# Tales Calculated to Drive You MAD": The Debunking of Spies, Superheroes, and Cold War Rhetoric in *Mad Magazine*'s "SPY vs SPY"

TEODORA CARABAS

WHEN *MAD MAGAZINE*'S SIXTIETH ISSUE WAS PUBLISHED, IN JANUARY of 1961, a new feature, developed under the heading of the "Joke and Dagger Department," was inaugurated. The strip, entitled "SPY vs SPY," was designed by the Cuban political cartoonist Antonio Prohías.[1] As a *persona non grata* for the newly instated Castro regime, Prohías had to leave his native country in 1960 and relocate to the United States. Shortly after arriving in New York City, the Cuban artist started working for *MAD*—to which he had been attracted by its name (Reidelbach)—and began publishing the now-familiar black-and-white heroes at the height of the Cold War, in an age when the spy genre was at its utmost popularity. The January 1961 issue of *MAD Magazine* introduced Prohías and his comic strip in gratifying terms:

> Antonio Prohías is a famous Cuban artist whose anti-Castro cartoons have appeared in such publications as Bohemia [sic] (largest circulation of any Spanish language magazine), the daily *Prensa Libre* (Free Press), *El Mundo*, and the Sunday *Oveja Negra* (Black Sheep). He has won the "Juan Alberto Gomez" award (the equivalent of our Cartoon Society's "Ruben") six times. On May 1st, three days before Castro henchmen took over what remained of Cuba's free press, Prohías fled to N.Y. stone broke. Once here, he came directly to *MAD*. Among the things he showed us was this captivating

*The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2007

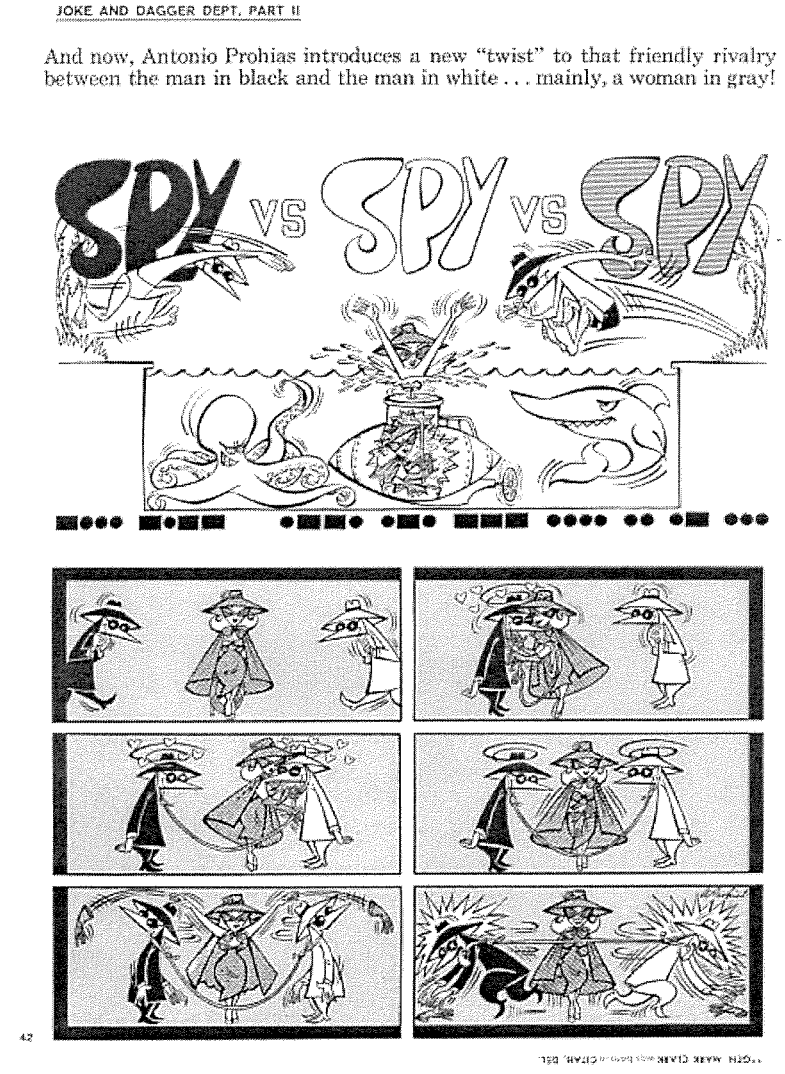


FIGURE 1. From MAD Magazine No. 73 © 1962 E.C. Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Used with Permission.

> cartoon-sequence of friendly rivalry called SPY vs SPY. (*MAD*, Issue 60, January 1961)

The "SPY vs SPY" series became highly popular (in fact the sequence is still being published by *MAD*, although in a somewhat altered fashion) and quickly developed into one of the magazine's regular features.

Prohías's strip relies (both in terms of content and narrative form) on an interesting formula that sets the "SPY vs SPY" series apart from most comics and popular culture stories of the 1960s featuring spies or action heroes. Unlike most comic strips of the time, but similar to many *MAD* strips, "SPY vs SPY" is a black-and-white series that uses very few words in its depiction of the adventures of two rivals, a black spy and a white spy, who are engaged in an endless fight against one another. In Issue 73, published in September 1962, Prohías introduces for the first time another character: the gray spy, a sensual blonde who ignites even more the choleric animosity between the black and the white spies.

This article looks at the first two years of the strip's appearance (from 1961 to 1963), as these were the years when the strip was inaugurated and the pace was set for its subsequent development. The article first positions the strip in the historical, political, and popular cultural context in which it was produced, then analyzes the strip's content and narrative form. My argument is that the strip ridicules political ideologies and the Cold War narrative by debunking certain popular culture clichés, e.g., spy/action-hero archetypes, while appearing sufficiently innocent in tone and manner as to avoid censorship. At a time when comics (as well as comic artists and editors in general) were subject to sustained scrutiny due to a widespread belief that they disregarded moral values, perverted the minds of "normal" children, and showed disrespect for lawful authorities (Nyberg), "SPY vs SPY's" strategy (mirroring the larger attitude generally adopted by *MAD*) was that of (a) ridiculing the political status quo while trying to keep its content relatively clean of language and images that might have been deemed offensive to the 1960s public sentiment; and (b) targeting familiar aspects of day-to-day life while seemingly concerned only with the nonsensical fight of two bird-like characters.

