

CQU: MMST11010 Illustration & Visualisation

Week 9 Lecture: Fantasies become actualities

Introduction

Last week we looked at the development of drawing as a form of social and political comment. We observed the emergence of pamphlets as a medium for dissemination of scenes and caricatures that often depicted the ridiculous side of contemporary events and persons in order to voice opposition to the status quo. Sometimes they were observations of grossly serious situations but portrayed in a humane or whimsical light. We saw how this tradition lent itself quite readily to incorporation into broadsheet and newspaper formats as they emerged in the industrialising West. Artists could make associations and assertions with images that could not be readily achieved with words. This genre of drawing—the cartoon—could also counterpoint and relieve editorial content.

This week we firstly look at how a related mode of drawing—the humorous non-political cartoon—rapidly transformed into a commodity. Some cartoons outgrew the newspapers and moved on into dedicated publications. In the early decades of the C 20th various adventure comic characters emerged and within a short time the comic book emerged as a truly successful global phenomenon, and yet one which demonstrated culturally unique variations.

We look at how the characteristics and qualities of comic narratives carried readily from print to celluloid and how the two mediums evolving side by side influenced each other. In particular we observe the commoditisation of the fictional character taken to new heights with the maturation of the animated cartoon industry.

Then we look also at the products Australian illustrators during that pre-TV boom time. Whilst this country's small population may not have fostered a mass market for home-grown comic books we will discover some unique examples of children's illustrated books which have since become all-time classics.

Comic characters as commodities

On both sides of the Atlantic during the tail end of the C 19th, as newspaper-style magazine publishers were finding burgeoning audiences amongst the growing middle classes and the newly literate working classes, they usurped the selling power of amusements. It became obvious that fantasy characters, with the right balance of quirkiness, earthiness and pathos, sympathetically portrayed in cartoon form, could assume 'lives' of their own and create loyal followings.

Commonly cited examples of this phenomenon are the popular characters of the British cartoonist Charles Ross (notably with assistance of the creative talents of his partner Emilie de Tessier using the pen-name Marie du Val) and the American, Richard Felton Outcault. The characters themselves—respectively, *Ally Sloper* and, *The Yellow Kid* were fictional entities that came to gain status somewhat larger than life—were the real stars. And like true stars, they became commodities (commodities are articles of trade or commerce that can be processed and resold).

Ally Sloper



Ally Sloper, 1867, in the magazine *Judy*. (Source: <http://bugpowder.com/andy/e.ally.sloper.01.html>)

A London slum resident, Ally was “essentially a con-man and a drunkard... involved in all kinds of schemes... his name was a pun on sloping off up the alley-way to avoid the rent collector.” (Sabin 2003). His antics were initially published in the form of a regular comic ‘strip’ in a popular ‘lifestyle’ magazine of the time called *Judy*.

The Ally Sloper character was so popular that he persisted through a succession of authors as cartoon historian Don Markstein outlines:

In the 1880s, Ross and du Val left the character, selling him for a flat fee to "Judy's" publisher, Gilbert Dalziel. Dalziel launched a new weekly, "Ally Sloper's Half Holiday", with a cover date of May 3, 1884. Thus, though it didn't resemble today's comic books very closely, Sloper became the first comics character to get his own magazine. Cartoonist William G. Baxter handled Sloper in the new venue, succeeded upon his death (in 1888) by W. Fletcher Thomas.
 Markstein, D., (2001-02)

The Yellow Kid



The Yellow Kid, 1896, in *New York Journal*, (Source: Wood 2004)

The Yellow Kid started out as just one among a number of colourful characters from a seedy New York tenement neighbourhood called *Hogan's Alley*. From the outset he was distinctive in that, even though he ‘spoke’ a kind of broken childlike Bronx-English, he had a very mature sensibility. Indeed, like Sloper, he

was definitely not a children's character. Actually, The Yellow Kid did not speak. Rather, thoughts attributable to him were written on the front of a long, broad nightshirt which became his 'trademark' and which, just as soon as his popularity had grown such that the additional cost was justified, came to be printed in a bright yellow colour.

