Book Review


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Seeing Mad: Essays on Mad Magazine’s Humor and Legacy is a hefty book, with twenty-one essays, plus introductory and supplemental entries. For those who either grew up under Mad’s vaguely improper comic spell or have interest in its historical contribution to American humor during the latter twentieth century and after, the volume affords an illuminating deepest of dives into a recognizable lineage of parody, satire, and humor over the past seven decades.

The book is introduced comprehensively and informatively by co-editor Judith Yaross Lee, who places the Mad legacy in context as the younger and proudly sophomoric shaper of latter twentieth-century senses of humor, growing up in the shadow of the savvy and sophisticated New Yorker, and with a pointedly countercultural birthright. Growth from a pulpy comic book founded in 1952 to a more respectable and free-wheeling magazine in 1955, Mad drew upon golden-age comedy writers like Bob & Ray, Sid Caesar, and Ernie Kovacs during its first decade.

Lee’s authoritative account of the Mad story attends to its socio-cultural root system, valuable for its scholarly eye trained upon the publication’s developing humor technique, satirically sharp while willfully absurd, “the graphic equivalent of slapstick”. (p. 9) Acknowledging the male-heavy perspective of contributors, readers, and indeed female representation until quite late in the day, she concludes: “Across more than six decades of media burlesques, Mad offered cultural and political as well as aesthetic analysis within the comic mode, yet laughs trumped cultural politics.” (p. 20) Lee ultimately shows Mad to have paved the way legally for commercial parody for those to come (through fair-use relief from copyright infringement), including National Lampoon, Saturday Night Live, The Simpsons, The Onion, and The Daily Show—and notably Art Spiegelman’s Maus, for which the artist credited the magazine’s influence. Lee also supplies edifying detail regarding the business side of the magazine’s fortunes (and denouement thereof) in the US mediascape.

The essays that comprise the body of the book are bundled into five sections, beginning with “The Usual Gang,” a reference to Mad’s standing label for the creative team as “The Usual Gang of Idiots”. In this, Part I, the staff and contributors are
revealed as a notable parade of artists, writers, editors and publishers, many appearing for decades on the Mad masthead and in the table of contents.

Within this first section, an essay by M. Thomas Inge, titled, “Harvey Kurtzman and Modern American Satire,” places the seminal Mad man at the vanguard of twentieth-century, anti-establishment satire as we now know it, if not as its originating force, inspiring the likes of Spiegelman and Terry Gilliam in its unflinching comic spirit of taking to task face values in popular culture through media parody. He further couches it in the philosophical existentialism and absurdist thought in the air by mid-century—part of a lineage noted by no less a media-studies authority than Marshall McLuhan. Margaret Cavin Hambrick, in “Al Feldstein and Mad’s Humor of Social Critique,” theorizes editor Al Feldstein’s balance of tragic and comic frames in engineering Mad’s commercial success—including its gap-toothed poster boy, Alfred E. Neuman, as a personification of an antic Vice character or Fool, whose tag line, “What, Me Worry?,” became the publication’s insouciant watchcry.

As suggested above, Mad is widely seen as having been produced predominately by males for the young male gaze (at least, until its later stages), especially during its first few decades. Joseph W. Slade, in “Wally Wood: Picturing Male Adolescent Desire in Mad’s Early Parodies,” probes this stance through the artist’s work during the publication’s first twelve years: “Wood’s exuberant caricatures for these stories—especially the parodies of books, motion pictures, comic strips, topical events, personalities, and other artifacts of popular culture—often exploited the conflicted sexual attitudes of young postwar heterosexual males, who formed a substantial segment of the magazine’s audience”. (p. 101) Slade acknowledges the hyper-sexualized illustrative style of Wood’s female bodies, while making the case that the artist also sought to puncture inscribed masculine pretense and bravado.