## Historical and Political Context of "SPY vs SPY"

The 1950s, when *MAD* started to appear,[2] was a time marked (at least officially) by ardent political conservatism and intense Cold War

propaganda. In the United States, the 1950s was the Hoover–McCarthy era; internationally, the decade was marked by the signing of two major treaties: (1) the Paris agreement (1954), which formed the North-Atlantic bloc, and (2) the Warsaw Pact (1955—in reaction to the 1954 agreement), that publicly rallied communist Eastern Europe under the military leadership of the Soviet Union (Jain). The two treaties deepened the tensions of the Cold War and intensified each side's efforts to disseminate propagandistic messages that would justify particular ideological systems.

Popular culture became one of the vehicles through which propaganda was disseminated. The guise of entertainment made it easier for the audience to assimilate ideological messages, and smoothed the social engineering process through which cultural values were being reinvented. Thus, the Hoover–McCarthy era became dominated by what Whitfield calls an "I like Ike, *I Love Lucy*" attitude that encapsulated—for mainstream America, at any rate—not only the way to do politics and write pop culture texts, but also the essence of morality and the core of a strongly held set of ideological principles that encouraged compliance with the conservative norms of the status quo.

Although Hoover and McCarthy failed to "root out communism," their actions set the stage for a conservative backlash against popular culture icons deemed harmful. Within a socio-political context that valued uniformity of opinion and scorned most forms of dissidence, comic art—particularly when animated by graphic depictions of violence, horror stories, and politically rebellious opinions—could not but incite a wave of so-called righteous public anger. Comic book opponents grounded their anticomic arguments in a wide variety of reasons that ranged from the scholastic indignation against the genre's low literary value, to the puritan outcry against comic debauchery, to the radical conservatives' fear that comics encouraged anti-American (i.e., communist) feelings. Among the anticomic advocates one could mention organizations such as the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency, the National Office of Decent Literature (NODL), and Anthony Comstock's New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, the latter legally empowered to make arrests. These organizations—all of which were engaged in what Nyberg calls the "decency crusade" (22)—received fervent support from an array of librarians, teachers, and parents' associations (such as the National Congress of Parents and

Teachers (NODL)), who protested against the poor aesthetic quality, violent or erotic images, and vulgar humor of comics, and often engaged in independent acts of censoring comic books at local levels. The common belief, clearly articulated by NODL, that comics ridiculed "national, religious or racial group[s]," and that they "used blasphemous, profane or obscene speech indiscriminately and repeatedly" to "glorify crime or the criminal" (Nyberg 24), led to an increased censorship of comic books—along with a growing censoring of films, dime novels, and popular culture texts in general. The 1954 publication of Frederic Wertham's book against comic art, *Seduction of the Innocent*, marked the peak of the anticomic attitude and provided the movement's advocates with what seemed like a scientific support for their conservative opinions.

Wertham argued that comic strips had a vicious content that encouraged juvenile delinquency, and very often supported communist, fascist, racist, or sexist ideas (O'Brien). Despite academic research showing little connection between the rise in juvenile delinquency and the mass circulation and increasing popularity of comic books, and notwithstanding Wertham's own admission that banning harmful comics would not eliminate the crime problem (Nyberg), *Seduction of the Innocent* had a large impact on the public opinion of the time. One cannot help but notice the irony behind the fact that Wertham's book attacked a major genre of popular culture (and struck a significant blow to the comic industry's prosperity) while using popular culture devices, such as an ambiguously formulated, catchy title, to attract audience attention.

Wertham tried to give psychological support to an argument that had previously been framed on moral, religious, and political grounds alone. Consequently, his recommendation that state authorities pay closer attention to what was being published in comics and his subsequent proposal that comics not be sold to children under sixteen, increased the controversy about comic books and their role within American popular culture. The recommendations, although failing to generate legislative reforms that would ban undesirable comics, led to intense investigations of comic books and publishers, through which the whole of comic art was put on trial. A new witch hunt, particularly against horror and politically subversive comics, began in the mid-1950s and was led by the Kefauver Committee of the US Senate (Nyberg). To economically protect themselves against the unleashed fury of radical conservatives, comic book publishers—

following the example of their brethren in the film industry, who were assailed by similar outbursts of public outcry—decided to develop a new Comics Code, essentially a set of self-censoring guidelines, intended to strip comics of images and ideas that right-wing radicals might consider perilous to the public mind.

William M. Gaines, *MAD*'s publisher, was particularly affected by the new standards. His Entertaining Comics (or E.C. Comics), a prosperous enterprise before the introduction of the new Code Authority, could not resist the strict censorship guidelines and fell victim to the war against comics. Gaines had been one of the publishers accused, during the Kefauver investigations and subsequent Senate hearings, of endangering the moral development of children, fostering racial prejudice, and publishing bad taste literature. In his Senate hearing, Gaines tried without success to defend comics by arguing that they were a form of harmless entertainment that was by no means devoid of good taste (Nyberg). Having failed to convince his inquisitors of the unjust character of their accusations, Gaines suffered severe consequences: his horror and science fiction comic magazines could not survive the effects of the anticomic war, and Entertaining Comics had to give up, by 1956, all its publications with the exception of *MAD* (Davidson). Gaines's desire to keep *MAD* clean is, therefore, easy to understand. In 1955 the magazine switched to black-and-white format to better avoid censorship by the Comics Code (Goulart). Moreover, both William Gaines and Harvey Kurtzman, *MAD*'s first editor, proceeded to publicly deny the magazine's political slant, arguing that they had "tried to keep *MAD* more or less apolitical" (Gaines, qtd. in Reidelbach 118), or that "the fact that you have a platform [does not] necessarily giv[e] you the qualification to make a speech" (Kurtzman, qtd. in Reidelbach 118). Under such unfavorable socio-political circumstances, Kurtzman and Gaines's professedly apolitical stance and the public denial of *MAD*'s "qualification to make a speech" (Kurtzman, qtd. in Reidelbach 118) was an attitude aimed both at sidestepping the Comics Code and avoiding any repercussions derived from the anticomic public sentiment.