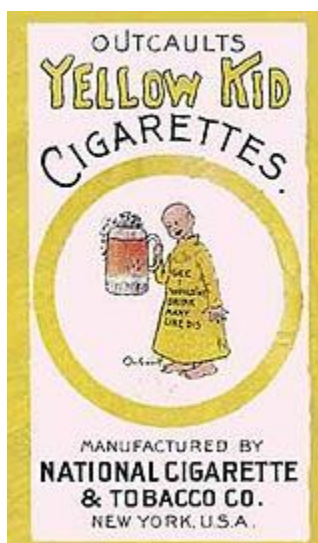
Like Ally, the Yellow Kid also survived a succession of authors. His popularity was probably increased by a barely but fairly resolved legal battle that resulted in his cloned existence in two rival US newspapers. This is an amazing story best told by those who have researched it, including David Westbrook whose essay; *The Business of the Strips* is on this week's reading list.

Another aspect that unites these two pulp stars is the extent of the associated merchandise promotion. As can be seen from the cover of the Judy magazine reproduced below it was a publication was a saturated with advertising.



Cover to Judy. May 4, 1892, (Source: Sabin 2003)

Both Ally Sloper and The Yellow Kid were used to promote all manner of consumer goods from pills to sauces to cigarettes to clothing. In addition, the publishers engaged the readers with interactive techniques such as running caption competitions and seeking suggestions for episodes. Sloper's publisher, Gilbert Dalziel instigated a club for his character's fans.



Yellow kid cigarette pack (Source: The R. F. Outcault Society's Yellow Kid Site)

Whilst these characters were commercial vehicles and commodities in their own right their authors never seemed to lose sight of the socio-political heritage of the cartoon. Part of the amusement appeal to the

readership was the lampooning of the status quo, authority figures and the social practices of the upper classes.

The effective commoditisation of the characters resulted from a combination of:

- economically achieved creation of abundant clever and appealing content;
- application of advanced technology in production; and,
- engaging the consumer through interactive marketing and merchandising.

The role of *new media*, then and now

The successes of comics such as these and their integration with the emerging popular mass media of their times have interesting parallels with our contemporary moment. Think of the annoying little frog that has saturated interfaces large and small with its imitation motorcycle routine. What is it about such fictional entities that give them the power to pervade? If the answer to that question was easily answered then I'd be a millionaire already!

There is a commonality between these examples of successful marketing of applied art from 150 years ago and those foremost in today's consumer environment. *New media* is implicated—then: emerging forms of high-volume and colour lithographic printing supported by mass-distribution networks, and—now: emerging forms of digital creation, production and networked and mobile communications.

Implementation of advances in technology offers opportunities to create demand through exciting and enticing product enhancements. Simultaneously, the technology offers means to satisfy that increased demand. The significance of the successful integration of the technological component with economic imperatives cannot be underestimated.

However, the relevance and appeal of content to its audience is always the key element of popularity. Consider that around the time that the publishers were capitalising on the successes of *Ally Sloper* and *The Yellow Kid* the fledgling photographic medium was about to be unshackled and released into its temporal mode—the movie. In this new medium the narrative and dramatic potential of the comic could be realised and characters liberated from their pages. Yet, despite the challenge that the emergence of animated movies could have posed to the fledgling comic book industry, the latter was yet to have its heyday. The huge growth in popularity of comic books that would occur over the first fifty years of the C 20th took place alongside the emergence of the movie industry.

Ukiyo-e in Japan



Suruga, Satta no Kaijo (The sea off Satta, Suruga), no. 23 in the series *Fuji Sanjuu-Rokke* (Thirty-six views of Mt. Fuji), woodcut by Hiroshige, 1859. (Source: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, reproduction number LC-USZC4-9689)

It is interesting to note that there existed an equivalent consumer-oriented graphical market in Japanese culture of the C 19th. Japan at the time was relatively isolated; largely on account of its own protectionist policies. For three centuries the popularity of mass-produced affordable posters called *ukiyo-e* had been maintained. The tradition of *ukiyo-e*, a term that may be translated as “picture of the floating world,” spawned many styles fashions and technical variations. Essentially they were woodcut prints produced by teams of painters, engravers and printers. When Japan did begin to open up to the world this tradition melded well into its acquiescence to Western artistic influence. It evolved into a modern whimsical art form known as *Manga*.

