

I was corrupted by MAD (magazine)

Bernard Marszalek

MAD, the wildly satirical humor magazine, was my primer for critical thinking in my early teens. This may seem an odd statement given the vacuous contents of the current magazine, but today's MAD is a pale reflection of its initial 1950s issues. We could say that it has been "neo-liberalized" like all mainstream media.

MAD magazine first appeared on newsstands across America in 1952. Well, it appeared on some newsstands. Not every drugstore or newsstand carried it because many distributors hesitated to see it next to Little Lulu or Archie. MAD was too "adult." In fact, the publisher, Bill Gaines of EC Comics transformed MAD from a satirical comic to a magazine to avoid the censorship of the Comics Code that banished his complete line of cutting edge comics in the 50s.

The 50s was a weird decade of conformism on all fronts. The fear of communist (meaning Jewish) influence over the minds of little (Christian) children was only one aspect of the exuberant cultivation of the Red Scare that didn't evaporate with the banishment of commie hunting Sen. Joe McCarthy.

A wingnut named Dr. Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist who claimed comic books were dangerous to children, wrote a 1948 *Collier's* magazine article, "Horror in the Nursery," to agitate for a Congressional Commission to investigate the unsavory influence of comics on the so-called rise of Juvenile Delinquency. JD in that decade amounted to not much more than petty vandalism and street fighting—quaint rumbles with chains and knives. However, the public hysteria created by Wertham in his book, *Seduction of the Innocent* and Congressional hearings, sufficiently upset the essential turpitude of the consumer society abuilding in that decade enough to precipitate self-censorship of transgressive mass media through the comic publisher's Comics Code Authority.

MAD, as an illustrated magazine, freed from previous restrictions, took on a more provocative role and gained popularity beyond the publisher's expectations. The magazine became the venue for some of the best comic writers of the decade, names that will be unfamiliar today, but in their day commanded national recognition on radio and television.

MAD alone in the popular media (and pointedly, advertisement-free) provided a satirical take on celebrity culture, politics, and advertising. Short humorous articles coupled with biting cartoons were an explosive combination that saw quick sales. Often issues sold out within days.

For a teenager like myself, first becoming aware of a massively mismanaged world, where within minutes warning I could be vaporized in a thermonuclear conflagration, MAD offered a bit of oddball sanity. Sitting reading the latest issue in my lower middle class home in Chicago, I no longer felt isolated and vulnerable to feelings of dread and doom.

MAD magazine was my inspiration for an underground high school journal of satire and abuse of authority of my own for which I was reprimanded and punished after the third issue fell into the hands of the targets of my venom. But the best example of how MAD buoyed my spirits in those days revolves around Mr. Lewandowski's Sophomore Rhetoric Class.

This was essentially a public speaking class, more than advocacy, and one I especially detested. Every speech was an opportunity for the class of testosterone hyperactive males—I attended an all-boys school—to ridicule the

hapless speaker with facial expressions unseen by Mr. Lewandowski, who consistently stood in the back of the room unaware of the facial machinations of the demons sitting at their desks supposedly in rapt attention.

The day I heard that our next assignment was to deliver a humorous speech, I was about to fake a near death experience to avoid the prospect of standing like a fool in front of that class trying to be funny. That night at home, I ransacked my collection of MADs until I found the perfect piece to develop into a speech.

Since the assignment did not mandate an original composition, I chose a MAD parody of an Army Sergeant's training lecture for new recruits. Accompanying the text were drawings the Sergeant referred to demonstrating how to tie combat boots, how to tuck in one's shirt, where to display campaign ribbons, carry one's rifle, and so forth.

I redrew the illustrations on large poster board and retrieved an old army shirt and cap that I still had from a grammar school play and stood in front of the hallway mirror for endless hours fine-tuning my absurd presentation. Of course, the shirt didn't fit, but that added to the effect I was after—total ridicule of the military services. Needless-to-say my speech drew major guffaws from the class and Mr. Lewandowski's beaming face registered "A" all over.

I must admit that in my youth, I fantasized becoming a stand-up comic in imitation of Lenny Bruce, an idol of mine at the time, or later, Mort Sahl, but circumstances and opportunities led me down another path. However, I did retain, and deepen, my hostility to the military, and later refused Army induction to fight in Vietnam.

In 2010, the magazine's oldest and longest-running contributor, Al Jaffee, told an interviewer, "Mad was designed to corrupt the minds of children. And, from what I'm gathering from the minds of people all over, we succeeded."

So, maybe MAD did corrupt me after all, as Dr. Wertham predicted and Jaffee and his MAD crew intended. But if that is the case, then all I can say is that to be "corrupted" to a system of injustice frees one to choose noncompliance, and rebellion.

Bernard Marszalek is the editor of *The Right to be Lazy: Essays by Paul Lafargue* righttobelazy.com/blog/ and founder of the Ztangi Press in Berkeley, Calif., ztangi.org.

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