The magazine's platform, although presumably apolitical, contributed to the development of an original formula, completely new both in terms of format and attitude at the time of the magazine's appearance (Davidson). The magazine targeted everything: it satirized the whole of the political spectrum, rendered absurd familiar aspects of

daily life, and poked fun at television shows and texts in other media, comics included. Kurtzman himself confessed that the intention was to create a magazine whose format "would make fun of comic books as they were at that particular period" (Kurtzman, qtd. in Goulart 248).[3] The idea of an intertextual magazine whose satire relies on the audience's familiarity with previous popular culture texts gave Kurtzman and Gaines the upper hand by allowing them to avoid compliance with the Comics Code and skirt the anticomic boycott, while continuing to publish material that was highly subversive of publicly sanctioned political opinions and cultural practices. As the cover of the magazine's first issue clearly stated, the strips were "tales calculated to drive you MAD."[4] In other words, most *MAD* comics were hard to pin down because they were tales intentionally created to undermine authority while keeping a seemingly innocuous façade. After the attack against and subsequent loss of his horror and social injustice comics, Gaines had learned his lesson. He discovered that one could still publish subversive and "good taste" literature under the guise of clever but apparently inoffensive jokes. *Mad Magazine*'s "humor in a jugular vein" attitude (a witty reminder of Gaines's previously popular horror comic books) debunked the conservative ideologies, Cold War tensions, and public values of the time through the use of acceptable language and a professed apolitical platform advertised by the publisher and editor.

This technique functioned not only to circumvent the Comics Code but also to gear the content of the magazine toward a broader audience that included children as well as adults (O'Brien). The larger demographic that *MAD* addressed was another way of positioning *MAD Magazine*: the use of humor and irony in combination with the language of the absurd defined *MAD* comics as more than merely "funnies" or children's literature, and curbed somewhat the belief that comics were devoid of aesthetic quality and harmful to the education of "normal" children. In a historical period animated internationally by significant political tensions and nationally marked by strong anticomic sentiments derived from McCarthyism and Hooverism, *MAD*'s formula developed a comic expression that spared no ideology, no major political figure or event, and no popular culture hero or convention.

Following this line, "SPY vs SPY" was designed as a series that depicted the "friendly rivalry" (as the strip's title informs us) of two mock-opponents, without much information being given about the

issues that generated the conflict or the external context of the fight. Once again, the comic effect depended on the audience's familiarity with the extraliterary context, the Cold War environment in this case. The strip's narrative form was sufficiently inoffensive to assuage the conservatives' suspicions, but the content was subversive enough to attract the interest of a large audience.

## Undermining Cold War Tensions through the Debunking of Popular Culture Formulas

Kenneth Burke explains that literature (from proverbs to complex literary genres) encodes, through the use of symbols, how a particular culture perceives its position in and interaction with the world. Literature is, therefore, an "equipment for living" (253), a strategy of naming experience, and of pointing out the consequences of human action. Two types of action heroes and heroines distinctly mark the Western popular culture landscape of the late 1950s and early 1960s: (1) the comic strip superhero, embodied in characters such as Superman or Wonder Woman, both of which appeared many years prior to 1950 but remained highly popular throughout the 1950s and 1960s; and (2) the spy figure, primarily represented by the James Bond archetype. The spy/superhero ethos was—during the 1950s, 1960s, and subsequent decades—a "mode of emplotment" (White 29) of the Cold War narrative. This emplotment oversimplified the ideological tensions embedded in the Cold War by polarizing *good* vs *bad* and problematizing neither side of the dichotomy.[5] In this sense, both heroic types were ideologically laden and created a propagandistic "equipment for living" (Burke 253) that romanticized the fight of good (i.e., the capitalistic West) against evil (i.e., communist Eastern Europe).

"SPY vs SPY" acknowledges and ridicules both heroic types while mocking the way in which spy/superhero formulas romantically emplot the cold war narrative. In so doing, "SPY vs SPY" repositions the romantic representation of the Cold War in satiric mode. This satiric expression constructs a counterdiscourse that undermines both the Cold War narrative and its popular culture emplotment. For the remaining part of this article, I shall look first at the use of color, costumes, and the physical appearance of the main characters, and secondly, the strip's narrative form to exemplify how "SPY vs SPY"

undermines Cold War tensions and satirizes their romantic expression through traditional spy/superhero formulas.

## *Color, Costumes, and Physical Appearance*

"SPY vs SPY" adopts a covert manner of ridiculing heroes and pop culture clichés. With its bichromatic format, "SPY vs SPY" stands out among the spy/action-hero strips of its time, most of which used color to attract attention and better situate their heroes and plots in the readers' minds. The outfits of superheroes and heroines—such as Wonder Woman (Smith), or Superman—rely on specific combinations of colors (particularly red, white, and blue) and highly salient symbols (such as the stars and stripes of the American flag) to create visually recognizable protagonists. Surely, not all comic superheroes are dressed in some combination of red, white, and blue. Batman's outfit, for example, is mostly monochrome (and for very good reasons). However, many comic superheroes are dressed in ways that recall the American flag and this is a significant detail that points to the existence of an ideological system behind the superhero narrative. The combination of patriotic colors and symbols constructs clear-cut dichotomies—good vs bad, "us" vs "them"—and positions the superhero on the side of the American flag. Wonder Woman and Superman fight, under American colors, against an archetypal evil that threatens to destroy the world. When comic superheroes such as Superman or Wonder Woman are dressed in American colors, and fight against all evil (however rudimentally defined this evil is), they become ethically unquestionable. This strategy serves political purposes: it simplistically defines what counts as a superhero, it graphically identifies (through the use of the American colors) where the "good" is, and uses the superhero ethos to consolidate a hegemonic ideology.