Emergence of comic books

Like most timely inventions, the earliest examples of comic books emerged in many locations within a window of opportunity where socio-cultural and economic conditions were appropriate. The term ‘comic’ was coined after a British title devoted to weekly fun (half in cartoon format and half as stories) called *Comic Cuts* made its debut in 1890. Whilst in this example the term ‘comic’ obviously relates to the jokes and humorous content, over time, the term ‘comic book’ has come to refer to any book that uses a primarily graphical mode to portray a narrative. Although there are now many conventions for incorporation of text (including speech balloons, panels and so on), the text is usually subordinate in that the narrative is conveyed primarily through the visual modality.

Most comics are not reliant on text to convey the passing of events, dramatic conflict and meaning. Indeed comics have often been stigmatically derided as *the literature of the illiterate*. In historical and cultural studies of the comic, the ideology expressed in the content, the popularity of the medium, and the threats comics have regularly been perceived to pose to social order and decency are often analysed in terms of socio-economic class relations.

Historically and in the contemporary there are many genres and sub genres of comics. Prior to the World Wide Web, the small magazine print format was the most economical means of servicing a broad market. It also enabled the servicing of special interest groups with an affordable product through a limited print edition. The subscription format became an effective vehicle for fostering cult following through creation of identity with specific and often limited appeal. The dedicated fan anticipates each issue. The nature of the publication cycle and its regular yet limited availability is conducive to consumer habit-forming and loyalty. It is perhaps ironic that a format that emerged to satisfy the demand for economical literature is now the source for an extremely lucrative collectors’ market.

What is credited by many as being the earliest graphic novel was published by the Swiss Rudolphe Töpffer in 1837. It was 40 pages long with 6 to 12 panels per page, with text under the panels to describe the story. When an English language version appeared in 1841 the title was translated as *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*.

However, cartoon historian, Andy Bleck (a.k.a ‘konkykru’) in his excellent WWW resource, “Andy’s Early Comics Archive” contends that an illustrated poem produced by Joseph Freiherr von Goetz in 1783 called *Lenardo and Blandine* should take the honour of being the first comic.



An excerpt from *Lenardo and Blandine*, Joseph Freiherr von Goetz, 1783 (Source: Bleck, <http://bugpowder.com/andy/e.goez.part02.html>)

Bleck's comment about this book of 160 sketches (reproduced as etchings) is worth citing in full because Andy outlines some of the characteristics that define the comic book as more than a quirky genre of literature. Interestingly, Bleck proposes that the desire to portray the temporal dimension in the visual culture of the West was symptomatic of a change in, what has been referred to in earlier lectures for this course as *worldview*, and, what he refers to as "cultural psyche":

The first comic?

... this is the first comicbook and in a way the first genuine comic ever. Goetz tells all of the story visually, not just a few key scenes, he takes the reader along and into the visual moments of the narrative. Time itself is displayed, it passes in the story while you 'watch' it, in real time so to speak.

A comicbook older than the declaration of independence! In a way this story also is a declaration of independence, independence of emotion from the constrictions of society and custom.

More important than the story itself is how it proves that the emergence of comics is not purely the result of technological invention. Something a lot more complex was happening, to do with a shift in the cultural psyche of the western hemisphere, probably in combination with technological advance. The book was a result of trying to make a new and better sense of the world, in other words, part of the Enlightenment.

Goetz was not a great artist like Töpffer or Busch, but this is a highly original and fascinating work, especially as it avoids all flippancy. Not only is it a comic, it already has features that would only appear in the 20th century: Long sections with just the dialogue as text, the insistence to show every moment, reminiscent of some recent Manga, the obsessive concentration on just one person's emotions and her progressive breakdown, something which would be more at home in an avantgarde comic of today. And simply to have a woman as the central figure, which didn't happen again until 'Helen' by Wilhelm Busch, and then not again until Jaime Hernandez let his 'Maggie' grow up. (Apart from various sexy adventure heroines, like Modesty Blake, Barbarella, Supergirl, etc) (Bleck, <http://bugpowder.com/andy/e.goez.part01.html>)

Cartoon characters as trademarks

In a book called *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, Geoffrey Batchen cites numerous sources from the period prior to the recorded invention of photography to convincingly demonstrate that the desire to make 'photographs' was evident in Western popular, artistic and scientific culture preceding the development of the physical and chemical capability to expose and fix images of permanence to a substrate. Similarly, if we follow Bleck's logic as expressed above, then the early forms of comic may be seen as expression of desire that anticipate the invention of the animated movie. However, this logic would not explain the remarkable longer-term evolution of the comic format both in congruence with and tangential to the animated movie format.



