



Socio-cultural evolution of comics

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Abstract

Literature is called the mirror of society. Socio-cultural phenomena of community are reflected directly or indirectly in its literature. Every age echoes its sentiments and moods, not just in the themes of its writings, but also in its techniques. If high tragedy flourished in dramatic form during the Classical Age of Greek antiquity, in harmony with the time's elevated cerebral leanings and the Dionysian carnival, the novel finds its ancestry in the changing center circumference equation of the seventeenth century. Comic strips are just one of the numerous innovative expressionistic novelties of the empirical modern age. Unfortunately, this art though very popular, remains misapprehended, defamed and villified. This paper traces the cultural history of comics, tries to understand their potential in the twenty-first century and also most importantly attempts to destigmatise this avant-garde genre.

Keywords: comics, cartoons, satire, humor

1. Introduction

Let me begin with a question: ever heard of Goscinny and Uderzo ^[1] Kane and Finger ^[2] or Hergé ^[3] ? Surely the next list of names would evoke a more familiar and also smiling response: Asterix, Batman, Tintin. In these two sets of names is a perfect example of the "invented" becoming more popular than the inventor. Socio-cultural evolution of Comics – the topic of my paper - may not go down well with an assembly of literary minded people, but my aim is to give publicity to this art, which has touched all, from the perspectives of its origin, influence, and promise. The encyclopediac definition of comics is a story told with sequential images, in tandem with text and dialogues. Some hold that the history of comics, commences with a french man Töpffer; ^[4] but most call it an American craft. However, new studies have shown it to actually be of a trans Atlantic origin, interpreted by some as the handiwork of initial stages of Multiculturalism. Our story begins on the eastern side of the Atlantic, in Britain and shapes up in its modern avatar on the western side of the ocean, in the U.S.

2. Socio-cultural evolution

Comics have evolved from cartoons; and cartoons were originally the rough pencil drawings by painting students of frescoes.⁵ If we were to trace the cultural moorings of cartoons and thereby of comics, we would have to start our journey with the pinnacle of Great Britain's industrial and imperial strength – the Victorian Era. Queen Victoria's reign saw Britain consolidate its might in economic, scientific and cultural spheres. Internationally, Britain enjoyed high esteem. And, at home domestic politics was becoming increasingly liberal. Today, in the light of colonial and postcolonial studies, a new perspective of this age has come up which does not show every thing Victorian, in a brilliant light. Academics nowadays regard the Victorian Era as "double edged" because of being an age of high contradictions.

On one hand, Industrialization and Imperialism backed each other, making Britain financially very secure. This affluence

coupled with the royal patronage, opened the floodgates to artistic, cultural and scientific prosperity. In literature there were names like Hardy, Dickens, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Mill and Pater. If architecture saw the Gothic Revival and the rebuilding of the Westminster palace, there was the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in visual arts. If Browning perfected the dramatic monologue, the Clique came up in paintings. Science developed in a form as it is known today.

On the flip side, however, they lay a rotting social order. Industrialisation had spawned a new social hierarchy, in which the middle class was weakening the grasp of the aristocracy. The new society had a three tiered system of the aristocracy at the apex, followed by the business class, and the factory workers at the base. It was the condition of these factory workers that was particularly deplorable. It is one of the strangest ironies of all times that in the Victorian Age, plenty and penury, gourmandism and hunger coexisted in extremes. While the factory workers (including women and children) toiled in factories for long hours in utterly inhuman conditions, the elite wallowed callously in insensitive extravagance. Hence the ugly contrast. This grim picture was not unnoticed by the sensitive eyes of the artists and many of them did speak of it in their works. The lines that best sum up the Victorian condition are :

Is it well that while we range with Science, glorying in
the Time,
City children soak and blacken soul and sense in city
slime? ^[6]

Coincidentally it was a comic accident that combined both these diverse cultural currents bringing the word "cartoon" into its present denotation. The Punch magazine ^[7] was a popular humour and satire magazine known for its clever, cheeky and bold takes on several stalwarts of the day. It boasts of some of the greatest comic writers like Thackeray & Wodehouse. It so happened that submissions were being accepted in the form of cartoons to adorn the Parliament

after the 1834 fire. During those days the Punch had a large satirical sketch entitled "Mr. Punch's Pencillings". Accidentally, this was replaced by the magazine's own cartoon entry to the parliamentary exhibition under the title "Cartoon" by Leech. This blunder contrasted the lavishness of the politicians, by drawing paupers staring in bewilderment at the expensive paintings in the parliament. Sarcastically the Punch wrote "... The poor ask for bread, and the philanthropy of the State accords – an exhibition." The false double standards of the Victorian Age afforded ample scope for sarcastic chiding by the artists, and the cartoon became its vehicle. This had set the ball rolling, and cartoons became associated, first, with pictorial satire, and later, with any humorous sketching.

So much for the British story. Comics, their charisma and craze are essentially an American gift. On the other side of the Atlantic, in 1895 Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*⁸ went down in record books as the pioneer strip featuring regular characters in news papers. However, it was Dirk's "Katzenjammer Kids" appearing in 1897, that is known as the first modern comics for its use of in-panel dialogue in a "word balloon" and panelled sequence. The next change came with the turn of the century in accordance with America's new cultural sensibilities of the scientific age. In 1912 Burroughs published his science fiction "Under the Moons of Mars" which led to the publication of the "Amazing Stories Magazine". Later Burroughs's Tarzan appeared as a comic strip illustrated by the legendary Harold Foster. In step with the temper of curiosity and scientific thrills, followed the very popular age of scientific adventures, epitomised by "Flash Gordon"^[9].