By contrast, the bichromatic variation of color featured in "SPY vs SPY" emphasizes the strip's ironic take on ready-made formulas and their potential for propagandistic use. Instead of a conquering hero, dressed in national colors, and always prepared to wage war against a menacing, evil "other," the *MAD* world introduces two black and white characters who chase each other continuously and to no apparent effect other than their reciprocal harassment. Despite the apparent simplicity of the black–white distinction that identifies the two heroes, the *MAD* spies cannot be placed in a bipolar relationship. They

are both good and bad, yin and yang, at the same time. As each other's alter ego, the black and white spies always try to outwit one another, an attempt that oftentimes succeeds so deftly that the protagonists end up outfoxing not just their respective adversary but themselves as well. In a strip published in Issue 67 (December 1961) both the black and the white spies—in an attempt to deceive each other—decide to change their colors. Consequently, they get black and white paint, respectively, and adjust their identity by applying a layer of opposite color paint over their clothes. Their plan to provoke in each other an identity crisis succeeds wonderfully (although not in the manner intended), and they both end up on the same psychoanalyst's couch. The strip ironically emphasizes that, despite appearances, no black vs white ethical distinction can be drawn between the two main heroes. At the peak of the Cold War conflict, "SPY vs SPY" presented its audience with a comic narrative in which the main heroes, instead of being either good or bad, are simply and, most importantly, *equally* irrational. These characters engage in a nonsensical and endless conflict, for which few reasons are given and in which they both win and lose to the same extent. Thus, the "SPY vs SPY" satiric repositioning of the pro-West cold war protagonist asserts that simplistic judgments of character, bipolar oppositions, and ready-made answers should be seen as equally problematic.

The 1950s was also the period of time that consolidated the spy narrative. This is the age that first saw in print Ian Fleming's famous James Bond novels: *Casino Royale*, *From Russia with Love*, and *Goldfinger*. The movies inspired by the novels altered Fleming's character by making him more arrogant, misogynistic, and unambiguously pro-West. Bond appeared first on television in 1954, when *Casino Royale* was adapted by Charles Bennett as an episode for a CBS mini-series called *Climax!* (a series that ran from 1954 to 1958). The episode starred Barry Nelson and Peter Lorre, and was directed by William H. Brown, Jr. The first Bond film, *Dr. No*, was released eight years later—in 1962—and was followed in 1963 by another Bond movie, *From Russia with Love*. Both movies starred Sean Connery, were directed by Terence Young, and were instrumental not only in imposing Bond as a Cold War superhero but also in strengthening the spy genre formula.

Clearly, the James Bond formula—particularly as developed in Young's movies—was an "equipment for living" that romantically

emplotted the Cold War narrative. Formulas are "structures of narrative[s] or dramatic conventions" (Cawelti 5), whose ubiquity within a culture or genre at a particular moment in time establishes recognizable modes of representing "images, symbols, themes, and myths" (20). These conventional representations are "cultural products" (20) that both reflect and alter the practices and collective imaginary of the community from which they originate. In this sense, the Bond narrative influenced the collective imaginary of the Western world by simplifying the Cold War conflict and articulating it in highly salient bipolar terms: first, it polarized the world in a good vs bad dichotomy and explicitly argued that the "evil" (the Other) endangers the existence of the entire world; second, it depicted the "good" in the guise of a physically attractive and highly talented male spy, able to solve by himself any conflict, no matter how complicated. Thus, the Bond narrative strengthened the political beliefs of the West by making it even easier for the audience to identify with the "good" side of the polarity. In addition, the Bond formula also instituted a new version of hegemonic masculinity, that of a cool, good looking, white, and heterosexual male spy whose sexy appearance and sexist attitude could only enhance his appeal.

Bond's talent and experience put him always in control of himself and the situation, thus increasing his charisma. Regardless of the unfavorable circumstances in which his desire to save the world places him, the "spy in the gray flannel suit" (Cohan qtd. in Whitfield 773) manages, by the end of the story, to have it his way no matter what the odds, saving both the world and the girl in the meantime. No wonder then that his image quickly became a very appealing popular culture artifact and persuasive propagandistic tactic during the Cold War period. Moreover, Bond's elitist behavior—encapsulated in his dress code, the condescending way he introduced himself to others ("Bond, James Bond"), and stiff-upper-lip requests such as that of having his drinks "shaken not stirred"—enhanced the character's popularity as a Cold War spy/action-hero prototype. Consequently, for the 1950s and subsequent decades, the James Bond symbol was not only a manner of oversimplifying political conflict, but also a mode of performing both the way to be a hero and the way to be a man.

By contrast, the *MAD* spies are two bird-like creatures who do not engage in an explicit and uncompromising endeavor to thwart wicked plans devised by unambiguously malevolent minds. They do not

embark on a noble quest to punish evil transgressors and restore universal harmony, safeguarding Western values in the process. Unlike the colorful James Bond, Superman, or Wonder Woman, the black and white spies follow a different recipe: they inhabit a world in which black and white are equally problematic, and in which conflict exists for the sake of conflict alone. Their irrational behavior debunks the conventions of popular culture plots (where the fight for good is always clothed in ethical ideals), but ultimately points to the irrationality of Cold War rhetoric. By waging a nonsensical, endless war against one another, the *MAD* spies mimic the two sides involved in the cold war and emphasize their own incongruity with the cultural milieu in which they exist.

A recognizable cliché of spy/action-hero narratives (not unlike other genres) is the finding of a solution that concludes the story by resolving dramatic tension (Cawelti) and eliminating a hubris that menaces the order of the world. Action heroes in popular culture go to war in order to defend normalcy and the positive values embedded in everyday life (Reynolds). One of the underlying assumptions on which the action story is constructed is that "the normal is valuable" (Reynolds 77) and has to be safeguarded at all costs. As wicked minds always conspire to change the world and change is always a worse alternative, action/superheroes go to war to preserve the status quo (Reynolds; Smith) which, by comparison to the gruesome transformations envisioned by the "bad guys," always seems to be the best alternative. The *MAD* spies, however, carry out a fight that—instead of restoring universal harmony—causes hassle and endless pandemonium. Within the *MAD* world the fight is the status quo, and the heroes work hard to preserve it no matter what the consequences. They are forever chasing each other and devising strategies to eliminate one another. Their plans for reciprocal destruction, however, end up in mutual loss, in draws, or in minor, temporary victories of one or the other of the two protagonists. No final settling of the conflict occurs at the end of a strip and no final resolution of tension takes place. Moreover, no matter how extensively the two heroes injure each other, they appear unharmed and ready for action again at the beginning of the following strip (another popular culture convention, this time used mostly in animated cartoons).

