

*Paper prepared for the
Third Euroacademia Global Forum of Critical Studies
Asking Big Questions Again*

Florence, 6 – 7 February 2015

*This paper is a draft
Please do not cite*

You Can't Fool the Children of the Revolution: 'Cultural Anti-Imperialism' and the Influence of American Underground Comics in Britain 1966-1980

Political Engagement

There was an increasingly disenchanting and finally vociferous opposition to the Vietnam War by the 'counterculture' in the USA in the 1960s, and the role of 'underground' publications became central to the identity and beliefs of that counterculture. Yet whilst these publications, such as *The East Village Other*, and *The Berkeley Barb*, espoused anti-establishment views and opposition to the war, the graphic styles used and the visual impact became increasingly important. It was as if these publications were intent on proving Marshal McLuhan's 1964 dictum that 'the medium is the message'. Within these magazines comics became some of the most popular items, and provided the counterculture with some of its most iconic images. Whilst these designs were sometimes utilised in political articles, in the main comics dealt with more overtly humorous material. It was as if the underground comics provided the same function as comics did for mainstream publications – they were the 'funnies'. But the situation was more complex than that. Robert Crumb's work became increasingly autobiographical, and often critical of many of the beliefs of the underground itself. Gilbert Shelton's Furry Freak Brothers were hippy drug users who outwitted the inept police who chased them. It could be argued that Crumb's more extreme sexual fantasies and Shelton's espousal of the drug culture were political gestures. As Richard Neville commented; "Underground organisations are inherently political – even the restaurants" (Neville, 1971, p214)

Stylistic Influences

But there are problems of definition. These were also highlighted by Tom Forcade, the 'Underground Press Syndicate' coordinator, who commented in 1968: "Underground is a sloppy word and a lot of us are sorry we got stuck with it" (Forcade, 1968)

A strong element in the counter culture which many writers ignore is nostalgia. Many creators had an interest in early comic strip artists, Disney animation, and in particular EC Comics.

Thus stylistically many artists owed a debt to earlier generations, but broadly speaking an underground comic stories displayed one or more of the following characteristics; favourable references to banned drugs, an overt or implicit political message or comment, and a willingness to express ideas in an outspoken manner. Comic artists like Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton, and poster/comic artists like Victor Moscoso were also hugely influential in Britain. Initially British underground magazines, such as *Oz* and *International Times*, reprinted American underground artists. This was facilitated in part by the 'Underground Press Syndicate' which allowed free use of any article by magazines, wherever they might be based, that belonged to the syndicate. Images that could be seen as peripheral, including the comics, can be seen as vital to the counterculture's view of itself, its cohesion and meaning, as explained by Dick Hebdige:

...the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not directly issued by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. (Hebdige, 1979, p.17)

But where once a drawing style was used to portray happy-go-lucky believers in the American Dream, now it was used to portray drooling losers, oppressed by society and obsessed with their own problems. Once the subject matter has changed, the style itself acquires meaning by association.

The reproduction of American work led on to the most famous British underground comics of the 1970s, the London-based *Cozmic Comics and Nasty Tales*, which featured both British and American material, and there were then many other regional production centres in the UK. Initially it was certainly the case that British undergrounds produced a series of clones of the successful American artists and writers.

Technological Restraints

The impact of technology on comic production in this period was significant. The Arts lab and 'Free Press' movement of the mid-1970s made cheap offset-litho printing facilities available at reasonable prices to community groups and anyone unable to afford the prices of mainstream printers.

Collective Bargaining

By 1977 there were enough underground creators in the UK for a national 'Konvention of Komix' to be organised. This period also saw the rise of independent female comic creators and the change of emphasis from 'underground' to 'alternative' sensibilities. The change was slow and subtle, but it can be argued that alternative comics, in the main, would no longer necessarily see sexual imagery as an expression of freedom, and were less likely to be political, but rather aimed to be 'adult'. The rise of feminism meant that much of the earlier underground work was seen as sexist. These debates helped to fragment the counterculture, as did the end of the Vietnam war and the disgrace of US president Richard Nixon. Without the war and Nixon the underground had lost two of the enemies that had helped to hold together various disparate groups. In the UK there was then a mixing of more home-grown models and the influence of art colleges on the comics produced both in terms of aesthetics and narrative.

Commercial engagement

None of the British publications were financially successful for any length of time. A combination of the low status of the form, poor distribution channels and censorship problems all conspired against them.

Arguably the rise of an alternative sensibility also robbed the comics of some of their power. As Dick Hebdige has argued, it was impossible for the underground to remain in complete isolation:

The creation and diffusion of new styles is inextricably bound up with the process of production, publicity and packaging which must inevitably lead to the diffusion of the subcultures subversive power. (Hebdige, 1979, p.47)

Conclusion

It can be argued that the underground comics of the period changed little in terms of politics. As Walter Benjamin argues;

...the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate an astonishing number of revolutionary themes and can even propagate them without seriously placing its own existence of the class that possesses them into question.(Benjamin, quoted in Walsh, 1981, p.6)

Just as the mainstream American culture could be seen as a hegemonic, almost imperial, influence on much of the Western world so the underground could be seen in the same light. Their 'revolution' was better, bigger and sometimes more violent, and its influence helped to create an arguably somewhat paler British version. However some UK comic creators, and the atmosphere they created, did change the way in which comics were perceived, particularly by a new generation of artists and writers. This has led to mainstream British comics being able, for example in Judge Dredd, to create a character that is a satire on fascism, or in Tank Girl, a strong, subversive and powerful female lead character in a mainstream comic; *2000AD*. Equally Alan Moore has been able in *V for Vendetta* to create an anarchist hero whose image has fed directly back into contemporary protest movements.

Forcade, T. *Orpheus*, August 18th, 1968

Hebdige, D. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Methuen, 1979

Neville, R. *Playpower*, Paladin, 1971

Walsh. M. *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema*, BFI, 1981

David Huxley is a Senior Lecturer on the BA(Hons) Film and Media Studies course at Manchester Metropolitan University. He is editor of the Routledge publication *'The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics'* (2010 -). His subject specialisms are the Graphic Novel, Comic Book & Comic Strip, Censorship, Hollywood Film and Animation. He has drawn and written a wide range of adult and children's comics, and has organised the annual *International Conference of Graphic Novels and Comics*(2010 -). He is the author of *Nasty Tales : British Underground Comics*, (Critical Vision, 2000), and has written widely on the comic and graphic novel, including entries in Beaty, B. (ed.) *The Critical Survey of Graphic Novels*, (Salem Press, California, 2012) and book chapters on Vietnam war comics.