

Comics: American liberty or suppression?

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We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

(<http://www.house.gov/Constitution/Constitution.html>).

The identity of the free American people was not just secured in its constitution. When Europe discovered the New World by the end of the fifteenth century, the dream and fantasy of it being a free world was deeply entrenched in its identity at that time. After this Europe started to colonize the land, as it colonized many parts of the globe.

A significant question in cultural discourse now, as “America has irresistibly moved toward center stage” (Kroes, 1996, p. 171), is whether America is now colonizing and dominating Europe by a process called Americanization or MacDonalidization. The MacDonalidization thesis is adhered by those who believe America is replacing traditional European culture by its own standards. Comic books can be considered an embodiment of American culture. So are European comics suppressed by American culture, or are they kept free to form a particular identity itself, as the liberal country of the United States of America would logically pledge for?

What is the MacDonalidization thesis?

Ritzer defines it this way: “The process by which the principles of the fast -food restaurants are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world” (Ritzer, 1993, p.1). The principles of the fast -food restaurants, or also of credit cards (Ritzer, 1993), are regarded slightly different,

depending on the author writing on the topic. The history of the concept of the past century is investigated to arrive at a general explanation of the thesis in the end.

Well conceivable is the fact that the concept of America had already been formed theoretically before it was discovered (Kroes, 1996, p.1, 172). Myths and fantasies had emerged around the concept in Europe, while it was referred to as “the land of promise” (p.8), “a world of freedom” (p.172) and to “its freedom from academic constraints” (173). “The millions who still left Europe, up to 1914, persisted in heading for the Americas” (Palmer, 2002, p.621). The many immigrants America welcomed, especially in the first half of the 20th century, contributed to the multiethnic character of its culture.

The “family of nations” (Kroes, 1996, p. 51) did not just import other cultures. According to Pells (2002), America has also emitted its own culture abroad after adjusting it according to the foreign cultural influence. America rearranges the European patterns to new ones by their own free will (Kroes, 1996, p.165), not always thanked for by the Europeans. It blurs the demarcations between low and high culture, “combining the sacred and the profane” (Pells, 2002), while Europeans almost praise the distinctive cultural classes.

Europeans have been witnessed with certain amounts of anti-Americanism from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards (p.10). A genuine anguish for the erosion of the traditional European culture led for some to a response of criticism of mass culture (Kroes, 1996, p. 17). Others were more favourably disposed towards “America’s modernity” (p.18). Both regarded the U.S. as a representation of Europe’s near future. This ambiguity remained throughout time, concerning the opinion of Europeans on American culture.

The criticisms consisted of various aspects. Anti-capitalism was always a main part. The thoughtless consumism derived from capitalism was best exemplified and many saw this as a negative characteristic (p.27). Ritzer elaborates on the critique by pointing out the dehumanizing environment in fast-food restaurants, the need to deliver perfect products despite the impossibility for nature to do so, the huge costs and risks McDonaldization results in, and most of all the requirements McDonaldization will demand of our planet and us in the future (1993, p.16-8). Even within America, its culture has been criticized, mainly by academics, on its deconstructionist character. However, by adhering to this view they split the American culture as a whole even more, thereby being destructionists themselves (Kroes, 1996, p.174-5). The criticism is based on good reasoning (most often), McDonaldization will not certainly result in a better world.

The supporters of McDonaldization naturally focus on other aspects. Products have become available to a larger audience, the variety of offered goods has increased, sales of certain goods are no longer linked to a certain geographical spot or specific time as distribution is now easier and faster (result: global diffusion of cultures), a higher quality has (often) been accomplished, equal treatment of consumers has become more likely, convenience and comfort are enlarged with a bigger speed of production (p.14-6). America's culture has lured "to the young and the rebellious in Western society" (Pells, 2002) probably due to its speed and the trends where the youth is very responsive to (Kroes, 1996, p.172), in contrast to the older and more conservative generations. Due to the international character of America's culture and therefore also of McDonaldization has also increased the ability for other people to accept this culture and its commodities. The evidence shows that McDonaldization has improved our world to a certain extent.