Comics' action characters such as Superman and Wonder Woman defend the status quo not simply by fighting against the evils that

menace "normalcy" but also through their identities and life stories. Both Superman and Wonder Woman are immigrants (Smith), who arrive in America from far-off lands—an old planet and an old island, respectively, both of which are sufficiently remote from the shores of the "New World" to sound exotic. Although immigrants, both Superman and Wonder Woman give up their cultural identity (preserving only the extraordinary powers they are naturally endowed with), and internalize the norms and values of their adoptive country without questioning them for a single moment (Smith). These characters are also white[6] and of privileged origin: Wonder Woman is a princess, and Superman is the biological son of a scientist and political leader. The central roles they play within their particular stories are validated by their whiteness, the prestige of "blue blood" or political leadership, and the high regard in which natural sciences are generally held. Hence, Superman and Wonder Woman belong at the center of their respective narratives not only because they show unconditional compliance with Western norms but also because they represent unquestionably pure origins. They are "ready-made patriots" (Smith 134) and symbols of the ideal immigrant for mainstream America. Not surprisingly, therefore, both Superman and Wonder Woman have costumes that recall the American flag, speak perfect English, and have become popular action heroes (in Western cultures at least) through the comic strips that introduced them and later through the TV shows and films that had them as protagonists.

Pure lineage is frequently endorsed by a handsome appearance and exceptional abilities. Physical strength, whiteness (legitimated or not by noble origin), good looks, and exemplary character are almost always the traits of an ideal hero. In addition, comic action heroes oftentimes have super-human powers while James Bond is always endowed with unique technological devices that give him the upper hand over his opponents. The two triangularly shaped "SPY vs SPY" protagonists deride all these conventional representations. Their lineage and nonhuman power are ironically derived from their bird nature. This mock super-power is their identity, their sign of heroic individuality, just like the Amazonian lineage is Wonder Woman's mark of distinctiveness and the origin of her power, and the Kryptonian descent is Superman's innate trait and the reason for his extraordinary qualities. Far from placing at an advantage the *MAD* spies' abilities, however, "bird power" playfully underscores both the

ludicrous irrationality embedded in never-ending conflicts and the absurdity of bellicose behavior where the fight is more important than the reasons behind it.

Their bird nature gives the *MAD* spies a mocking duality: as birds (their true identity), the two protagonists are irrational and quarrelsome; as spies (their public personae), they are supposed to act heroic and save the status quo from peril. Their true identity, however, transpires into their public personae and contaminates their fight. This mock-duality subverts another well-known popular culture formula that understands dualism as a *sine-qua-non* condition of an ideal hero. Duality enables action heroes to have both extraordinary and unobtrusive daily lives. When not needed by the world, the lives of action heroes are perfectly adjusted to the rhythm of normal everyday existence, and completely in tune with the ordinary behavior of everybody else around them. It is only when the world is in danger that James Bond becomes Agent 007, Diana Prince becomes Wonder Woman, and Clark Kent becomes Superman. Only when normalcy has already been disrupted are superheroes allowed to act differently and they can use their exceptional abilities for the single purpose of restoring the routine of normality. Once this routine is reinstated, superheroes must go back to being inconspicuous citizens.

As both spies and birds, the *MAD* protagonists have a mock-dual nature that brings their other-worldliness into their institutionalized roles. They are both birds and spies at the same time and their irrationality transpires into and vitiates their fight (or is it the other way around?). They use various devices (black glasses, large hats, loose clothes) to disguise their bird-like nature and emphasize their public personae but they can never completely hide their identity. Costumes, as "utterances within a code" (Reynolds 26), often express the range of powers which a hero or heroine possesses. As such, the monochrome outfit, assorted hats, and black sunglasses, stand out as recognizable features of the *MAD* spies that position the heroes within the spy genre. The black glasses are, of course, a visual indicator of a well-known spy dress code that requires such accessories, not necessarily for their most obvious purpose (protection against the sun), but rather as some sort of mask meant to both create an air of "coolness" and render recognition by others more difficult. From this perspective, the sunglasses—as a necessary part of the spy costume—could be interpreted as an ironic signifier that functions both to remove (the recognition

of a physical trait) and render obvious (a profession or professional deformation).

The presence of a mask is further emphasized by the large-brimmed hats, and the long and pointed beaks. The latter in particular recall the Medieval carnivalesque tradition that required beak-like masks as a necessary device by means of which one could cover one's face (and put away one's flesh) so that inner (noncarnal) characteristics could surface. The word *carnival*, etymologically *carnem levare* (Lat.), originally means to "remove the flesh," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The mask is a mark of spectacle and an old part of a Western dramatic tradition that required the covering of the face (thus the veiling of one's identity) for public theatrical performances. The *MAD* spies cover their bodies in order to better perform their institutionalized roles in front of their audience (the readers and one another). The removal of flesh privileges the performance of public identity but the access that the *MAD* spies thus gain into officially validated forms of public culture is playfully subverted by their continuous irrational behavior, which betrays their true identity and indirectly mocks the public culture that it mimics.

There is another sense in which the mask could be seen as both a mark of removal and a sign of disclosure. The carnival is a spectacle that requires everybody's equal contribution and a moment in time that eradicates social hierarchies, privileged positions, rank, and class (Bakhtin). Carnivals are, from this perspective, celebrations of social equality and "feast[s] of becoming, change, and renewal" (10). The *MAD* spies are a carnivalesque removal of oppressive structures, of predetermined formulas, and old canons that are made manifest both in the real and the fictional worlds. The presence and actions of the *MAD* spies simultaneously disclose and mock the ideological nature of the Cold War, while bending multiple conventions of popular culture genres. Their idiosyncrasy in relation to well-known spy/action-hero patterns, as well as their failure to fulfill the expectations created through previous prescriptions, position the *MAD* spies' mimicry of real political conflict as a sign of liberation from conventional behavior and dominant ideologies.