Still from *Felix Doubles for Darwin*, 1924, M J Winkler, silent animation uses cartoon speech balloon conventions (Source: <http://www.archive.org>)

Certainly, some of the early examples of animated movies, especially those from before the invention of the 'talkies', display all the signs of carrying over the conventions of the earlier medium into the later—a common observation in media studies. But in the case of the simultaneous emergence of the animated

movie format and the comic book format as seen historically through the period: 1920s, 30s and 40s there could be said to be a much more interdependent and synergistic relationship.

It is my opinion that a maturing of approaches to legitimising the ownership of characters contributed to this process. The copyright battles and ambiguities of ownership outlined above in relation to The Yellow Kid and the Ally Sloper characters were overcome by application of the world-wide trademark regulations. This is a point made also by Westbrook in *The Business of the Strips* (one of this week's readings).

The passing of the English *Copyright of Design Act, 1839*, introduced a system of registration (during the same year that Daguerre made public his photographic process). In 1883 a single consolidating and amending Act was passed embracing Designs, Patents and Trademarks. Similar legal enactments took place in France and the US during this period.

Trademarks are legally sanctified, representative agencies. As Westbrook says, a trademark is a way of making a brand name a form of property. "Trademark protection, in stark contrast to copyright protection, can be renewed indefinitely". Companies may use a trademark to preserve the value generated by a cultural product's loyal audience. In a symbolic sense this legal entity gives a brand a life of its own.

We commonly associate trademarks with logos we see on everyday products that we buy in the supermarket. The word 'logo' in English languages stems from a Greek term 'logos' for word. In the contemporary English language it also carries notions of the French, 'idéologie'. The trademark as a logo, or ideologue, has as much to do with advocating a particular ideology as it does with naming or pictographic representation. According to Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, "Ideology is a 'Representation' of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence". A trademark virtualises the culture of an entity and the desirability of a commodity. Media saturation of branding is an attempt to make omnipresent this imaginary relationship to promote consumption of produce.

A trademark exists as a product of discourse in a cultural environment. In this way fashions, popular notions and memes inform trademarks. Then, in turn, trademarks themselves become part of the cultural landscape. In this way a trademark can both subjectively reflect and objectively represent a concept or entity or movement with which it is contemporary. Indeed a trademark can become intensely involved in this culturalisation process that reaches from the roots of economic power to the most extreme perimeters of distribution and consumption.

Because the production of animated movies requires much more capitalisation (they are more labour and resources intensive) than the production of comics, there is a greater need to protect this investment. As Westbrook points out, the example of *Superman* comic book, movie, and television serials shows that "making the character into a trademark rather than a merely copyrightable fiction [...] consolidates the character's protection as property under U.S. trademark law".

Loonies, super heroes and adventurers

The range of genres and diversity of characters that have come out of the comic book industry, especially as it converged (mostly in the US) with the animation industry, is so immense that one could not hope to approach this topic in a lecture such as this. Several Internet resources are provided in this week's links for those who may wish to follow up the genealogy of the comic book/animated characters. The point best made here is simply that there are quite distinct cultural variations to be observed in even a precursory overview of material up until, say 1950.



Animated gif adapted from *Superman*, animated movie with sound, 1941, The Fleischer Bros (Source: <http://www.archive.org>)

Whilst the American traditions will include superheroes on the one hand (for example, *Popeye*, *Flash Gordon*, *Phantom*, *Superman*, *Batman* etc, etc); on the other hand it also takes in many, many loony and amusing characters (*Gertie the Dinosaur*, *Felix the Cat*, *Oswald the Rabbit*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Bimbo*, *Betty Boop*, *Mighty Mouse*, *Bosko*, *Porky Pig*, *Daffy Duck*, *Bugs Bunny*, *Elmer Fudd*, *Roger Rabbit*, *Tom & Jerry*, *Wille E Coyote*, *Dumbo*, *Bambi* etc, etc ...)