The American culture that is exported according to the MacDonalidization thesis should be defined more specifically. "The American style of eating on the run" (Ritzer, 1998, p. 84) exemplifies the American consumer culture. This culture of standardized companies selling products in countless franchises and its impact on society is exported to all the corners of our globe.

The concept MacDonalidization is derived from the corporation McDonald's. It has an extensive influence on popular culture these days (p. 5), and was the origin of this American mass culture. The company is used in discourse as an epitome for America, and is sometimes even more important than the country itself (p. 6). Some even call it sacred (p. 7). The business is expanded beyond its normal restaurant shop (think of places like military, schools, hospitals, railway stations) and Mc is now an established icon always associated with McDonald's (p.8 -10).

Many other countries that have now experienced the concept of McDonald's have formed their own varieties on the concept (p.4) "Their culture has become other people's property" (Kroes, 1996, p. 176). The culture of America is now remembered by our generations as our own national culture. America's culture is taken and made ours.

MacDonalidization used to be opposed by the Russian expansion of its culture in Eastern Europe (Ritzer, 1998, p. 84). As communism has disappeared from the global scenery as a colonial cultural power, local cultures are the only ones left to 'fight' the ever-increasing movement of Americanization (p. 84). Products of McDonald and comparable business' are localized and the meaning of the corporation differs along their geographical position. One can argue that our actual world is homogenised by MacDonalidization but also that it is heterogenised by localization.

Kroes (1996) believes American culture has become “unavoidable” (p.173) today and we have no choice other than letting the flow of its products affect us (p.177). Ritzer, by noting “America will become virtually everyone’s ‘second culture’” (1998, p. 89) would agree with him. Pells forms an opposition to both as he adheres to the view that America has not culturally dominated the world so far that it can possibly have resulted in a global American replica, instead he argues the other way (2002).

Whether the United States of America is dominating the world culturally will not be questioned here. The dispute will be if the world of comics is dominated by America, or not.

Comics...?

Comics have existed for ages and have developed extensively, especially over the last century. The history of comics has had a boost after World War II as the popularity of comics increased sharply. People had more leisure time and most important: more money to afford luxury products such as comic books. Although cartoons can be seen as luxury goods, it also had other functions in society over time. The fun part of reading comic strips is likely to be seen as one of the most important features to their readers, nevertheless, most cartoons also have a message to share with their reader.

Comics need to be defined as the medium it is, as it has a deeper meaning than just the object, be it a comic book or a comic strip. A clear definition is that comics can be regarded as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, p. 9). This response is crucial as this can form the

popularity of a specific comic and give information to the reader, which can be relaxing as well as informative in the sense of norms and values.

Many items can be considered a comic when studying the history of cartoons. The prehistoric cave painting could be regarded as the primary comic because it was meant to communicate although not all paintings formed a true story by subsequent pictures and language was not yet used. Later on the Egyptians developed hieroglyphs to count the harvest to register the amounts of tax paid and to organize their trades. The pictorial writing cannot be considered a comic, seeing that either the language is missing or the pictures. The rebuses are though very much alike. Another seemingly historical comic is the Bayeux Tapestry, an infamous seventy meters long tapestry that tells the story of the battle of Hastings. "Narrative strips, usually in the form of woodcuts, became a popular medium for the expression of religious and political ideas during the Reformation" (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2003). The invention of the printing press contributed major to the world of reading, so too for comic books although only in a later stage. Another cause might be the huge metamorphosis comics went through during the inter bellum and especially after the second world war. At first comics were no longer accepted and even banned. However later on got their gratitude back and made the comic industry flourish as comics were very popular, again.