The *MAD* spies' duality and conflict are interrupted occasionally—or maybe re-emphasized—by the appearance of the gray spy, a voluptuous young blonde, with a *femme fatale* air and costume (another consolidated popular culture cliché), who ignites the fight and sets the

black and white spies even more against one another. Issue 73 of September 1962 features the first appearance of the gray spy under the black, white, and gray heading "SPY vs SPY vs SPY." Unlike the choleric black and white spies, the gray spy is always cool and in control of the situation, and she wins whenever she appears. She could be interpreted as both a parody of the typical female spy, sexy and lethal, and as an ironic take on the other spy in a "gray flannel suit," James Bond (what could be more ironic for a misogynist character than its rewriting in female version?). The gray spy is the only character in the strip who always has it her way, and her victories over the black and white spies make the latter even more inadequate to either save the world or win the girl. Her presence emasculates and delegitimates the male spies around her, thus rendering them completely inapt to advance the traditional action-hero narrative or romantically emplot the cold war conflict.

The gray spy has her own version of a dual identity. Her grayness is a derisive mark of in-betweenness that points to a pseudo-dualism between her true identity and her institutionalized public persona. Her real identity is her female nature, which provides her with the "super-power" needed to defeat her opponents; by defeating her opponents she performs her public persona and playfully saves the world from danger (i.e., the other two spies). Her female charms and seductive gestures help her prevail over her bird-brained male opponents, while her provocative costume enhances her power by revealing just enough of her figure to make her lethal. She wears a large-brimmed hat (which resembles somewhat the hats of the black and white spies), tight, knee-length dress, large cape, and sunglasses. Her costume is in tune with 1960s fashion and her actions punish both the black and the white spies for their inability to save the world and their inadequacy within their popular culture genre. If the "SPY vs SPY" strip is read as a satiric counter-narrative to the romantic triumph of good vs. evil in which the Cold War discourse and its popular culture emplotment are grounded, then the gray spy's appearance within the strip doubly undermines the political conflict's polarity by emphasizing that the conflict's protagonists are equally incompetent and irrational regardless of the mode—romantic or satiric—in which we read the narrative. The solution out of the conflict can only reside in the various shades of gray that problematize ideologies and frustrate expectations.

## *Narrative Form*

The strip relies almost entirely on pictures to create the comic effect. As a matter of fact, except for the title and the occasional presence of a few editorial comments that introduce the spies and their dealings, the strip rarely uses any words in relation to the conflict between the main protagonists. On the one hand, this preference for images to the detriment of words facilitated *MAD*'s avoidance of censorship. On the other hand, the preference can be interpreted as an ironic take on the stereotype that spies and action heroes need few words to make themselves heard. Thus, the *MAD* spies mimic the heroic mode and demand to be taken at face value by letting their actions do the talking.

The absence of any verbal dialogue between the heroes draws attention to the few words that are present (generally, in the title, subtitle, and on the margin of the strip). The words outside the panels, especially at the beginning of the series, draw in the socio-political and popular culture context of the time.[7] The comic strip is thus connected to the cultural context of its age through the peripheral presence of (1) jokes and ironic remarks about various prominent names ("If Sally Rand married Salvador Dali . . .," (Issue 69, March 1962: 30); "Gen. Mark Clark was born in Citah, Del.," (Issue 73, September 1962: 42); or "I can't for the life of me remember which magazines Henry Luce MADe his fortune on—but give me a little time and I'll think of them!," (Issue 75, Dec. 1962: 29)); (2) well-known slogans ("Let's make love. . . . 'a wise alternative'," (Issue 67, December 1961: 22)); and (3) references to movies and other popular culture texts that were *en vogue* at the time ("*The King and I* with William Prince, Duke Ellington and Steve McQueen," (Issue 60, January 1961: 9); or "We knew Tarzan before he became a Monkey's UNCLE," (Issue 71, June 1962: 42)). These side comments call for an association of the mock-heroic *MAD* strip with real-life situations that must have been very familiar to the readers of the early 1960s.

The position of these peripheral remarks in relation to the comic panels is particularly interesting. The words are almost always printed sideways or upside down, thus forcing the readers to interact more with the printed page by having to change their own position or that of the text in order to read the words. This mock-interaction could be interpreted as a parodic deconstruction of the conventions of the spy/action-hero genres in which the protagonist must consider more than

one perspective, and take into account more than just one reading of events. Ironically, however, the protagonist here is the reader, not the fictional heroes within the story. One could, therefore, argue that the peripheral story (in which the reader is the protagonist) parodies the centrally positioned narrative (the black vs white vs gray spy story) and calls attention to the fact that the main narrative is only part of the context of the printed page, therefore it is itself marginal within the text. The "wink, wink, nudge, nudge" contained in the side remarks distances the reader from the spy war and highlights the margin of the text, where another type of narrative takes place.

The positioning of the reader as one of the protagonists of the spy story also introduces a certain reflexivity of the reading act as well as another layer of narration in which an interesting textual and meta-textual relation between author and reader is established. The textual reading unmasks—through the introduction of the side remarks—the fictional character of the "SPY vs SPY" story by pointing to the real-life context. The meta-textual reading, however, introduces a spy narrative that involves only the reader and the author and encompasses the black, gray, and white spy feud. This meta-textual spy story is underscored by the presence of an almost unnoticeable message that discloses the name of the author: Prohías. The words "by Prohías," which always follow the title of the comic strip, convey little information in and of themselves; despite their usefulness in identifying the name of the artist, they may not seem to be worth much attention in the development of a spy story. The presence of the words may seem insignificant but their expression in Morse code and positioning in the middle of the printed page are not. Their presence in each strip and the secret code in which they are transmitted help develop a spy story in which the reader and the author playfully collaborate to keep the black, white, and gray spies in check. The comic strip takes the form of a mock radio transmission, by means of which the author (the sender of the message) secretly informs the reader (the receiver) of the most recent development in the conflict between two (or three) spies. Thus, the spy story is simultaneously debunked (the black, white, and gray spies become marginal within the context of the reader–creator relationship) and re-inforced as the reader and the author themselves become part of the game. What seemed to be a peripheral remark—the words "by Prohías"—helps develop a central narrative and a conspiratorial atmosphere that only the reader and the author are allowed to relish. This interpretation is

significant because, if the white, gray, and black spies are read as a mock heroic narrative that debunks (at various levels) the Cold War, then the reader–creator relationship—by undermining the black/white/gray spy story—undermines yet again (and at a different level of narration) the Cold War arch-narrative.