And so an entry by Ann M. Ciasullo provides a welcome and significant recollection and analysis. Titled, “The Lighter–and Weightier–Side of Mad; Or, Everything I Needed to Know About Gender and Sexuality I Learned from Dave Berg,” she attributes to Mad the formatting of her sense of humor in the 1970s. As “an impressionable young girl growing up in a Catholic household and attending a Catholic school,” (p. 119) she refers to her younger self and reflects as an adult and self-described feminist (having re-inspected the magazine’s 1970s archive) upon the less-than straightforward processing of humor unabashedly fashioned for a young-male audience against the background of the so-called sexual revolution. Ciasullo focuses on the Mad cartoonist and writer Dave Berg’s apparent objectification of women in the drawing of his regular “The Lighter Side of . . .” commentary on social mores, thereby catering to the magazine’s presumed readership. Similar to Slade, however, she goes on to argue that “the humor of Berg’s feature often lies in the conjoining of images and words, the upending of expectations regarding what a body looks like versus what a body says and does—or more precisely, by
what we are invited to gaze upon versus what we are invited to laught at,” (p. 126) thereby offering up something like ‘equal-opportunity satire’. (ibid.)

To be sure, not every word of every entry will interest casual readers or scholars devoted to data-driven research. A piece titled, ‘Inside the Editorial Process’ amounts to two lengthy interviews conducted by Paul Levitz, the magazine’s publisher from 1992 to 2009, with contributor Al Jaffee and editor Nick Meglin, both of whom served Mad for decades. They offer quite a bit of anecdotal detail regarding the creative personalities and changes over the years. The entry does, in fact, harbor relevance to the care and feeding of a long-term, commercial endeavor that by definition demands humor production relentlessly and on deadline.

The second section of Seeing Mad, “Features from Cover to Fold-in” (Part II of the volume) looks at various regular contributions to the publication, both specific (e.g., “Spy vs. Spy”) and general, (e.g., satire through music parody). Of note, an essay by Christopher J. Gilbert, “The ‘Mad 20’ with Alfred E. Neuman; Or, It’s the Covers, Stupid,” applies trenchant thought to the notion of stupidity—embodied in the iconic rendering of the magazine’s mascot—as fulcrum for satirical leverage through graphic representation. The topic is explored and argued right through a latter-day shift to the satyric, summoning the spirit of the ancient Greek satyr play, and its “deep relationship between comicality and crudeness” (p. 149). Don Baird’s “You Always Hurt the Ones You Love: Mad Magazine’s Affectionate Parodies of Beloved Film Classics” is an incisive tribute to the use of culturally hallowed films deployed as vehicles for satire about the contemporary world, as well as the generic blind spots enabled by our communal affection for them. Baird enumerates a handful of recurring humorous techniques in advance of more detailed discussion of films, some from well before Mad came into existence (e.g., It’s a Wonderful Life and The Wizard of Oz, used as recently as 2010) and some upon their release in the latter twentieth century (The Sound of Music and The Birds).

Mad has always sought to expose the formulaic reliance and commercial laziness brought about by television’s relentless demand for product. Ethan Thompson, in “A Golden Age of Blecch: Mad Magazine’s Parodic Satire of Quality Television”, establishes a concept of “parodic satire” in advance of an era-by-era investigation—thereby offering an enlightening time-lapse view of such programming on US television, and rendering critiques of the making and marketing of such content through the eras.

Kerry Soper’s contribution, “Folding Against the Establishment: Satiric Distance and Difference in Al Jaffee’s Back Cover Feature in Mad Magazine,” presents a broad-spectrum discussion of artist and writer Al Jaffee’s longstanding fold-in feature. At the back of each issue the reader was presented with a full-page graphic rendering on a certain timely issue, usually with text. The reader would be instructed to fold the page in upon itself and back again upon dotted lines, so as to reveal a cleverly
constructed satirical message via the original page’s collapsed image. The essay gives context and insight into the biographical and social forces that shaped Jaffee’s creative growth. It also makes some keen points about satirical and parodic utterances: invoking Linda Hutcheon’s notion of critical distance in the execution of cutting satire; via comparison of Jaffee’s approach to that of author Joseph Heller in *Catch-22*, using silliness within seriousness to sharpen satiric potency; through Jaffee’s deployment of color and style in his work’s “parodic quoting” (p. 313); and in the manual act of folding the page to reveal the counter-message harbored within the more conventional question posed in the full-page image and text.