The British tradition includes the everlasting *Dandy*, *Beano* and *Rupert the Bear* comics, has also seen the rise and fall of *Boy's Own* adventure classics and some memorable features including: *Animal Farm*.

The stars of the European heritage would have to be *Tintin* and *Asterix*.

In Japan the Manga tradition of comics is claimed to have been initiated by an artist called Tezuka. To catch up with the movies arising out of this tradition we have to cheat beyond 1950 to the mid 60s where we find *Kimba the White Lion*, *Black Jack*, *Astro Boy* and *Dororo*.

In Australia, Jimmy Bancks' *Ginger Meggs* newspaper comic strip had its first annual comic book in 1924. These were published for the next 35 years. In 1925 there was also a Meggs film entitled *Those Terrible Twins*. *Fatty Finn*, drawn by Syd Nicholls became *Ginger Meggs*' rival. Finn had annuals from 1928 and a weekly from 1934. There was a movie called *Kid Stakes* in 1927.

Interestingly, Australian publishers, Frew, claim to hold the record for producing the world's longest unbroken run of *Phantom* comics. The first Australian issue was released on 9th September 1948, and in 1998 Frew celebrated their 50th year of continuous publication of the *Phantom*. The content is mostly imported and covers are altered for the local market.

Arch-rivals and antiheroes of the comic

The rise of the comic book was exorable. Concerns about the depiction of violence and illegal and immoral behaviour, concerns about the lowering of standards of literacy and, class-based stigma contributed to anti-comic reactionary political movements in the United States in particular, coming to a head in the early 1950s. One account of how these forces combined to bring about a sustained slump for the comic industry is included as the second reading for this week.

Australian illustrated children's fiction

Whilst this country's small population may not have fostered a mass market for home-grown comic books in the period to 1950 it is worth noting artists who produced unique children's illustrated books which have since become all-time classics.

Arguably, the most notable of these is Norman Lindsay (1879-1969) who was not only a painter and print-maker of renown but also a prolific commercial artist. He wrote and illustrated *The Magic Pudding*, which was first published in 1918 and had to wait until 2000 to be made into an animated movie. The original has masterful characterisations of *Bunyip Bluegum* and his grumpy uncle *Wattleberry* (koala bears), *Barnacle Bill* (a sailor) and *Sam Sawwoff* (a penguin) and a host of classic Aussie villains. The three heroes are

members of the 'Noble Society of Pudding Owners', whose "members are required to wander along the roads, indulgin' in conversation, song and story, and eatin' at regular intervals from the Pudding."

Also memorable and highly regarded for their unique characterisations of Australian bush flora and fauna are the childrens books by May Gibb. *The Gumnut Babies*, her first book about Australian bush fairies, was published in 1916. Perhaps her most famous book, *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie* in 1918. Her publications include *Flower Babies*, *Wattleblossom Babies*, and other *Gumnut* fairytale books. Her *Bib and Bub* comic strip series ran for years in Sydney newspapers.

Another quite prolific Australian illustrator of childrens' books from this period was Ida Rentoul Outhwaite. She also produced a comic strip for the Weekly Times from 1933 featuring a koala called *Benjamin Bear*. Ida's speciality though was fairies. Fairies were broadly popular in the 1920s and 30s.

Naturally enough, the koala features in many Australian childrens stories. Another memorable characterisation is that of *Blinky Bill* by Dorothy Wall. The first of a trilogy of books was published by Angus & Robertson in 1933.

There are links regarding these Australian artists for further information in this week's Related Links panel.

New wave of Aussie comics

In the 1980s and 90s the comic book format and its audiences burgeoned in Australia. This resulted in a whole range of titles testing out niches in new markets. This trend continues today with e-zines and online comics. David Carrol has published an article via the web site *Tabula Rasa* entitled, "Australian Comics: a History" which provides an excellent overview of these events and has an associated illustrated chronology of Australian titles. For those who wish to follow up on this interesting topic there are links in the Related Links panel for this week.

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