The Morse encoding of the author's name is always positioned outside the panels that depict the black, white, and gray spy story, but almost always in the center of the printed page. This ironic interplay between main and side story undermines graphically the textual relation between center and periphery. Moreover, this interplay foregrounds the various codes (pictorial, linguistic, and pseudo-aural) and underscores the nodes of narration (centrally or peripherally positioned within the printed page) through which the story is transmitted.

The strip's narrative form is a significant part of *MAD*'s strategy of fragmenting officially validated cultural expressions by continuously frustrating expectations. The strategy works to debunk the linearity of previously established popular culture conventions while also problematizing the linearity of the political ideologies behind those patterns. Thus, the multipart character of the "SPY vs SPY" strip bends the clichés of mainstream culture and subverts monovocal readings of reality. By foregrounding their irreverence of the cultural and political environment in which they exist, the *MAD* spies turn on its head an entire world of formulas, and highlight, in carnivalesque-like manner, the shades of gray in the relationship between normative and peripheral discourses. The incongruence between publicly validated norms and their satiric rereadings functions to undermine political authority and to mock, through parodic imitation, the conventions of the status quo.

The emphasis placed on the nonsensical aspect of an apparently simple feud and on the absurdity of the white and black protagonists undermines the heroic attitude privileged by the romantic mode, and pokes fun at the ideological conflicts embedded in the political rhetoric of the age. "SPY vs SPY," a genuine "tale calculated to drive you MAD," develops as a counter-narrative that relies on irony to (1) highlight the dangerous irrationality of political conflicts and (2) subvert the idealized guise of Cold War propaganda. The mock-heroic mode embraced by the creator of the *MAD* spies reduces to the absurd the traditional popular culture's emplotment of the Cold War narrative and—by extension—the one-sided logic of real-life events.

NOTES

I am grateful to Judith Yaross Lee, Scott Titsworth, Pamela Royse, and Andrea McClanahan for reading various drafts of this article and offering valuable insights.

1. Antonio Prohías died on February 2, 1998.
2. The first *MAD* issue was published in October–November 1952.
3. "Poopeye" and "Superduperman" are examples of *MAD* comic strips that directly made reference to and ridiculed popular culture idols. Gaines actually states that "*Mad* lost money for three issues" (Goulart 248), until the "Superduperman" strip appeared in Issue 4 (April 1953). Therefore, *MAD* became financially feasible only after the publication of a strip that explicitly ridiculed previous (and enormously popular) comic texts. Other "Superduperman" strips appeared in summer 1973 (a bonus strip), July 1979, and October 1981. "Poopeye" appeared in March 1955, with a bonus in fall 1980.
4. The motto "tales calculated to drive you MAD," appeared constantly on the cover of *MAD Magazine* until Issue 24, published in July 1955, and intermittently since 1955 on. The words were accompanied by the adage "humor in a jugular vein," which appeared uninterruptedly on the magazine's cover until July 1956, and irregularly since then.
5. For an excellent discussion of narratives as *modes of emplotment*, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. The relation between narratives and history, as discursive constructions, is elaborated in Hayden White's book *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*.
6. With the exception of a short interval in the 1980s, when Wonder Woman was depicted in comic strips as a minority character, the heroine has always been portrayed as white and associated primarily with mainstream values and belief systems. For a more detailed analysis of the ideological implications of Wonder Woman's whiteness, see Smith.
7. The use of words in side remarks is obvious at the beginning of the series but the words start to be replaced by pictures in Issue 77, published in March 1963. These marginal images that replace words usually tell a story that is graphically similar (although narratively disconnected) to the one depicted in the black versus white spy story.

## Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.

Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. New York: Vintage Books, 1957.

Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago, IL: The U of Chicago P, 1976.

Davidson, Steef. *The Penguin Book of Political Comics*. Trans. H&M Velmans. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1982.

Fleming, Ian. *Casino Royale*. New York: Macmillan, 1953.

———. *From Russia with Love*. New York: New American Library, 1957.

———. *Goldfinger*. New York: Macmillan, 1959.

Goulart, Ron. *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*. New York: Facts on File, 1990.

Jain, Jagdish P. *Documentary Study of the Warsaw Pact*. Bombay, India: Asia Publishing House, 1973.

*MAD Magazine*, 60 Jan. 1961:9.

Nyberg, Amy K. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998.

O'Brien, Chris. "It's a Bird. It's a Plane. It's A . . . Bomb? Commies, Crime, and Comics, 1945–1962." *The Mid-Atlantic Almanack* 7 (1998): 89–100.

"Carnival". *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Last accessed 20 Nov. 2006 ⟨http://dictionary.oed.com⟩.

Prohías, Antonio."Spy vs Spy." *MAD Magazine* 67 Dec. 1961: 22.

———. "Spy vs Spy." *MAD Magazine* 69 Mar. 1962: 30.

———. "Spy vs Spy." *MAD Magazine* 71 June 1962: 42.

———. "Spy vs Spy." *MAD Magazine* 73 Sept. 1962: 42.

———. "Spy vs Spy." *MAD Magazine* 75 Dec. 1962: 29.

Reidelbach, Maria. *Completely Mad: A History of the Comic Book and Magazine*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991.

Reynolds, Richard. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1992.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Trans Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1984.

Smith, Matthew J. "The Tyranny of the Melting Pot Metaphor: Wonder Woman as the Americanized Immigrant." *Comics & Ideology*. Eds. E. H. Sewell, M. P. McAllister Jr., and I. Gordon. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. 129–50.

Wertham, Fredric. *Seduction of the Innocent*. New York: Rinehart, 1954.

White, Hayden. *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.

Whitfield, Stephen J. "Sex and the Single Decade." *American Literary History* 12 (2000): 771–79.

**Teodora Carabas** (PhD, Ohio University) is an Assistant Professor of communication studies at Towson University. She studies rhetorical theory and criticism, advocacy and argument, political communication, public sphere theory, and media ecology. Her research and teaching interests focus on the study of public discourse and on the role that communication technologies play in creating meaning, shaping human agency, and structuring culture.