From the “Themes” section (Part III), Nathan Abrams’ “A Secular Talmud: The Jewish Sensibility of *Mad* Magazine,” delves into what might be seen as *Mad’s* distinctively Jewish sensibility in the 1950s and 1960s, manifested by the spirit of a staff, many of whose creative fires were forged by growing up during the Depression, World War II and, indeed, the Holocaust. They came to social commentary with an othered perspective unimpressed by the dominant discourses and abiding myths supporting the proud, homogenized American self-image. Writer Al Jaffee is quoted as explaining, “Oppressed people resort to humor. They can’t afford to get angry.” (p. 325) From a pragmatic perspective, Abrams points out: “Specifically, *Mad’s* humor was grounded in Yiddishisms, sarcasm, and self-mockery, all defining features of Jewish humor.” (p. 327) In an essay titled, “Diplomats Gone *Mad*: A Musical Rumble,” James D. Bloom proposes that the Baby Boom generation acquired through the pages of *Mad* a counter-education to the axiomatic truths and loyalties advanced by politicians and commercial media.

Within the short “Theories” section (Part IV), Jeffrey St. Onge, in “Comedy before Country: Engaged Levity and Absurdist Critique in *Mad* Magazine,” lays out useful theoretical approaches to the positioning of satirical humor regarding framing, absurdist aesthetic, and political valence. A contribution by Kathleen Mollick, “Genre Studies and *Mad* Magazine: Changing and Challenging Genres, 1953–1966,” points to a broader potential for analysis of comic technique by digging into the satirically shrewd deployment of Bakhtinian speech genres for social commentary, code-switching effect, and as a conduit for analysis of historical context on the ground. Mollick suggests that inspection through these genre-centered lenses stands to serve scholarly endeavor by those who did not have first-order contact with the source material.

And in the short, final section, titled, “Legacies” (Part V), Nicholas Sammond, in “Sons of *Mad*: Harvey Kurtzman and the Rise of Underground Comix (an Alternative-Universe Analysis),” delves into the prominence of *Mad*, its creative staff, and its readership within the landscape of underground comic satire in the US. He offers important texture to a general narrative that tends to omit feminist, queer and non-white cartoonists and their work (even while some of them have
acknowledged *Mad* as an important influence on their creative growth). Sammond thereby proffers an updated and fuller analysis of Kurtzman’s influence upon countercultural artists of the time, if not of society itself. And like other contributors, he advocates for the extent to which *Mad* and its makers have informed the spirit and practice of parody and satire to this day, in that, “this distinction between political and ‘apolitical’ (or implicitly libertarian) satire is significant for understanding the influence of Kurtzman and *Mad* on radical cartooning in the late twentieth century”. (p. 450) In light of this essay, it might be said that elsewhere in the volume occasional leaps are taken about the magazine’s broad cultural impact.

Finally, as a repository for *Mad*-related thought, people, events, and their contexts, the volume includes three valuable additional entries under the label of Resources (Part VI): “*Mad*’s ‘Usual Gang of Idiots’: Selected Capsule Biographies”; “A *Mad* Timeline, 1952–2020”; and “Bibliography,” including archives, collections, and other relevant articles and publications.

In reflecting upon the collection of essays as a whole, there is much of value regarding the nature, purpose, workings, and strategies of *Mad*’s parody and satire. It is gratifying to come across multiple takes on the same plot point (e.g., the migration by *Mad* from comic to magazine) or critical perspective (*Mad*’s purportedly studious apolitical or both-sides satirical targeting, committed to ridicule rather than political stance) from adjacent and/or alternative angles. To be sure, legacy fans may find a sentimental thrill from such loving attention to historic features and familiar members of the creative staff—they may well gain insight into the humorous workings so cherished by their younger selves. On the other hand, subjective appreciation sometimes threatens to nudge aside rigorous case-making.

*Mad* magazine’s corpus provides vast material for anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment and counter-capitalist satire produced by artists and writers who knew something about humor and how to make it do things. The collection serves as an important archival and analytical resource of humor-relevant material, thought and context for what stands as an influential purveyor of mid-to-latter twentieth century American humor.