The Golden Age of comic books, from 1930 until 1951, was named this way as the comic book was incredibly popular item during this era. The reason for this occurrence could be the cheap price of the product during World War II, probably due to unequal quality of stories, art and print quality. The demand for comics provided many unemployed with an occupation as well, although often at low wages and in sweatshop working conditions. Nevertheless, since comic books were primarily

aimed at children, many adults still remember it now with warm feelings, as the hallmark of their youth. In the late 1940s and early 1950s most politicians and moral crusaders blamed comic books as a cause of crime, especially youth crime, moral deterioration, increased use of drug, and bad results at school. As a consequence of these concerns, schools and parent groups held public comic book combustion, and some cities even decided to ban comics. The industry of comic books decreased sharply as a result of the believe that comics had a bad influence.

Following World War II, Japan had created a special comic book industry, called manga. "Although science fiction themes were in evidence, manga has traditionally presented a much wider range of subject matter than have American comics, and manga are more widely accepted in Japan than are comic books in America" (wikipedia.org, 2004). A common example is pokemon, which is a craze all over the world as the impact on the youth was incredible. Every child wanted to compete with his or her friend playing this cardgame that was linked to the comic pokemon. Together this made a very strong combination that created its own type of culture all over the world, however, its origin is in the Japanese manga.

In Europe, another branch of comic books emerged whose stories evolved around the 1950s. Most of these comics are based on native comic figures that experienced many adventures all over the world. Famous examples of this strand are Tintin and Asterix the Gaul. Most comic books use stereotypes of the countries visited, while some even contain the political opinion of the artist, though intrinsically. Nevertheless, often norms and values are indirectly found in the cartoons as well.

"During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a surge of underground comics occurred.

These comics were published independently of the established comic book publishers and most reflected the youth counterculture and drug culture of the time.

Many were notable for their uninhibited, irreverent style, which hadn't been seen in comics before" (wikipedia.org, 2004).

This idea was formed by the youth to show themselves and the outside world what their view on society was. In this case the comic book was clearly used to exchange different types of cultures, youth culture for instance, to communicate and find sympathy for comics again.

Briskly summarized one could say that "in the early 20th century, comics were accused of glorifying unsavory characters and thus encouraging children to misbehave. They were also condemned as being a waste of time"(Encarta.com). For a couple of decades this negative view at comics stayed the same, but in the 1960s people began to reevaluate comics and appreciate their artistic qualities. "Comics are now regarded as one of the most significant forms of 20th -century culture" (Encarta.com, 2004). As comics were seen as a typical sign of youth culture, this was, not surprisingly, also their main audience. Nevertheless, comics contributed in a significant way to contemporary culture, not the least because of the message contained within the comics. Primarily important was namely the fun for the readers. Norms and values were introduced in the cultural genre of comics the comics, so that it would be educative for the, mostly young, readers as well. On the other hand comics can give other messages as well like a political message or a sexist message when it is denigrating towards women for instance.

To Conclude...

Comic books has strongly stabilized its position as an artifact of nowadays culture; it can even be considered a mass media communication asset. Although comics are mainly intended as leisure, very often they contain a message for the reader.

Comic books are very popular by the youth, who see them as an ideal object for hours of fun. Typical fact is that, nowadays, more and more grown -ups like to read a comic strip as well. This has been quite different during history, as comics were seen as a bad influence that America brought along with the MacDonalidization of the world. Where the youth loved comics, the parents and politicians opposed to it, which made it even more interesting for the youth to keep reading them. An own subculture of comic books was created by the youth, the underground comics.

The view of the parents and politicians on American mass culture improved over time as they learned to accept the culture. Al so, it became obvious that America was by far the only producer of comic books, and therefore could no longer be associated with American culture as such. Comics today are created all over the world and for this reason are not part of the MacDonalidization. The production of comic books in the Westernized world (Asia, Europe and America) can be seen as a joint venture of the coherent cultures. European comics are obviously not dominated by the Americans, but have an own identity and role in the world of comi cs. Nowadays comic books are accepted in our cultural society and have even become the subject of academic empirical research.

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