NEWSTATESMAN

ARTS & CULTURE

# It's a mad world

Nathan Abrams

Published 28 February 2000

Print version Listen

Comics - Nathan Abrams on how *Mad Magazine* led the assault on cold-war America

One of the most curiously overlooked publishing phenomena of the 1950s was the appearance of the comic book *Mad* in October 1952. For its satirical insights, its characteristic disrespect for the institutions of cold-war America, *Mad* had no contemporary rivals in the genre. In 1959, it was observed in *Newsweek* that "*Mad* each month sticks a sharp-pronged fork into some part of the social anatomy". And Gloria Steinem recalled: "There was a spirit of satire and irreverence in *Mad* that was very important, and it was the only place you could find it in the 1950s." Even Marshall McLuhan considered *Mad* worthy of mention in his influential study *Understanding Media*. Noting its "sudden eminence", he attributed this to its "ludicrous and cool replay of the forms of the hot media of photo, radio and film". Strange, then, that very little attention has been given to *Mad* beyond its own retrospective publications.

The first issue, the full title of which was *Tales Calculated to Drive You MAD - humor in a jugular vein*, was 32-pages long, cost ten cents and was primarily targeted at the teenage market. It was initially written and edited by Harvey Kurtzman, until September 1956, when he was lured away to work on Hugh Hefner's new publication, *Playboy*. In 1955, William M Gaines, *Mad*'s publisher, transformed it into a 25-cent, black-and-white, bimonthly magazine, renaming it *Mad Magazine* in the process. It was at this point that *Time* somewhat mistakenly referred to *Mad* as "a short-lived satirical pulp". Less than two years later, *Time* would eat its words: "Through such zany mockery of the solemn, the pretentious and the inane, *Mad* is compiling a growth chart that is no laughing matter." By the late 1950s, the magazine was second in popularity to *Life* among high-school students.

Originally, *Mad* turned its mocking voice on other comic books, dismembering anything that seemed "traditional" or "innocent" about them. In its hilarious pages, it turned Mickey Mouse back into vermin, a little rat-faced thug with five-day stubble ("Mickey Rodent"); the innocent teenagers Archie and Jughead became chain-smoking juvenile delinquents; the western hero, an isolated fool ("The Lone Stranger"); and the triumphant superhero, an unbearable bungler ("Superduper Man!"). Later, *Mad*'s creators turned their attention to other media parodies - television, advertising, the movies - devouring the artefacts and cultural forms of "the good life" of the fifties with relish.

Despite the hesitance of *Mad*'s editors to acknowledge the magazine's involvement in political satire ("we like to say that *Mad* has no politics and that we take no point of view"), it was not afraid to tackle political issues. Its 1954 attack on Senator Joseph McCarthy entitled "What's My Shine?" (a combined reference to the long-running game show *What's My Line?* and David Schine, McCarthy's odious sidekick), came at a time when other elements of the press were still some way from a full condemnation of the demagogue from Wisconsin. *Mad* focused on McCarthy's sensationalism and his use of the media, particularly television: "And so, as Mr Smurdly is gently propelled from the studio, we switch to Number Two camera . . . and procede [sic] with the proceedings!" Using the game-show format, the magazine parodied the endless points of order of McCarthy ("McCartaway) - "One ham on rye . . . no lettuce or butter! . . . container of milk and a Danish! . . . tell the boy to bring a couple of straws" - Schine constantly whispering in his ear, and the adoration with which the assembled journalists hung on to his every word.

Although, as editor, Kurtzman sought to downplay the significance of the satire - "McCarthy was a special case. He was so obvious. And so evil. It was like doing a satire on Hitler" - *Mad*, born as it was during the height of the domestic cold war in America, could not have failed to ignore the political context in which it operated. Indeed, its very title anticipated and played upon apocalyptic fears of nuclear Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Five years before *Dr Strangelove* and *Catch-22* assailed the core values behind the construction of American identity during this period, *Mad* was mocking American neuroses about the Soviet Union. Its 1959 phrase book for American tourists travelling behind the Iron Curtain offered the following "handy phrases": "When will I get my camera back?" "Has the chambermaid finished searching my luggage?" "What time is the ex-Commissar's funeral?" "What time is the new Commissar's funeral?" "Our guide is very friendly?" "Why was our guide liquidated?" "Waiter, there's a dictaphone in my borscht!" "The handcuffs are chafing my wrists." "Do you have a cell with a view?" "Will I need my galoshes in Siberia?" "I demand to see the American consul!"

Elsewhere, *Mad* humoured the cold-war linkage of communism, disease and advertising. "If official America radiated health, *Mad* insisted on the importance of the 'sick'," noted one critic. Where one advert asked "Is Your Bathroom Breeding Bolsheviks?", *Mad* advertised "Mr Mean: All-Commie Brainwasher". Beneath a picture of a stern Khrushchev, the copy read: "Better watch him closely or he'll clean us out of our homes, cars, offices, factories, schools, everything!"

Turning its zany gaze on every aspect of American life in the 1950s and 1960s, *Mad* fulfilled a pivotal role, giving teenagers a political education over their breakfast cornflakes. Although still around today, its satire has become diluted. Perhaps the endless copying of the magazine has diminished its impact. Located at the margins during its early years, *Mad*'s arrival at, and acceptance into, the mainstream was signalled by its absorption into Time-Warner. The very institution that had once described *Mad* as a "short-lived satirical pulp", and was the target of its parodies, now owns it. Nonetheless, the familiar face of Alfred E Neuman still continues to stare out from the front page, its toothy grin a reminder of its mordant history.

*Nathan Abrams is a freelance writer. He also teaches history and film at Birkbeck College*

**Post this article to**

Digg | del.icio.us | newsvine | NowPublic | Shoutwire | Reddit

We want to encourage people to comment on our content and to exchange views with other readers and hope this will be done on a courteous basis. However, if you encounter posts which are offensive please let us know by using the 'report this comment' facility or by emailing comments@newstatesman.co.uk and we will take swift action where necessary.

Redesign consultant: Sheila Sang, PowWow Interactive