 1954, *Pageant* - then a top-selling digest-sized magazine - ran a spread about *Mad*, and as a result the editor offered me a job on *Pageant*’s staff. To persuade me to stay with EC, Bill Gaines offered to transform *Mad* into a dream of mine: a real magazine in a larger format, with black-and-white insides, and selling for a quarter rather than a dime. I edited five issues of the “slick” *Mad* before I had a disagreement with Bill and left.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Kitchen and Buhle present the transition to a magazine as something that Kurtzman pleaded for, but that was rejected until this rival offer.[[45]](#endnote-45) Reidelbach also emphasises the offer from *Pageant* as a decisive factor in the transformation of *Mad* into a magazine.[[46]](#endnote-46) This transformation, whether intentional or accidental, enabled *Mad* to survive the drastic change that was brought about by the introduction of the Code, which wiped out EC’s existing comics line. In Reidelbach’s account, Gaines is presented as having made a lucky choice in granting Kurtzman’s wish to turn *Mad* into a magazine, as it escaped the confines of the Code.

Ethan Thompson reads the situation as reversed: “*MAD*’s cultural prominence was in large part born out of this crusade against the dangerous effects of comics. Gaines agreed to let Harvey Kurtzman, the founding editor of *MAD*, his last remaining successful title, turn the comic into a magazine in order to get around the code.”[[47]](#endnote-47) Although the narratives of *Mad*’s origins generally favor the accidental survival of *Mad*, there had been warning signs. In 1953, the success of *Mad* led to imitation from other publishers, while at EC Gaines asked Feldstein to develop a new humor comic. *Panic* was published in December 1953, and included a darkly surreal take on the 1823 poem ‘A Visit From Saint Nicholas’, drawn by Will Elder. The piece gained notoriety and national press coverage, with the Governor’s Council of Massachusetts demanding that the comic be banned across the state. This notoriety led to a visit by the New York City police, who purchased a copy of *Panic* from EC employee Lyle Stuart in the company’s mail room. After taking offence at a Mickey Spillane parody, the police arrested Stuart “for selling ‘disgusting’ literature.”[[48]](#endnote-48) The case was argued out of court by Gaines’s layer, but this was only a symptom of a worsening situation.

July 1955 saw the new version of *Mad* on sale, black and white inside, achieving the rare distinction of selling out and having to be reprinted. The new *Mad* also introduced a recurring motif that would go on to function as a metonym for the attitudes and values of the magazine:

The first issue of the magazine also included, as an apparent space-filler, a portrait of a dim-looking kid above the phrase “What? Me Worry?” It would take another year for him to settle in as the magazine’s mascot and be anointed as Alfred E. Neuman. The ardent stupidity and quiescence that Alfred embodied was always a front, a ruse to weaken the enemy’s resistance: Hey, let the kid read it - it’s just a dumb joke book. In fact, *Mad* took the world more seriously than popular adult magazines of the 1950s such as *Pageant*, and it provoked young people to worry a great deal about grown-up matters such as the Cold War, duplicity in politics and business, and social issues such as race relations.[[49]](#endnote-49)

However, despite *Mad*’s success, and the pleasure that Kurtzman took in being in charge of a magazine rather than a comic, his financial situation was still limited by fixed page rates. This dissatisfaction would ultimately lead to Kurtzman’s finite tenure on *Mad*.

*Mad*’s transition to a magazine “was the first successful attempt.”[[50]](#endnote-50) to transition a comic book into something that resembled a magazine for a broader audience, but the early issues of the magazine were still oriented towards and enjoyed by an adolescent rather than adult audience. It wasn’t until Kurtzman left EC to work with Hugh Hefner that he tried something aimed directly at adults. Hefner offered Kurtzman a satire magazine, printed on glossy paper in color. This became *Trump*, which debuted in 1956. The art team included Jack Davis, Will Elder and Wally Wood, along with a younger generation of less established artists, while text contributions included work by Mel Brooks. The first two issues of *Trump* sold well, but production costs were considered too high and Hefner withdrew financial support. Kurtzman next developed the magazine *Humbug*, which ran from August 1957 to October 1958. It featured work by Kurtzman’s regular collaborators, but it sold poorly.

In 1959, Ballantine Books published *Harvey Kurtzman’s Jungle Book*, a paperback volume of four stories for adults drawn and written by Kurtzman. Hilary Chute points out that this was another innovation on Kurtzman’s part, and was ahead of its time, arguing that its format was “not unlike Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, the series of four linked vignettes that in 1978 was the first book to appear with the publisher-approved designation A Graphic Novel.”[[51]](#endnote-51) It was not a commercial success, but did offer a younger generation of artists a glimpse of what might be possible. As Baetens and Frey point out, the description of a work as a graphic novel “did not have much, if any, popular currency in this period, but works such as *Harvey Kurtzman’s Jungle Book* established adult, long-form, complex visual literary material.”[[52]](#endnote-52) It deployed methods he developed in *Mad*, playing with genre forms to achieve narratives both humorous and critical. The themes were political, most obviously in the final story ‘Decadence Degenerated’, which addresses racist violence and lynching in the context of a small town in the Deep South:

What is clever is that this section of the work mocks racism but then also teases how cinema so often fails to depict it appropriately or to really fully speak out against it. Kurtzman’s page layouts and drawing style support and advance his satire. They offer close-up shots of protagonists but also provide splash-page single images and more detailed close-ups. Compared to comics of the period, fewer frames are used, and there is a greater willingness to offer close-ups on characters rather than more distant framing.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Although the book did not find a market in 1959, Ballantine, who also reprinted material from *Humbug*, did find commercial success with their small format *Mad* paperbacks published between 1954 and 1993. Baetens and Frey also add that it is surprising that “such an important work for the history of the medium has only ever received one major reprinting,”[[54]](#endnote-54) but add that it is appropriate that the date of that reprinting “was at the height of the breakthrough of the graphic novel in 1986.”[[55]](#endnote-55)

Kurtzman’s next magazine was *Help!*, published by James Warren, who in the mid-1960s developed *Creepy*, *Eerie* and *Vampirella*, horror comics that owed much to the EC comics of the early 50s. Published from 1960 to 1965, *Help!* was Kurtman’s longest running publication after leaving EC. The magazine relied heavily on found photographs and movie stills with humorous captions. It also used fumetti photo stories, a format that was uncommon in the US. Inspired by this format, the young Terry Gilliam, who had been previously obsessed with Kurtzman’s *Mad*, produced his own versions for a student magazine. Gilliam subsequently travelled to Manhattan in the hope of working on *Help!*, and by chance was successful, joining Gloria Steinem as a member of junior staff on the magazine. *Help!* still published comic strips and cartoons, including work by Crumb and Gilbert Shelton. Kurtzman wrote a risque *Archie* parody, ‘The Adventures of Goodman Beaver’, drawn by Elder and developed from a story that first appeared in *Jungle Book*. Their collaboration in this adult vein continued in the lavishly painted ‘Little Annie Fanny’, which they worked on between 1962 and 1988 for *Playboy*.

Education played a significant part in the later years of Kurtzman’s life. He taught at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan from 1973 until 1990. During this time, he compiled fifteen editions of an annual compilation of students’ work called *Kar-Tunz*. He also wrote, with Michael Barrier, the insightful and informative *From Aargh! to Zap!: Harvey Kurtzman’s Visual History of the Comics*, published in 1991. This followed the publication of *Harvey Kurtzman’s Strange Adventures* in 1990 by Byron Preiss and Epic Comics (an imprint of Marvel). The collection of stories written by Kurtzman includes art by, among others, Sarah Downs, Crumb and Sergio Aragonés. These are genre pieces, paying homage to the parodies of early *Mad*. They read as dated by the standards of 1990 but in ‘The Super Surfer’, drawn by Dave Gibbons, the artist manages to sneak in a few of his characters from *Watchmen* into a splash page showing a Super Convention. Kurtzman’s affectionate parodying of Stan Lee’s Silver Age writing provides a fitting sense of circularity. Lee had not only given Kurtzman an early break in the comics industry, but had also shown consideration to Kurtzman in the early 1970s, offering him an editing position at Marvel, which Kurtzman turned down.

*Strange Adventures* included an introduction from Art Spiegelman, who wrote that seeing Kurtzman’s work made him want to become a cartoonist and draw comics. Speigelman is adamant that there is a genealogical connection between ‘Micky Rodent’, discovered by the pre-teen Speigelman in a paperback *Mad* reprint, and *Maus*. This geneaological connection relates to other aspects of Speigelman’s work:

There’s a clear link between Kurtzman’s *MAD*, underground comics and *RAW*, the ‘avant garde’ comics magazine edited by Françoise Mouly and myself. There’s an overwhelming link between the anarchistic and subversive brand of humor invented by Kurtzman that made zillions of dollars for his publisher at *MAD*, and the ‘Wacky Packs’ and ‘Garbarge Pail Kids’ I developed for the Topps gum company that made zillions of dollars for them.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Shortly after Kurtzman’s death at 68 in 1993, Crumb and Spiegelman were joined by more voices from the comics industry. Issue 157 of *The Comics Journal* was a tribute to Kurtzman, with contributions from creators of different generations, including Alan Moore and Gilbert Hernandez. Jean (Moebius) Giraud writes of coming “face to face with those joyous spoofs” [[57]](#endnote-57) in *Mad*, surrealist explosions “that instantly plunged me into the most delightful state of confusion.”[[58]](#endnote-58) Editor Gary Groth wrote about his discovery of *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*, which proved to him that comics were capable of drama as well as humour. Will Eisner stated that whatever might be written about Kurtzman’s work, he wanted to tell his late friend that “you were a mensch.”[[59]](#endnote-59) Certain that Kurtzman would be remembered as an important part of the history of the medium, he asks ‘… who will tell about the shelter you gave (René) Goscinny or the start you gave Gloria Steinem? And who… who will tell the story behind why you never got the full financial reward that should have been yours for creating *MAD* magazine?’[[60]](#endnote-60)

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