3. Origin of Comic Book

1933 was an important year. Maxwell Gaines - the father of comic books - innovation in printing produced "Funnies on Parade", the world's first comic book. 1938 saw the birth of a star. Two teenagers - Siegal and Shuster - had created a hero that took the comics industry by storm, heralding the "Golden Age of Comics". "Superman" had arrived. By the end of World War II, the reign of super heroes had ended. There was much chaos and the downward trend in comics began. The "Silver Age" brought Walt Disney's funny animals as a whiff of fresh air but soon violence suffused the new art. This decadence is at times understood as a fallout of the American "Popular Culture" of the time.

4. Comics of Vernacular Culture

Popular culture is defined as the vernacular culture of a modern society, particular to a time and place. The content of this culture is established by certain agencies like Television, cinema, publishing circles and their mutual and social interactions, which become the breeding grounds for new cultural trends because of their mass following. The popular culture poses an interesting phenomenon for study. Bennet opined that any vernacular culture is composed first of a "primary force" or the all-engulfing mainstream drifts, and second, of the "secondary forces" which are the shoddy local reproductions of the primary force^[10].

5. Social rejection

A disenchanted world was only recovering from the horrors of the Second World War, when the Cold war broke out. The Cold War American atmosphere was fraught with suspense, tension. This mood and the secondary force of the

Popular Culture of the time, combined to infect the comics with a corruption that peaked in the "Bronze Age". Suddenly there was an explosion of horror, violence, blood, gore and even obscenity on the comics' scene; the cartooning became nasty, the language foul and printing substandard. The Chicago Daily News reported:

"Badly drawn, badly written, and badly printed - a strain on the young eyes and young nervous systems - the effects of these pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant. Their crude blacks and reds spoil a child's natural sense of color; their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient.... "

Psychiatrist Dr. Wertham added fuel to the fire by echoing similar thoughts. His report did its damage and comics were burnt publicly. The reaction led to the formation of the Comics Code Authority by the US senate in 1954. However, the senate committee did not fully agree with Dr. Wertham's views as his study was conducted only on young delinquents and not on the cross section of the young population^[11].

6. Social recognition

In the 60s and 70s, the cloud canopy cracked and sun smiled abundantly on our new art. Practitioners of popular art (which was a reaction to abstract art) incorporated comics in their works. The best thing to have happened to comics' art in these years, was the scholarly attention that it earned as a result of the mushrooming fan clubs. Scott McCloud argues that comics merge word and image in an unprecedented way. He further states, & I quote, "comics have revolutionary potential for understanding pictorial and textual narratives"^[12] Today as we pace towards a holistic understanding, in an age of new fast communication like multimedia and internet, where too much has to be imbibed in too little time, conventional communication media are not enough. An interesting observation is that comics have already crossed their phase of infancy and turbulent adolescence, to have just embarked on their period of maturity.

7. Current cultural concept

As society is a dynamic phenomenon, wisdom lies in understanding its changing needs and meeting the same with the novel methods tossed up by time's churning of the socio-cultural order. The new generation today can hardly afford the luxury of curling up with a book for long hours. And with the TV making infotainment very convenient, reading, which is definitely more effort hungry has been pushed into the background. Consequently, what have also been hurled into a black hole of oblivion, are the rich exploits of artists whose array of enriching, endowing & elevating observations are veiled in words. In such a scenario, comics, with their brevity and visual appeal come in handy as a redeemer. Particularly in the case of children, aesthetically drawn quality comics can be used to acquaint young ones with literature proper, thereby simultaneously ushering them into the habit of reading. Under parental guidance they can mature from comics to graphic novels into the full fledged reading of classics. They can add zing to learning in the fields of History, Geography, health, hygiene and nutrition related issues & religion. Biographies can be effectively related through the medium of comics. Several social welfare centers in the west for chronically and terminally ill children and adolescents publish

pamphlets of comic strips to help young patients cope with their condition's psychological and long-term manifestations. This experiment has seen a positive response in the last two decades. In India, strips like *Tales from the Panchtantra*, *Jataka Tales* & *Amar Chitr Kathe*, are fighting a battle to keep our culture alive which under the influence of the west was losing its appeal. A timeline of comics in India shows more than ten comic lines which stood the test of time during last century ^[13].

8. Conclusion

Though today their appeal, potential and quick-communication-quotient are a force so strong that few encyclopedias have defined them as "a somewhat related or peripheral form of literature" yet even now comic strips remain a maligned and misunderstood craft. People cynically complain about the characteristic goodness of human life being eroded by the fast paced modern day living. They also fret that the rude winds of materialism and cut throat competition have embroiled all in a maddening rat race, the result of which is that people have forgotten their roots. Though most of this is not unwarranted, yet there is hope. As the promise of this genre is being increasingly tapped, it remains our duty to see that, like before, the vitalities of this expertise do not run into precarious paths; and to remind us of our obligation we have the words "With great power comes great responsibility" immortalised by none other than our very own Spider-Man.

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