

## COMICS AND TWO CULTURES

### I

I have deliberately used the term « two cultures » to take advantage of the currency it has recently been given by C. P. Snow. His book focused attention on the gaps between the « cultures » of the humanists and the natural scientists, but the divisions to be made don't end there. Within each of these cultural kingdoms there are little self-contained realms that go their own way and fight for their existence just as nation-states try to maintain their identities and achieve their aims in the political world.

Thus, for example, in the sciences there are basic and applied sciences, there are physical and biological sciences, there are « armchair » and « experimental » sciences and numerous other « kinds » of science that may be distinguished. In the same way there are many humanistic cultures which differ in subject matter, method, and level. One of the most common distinctions made is between what is called « high » culture and what is called « low », « mass » or « popular » culture.

The distinction generally made between these two kinds of culture is that « high » culture supposedly embraces *serious* literature, art, music and so forth, while « low » culture is a *product* created to make money by pleasing its market. Until recently this definition of « low » culture has just about been universally accepted, and so scholars have paid little attention to it, though it certainly « bulks large » in contemporary society.

It was held that to get to know something about what is called « national character », it was necessary only to explore

the great and important works of literature and the arts which encompass the « dialectic » (to use Trilling's term) of a given culture; that was enough. The problem with this approach is that it is too limited, too precious, and really too much to hope for. Scholarly estimates of literary artists rise and fall with such regularity that one can easily go astray in simply trying to study the « great ». And what *is* « the best that has been thought and said? ».

But the point is that in confining our attention to masterpieces or « serious art », we neglect much that is important, for the view « from above » often misses a great deal of detail in the world below, or distorts what it sees. Let me give an example. A number of years ago an important American magazine, which prided itself on its accuracy in knowing popular taste, predicted a certain person would win the American presidential race that year. It based its prediction on an elaborate poll it had conducted by telephone. The election resulted, however, in this person being handily defeated. Why? Because at that time the people who had telephones formed an untypical segment of the American public.

The same possibility for making erratic assessments holds true for those who confine their attention to « high » culture. What I suggest as a remedy is to stop ignoring « popular » culture and to have the best of both worlds, or both cultures. By looking at culture from all levels, or by looking at all levels of culture, we gain a more complete and more correct picture.

Most universities have courses in « comparative literature », and this is only sensible. To understand Nathanael West we must know something about Baudelaire and to understand Baudelaire we must know about Poe, and the same applies to countless other authors like Joyce, Kafka, Proust, etc. To understand something about the Italian « mentality » you ought to know something about Dante, Machiavelli, Garibaldi, Croce, and others. But this isn't enough, and if it were all you knew it would be frightful. You should also know about Domenico Modugno, Federico Fellini, and Bonaventura.

And if you wish to know something about how different national cultures or national characters compare, it is as important to know about their « low » cultures as well as their « high » ones.

What I am proposing then is a serious study of what might be called comparative « sub-literature » or comparative popular culture. If, as Clement Greenberg says (in *Mass Culture*), « the precondition for kitsch [popular culture] ... is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of... » then so much the better for it as an instrument of cultural analysis. But, we may ask in passing, if this « kitsch » is such a simple matter, why is one song, one magazine, one film more popular than other competing ones? I don't think the matter is as simple as the « consumption » analysts of popular culture tend to believe.

The « two cultures » that I am going to compare are those of Italy and America and to do so I am going to use a form of popular culture that happily lends itself remarkably well to comparison and contrast — the comics, or as they are called in Italy, « i fumetti ». After I conclude my brief discussion of the arguments that have been made about « mass » culture, I analyse American and Italian comics to see what light they shed on the values, assumptions and cultural commonplaces of their respective countries.

I will do this analysis of various Italian and American comics in terms of their different verbal, graphic and narrative aspects, which I shall relate to the conventions of the medium and to Italian and American life — that is, certain assumptions of Italian life, and attitudes towards values and institutions that are different from American ones. Many of these attitudes and values are « covert » or hidden. The creators of the comics most probably did not purposely inject the values in the strips, but in trying to create material that would be acceptable tapped a great « collective unconscious » of sorts. The point is not that the attitudes which I have discovered were put in, but that they were *there*.

In *Modern Public Opinion*, a prominent social psychologist, William Albig, says comics

... are a basic expression of American culture. In the comic strips we have the reflection of the predominant values in the life of the United States. They are a popular art which reflects values and preoccupations even better than the movies and television.

Although this statement must be qualified slightly (Albig does this later), it does suggest that the comics can be of great usefulness in analysing American culture, Italian culture and, of course, any culture.

## II

In this study<sup>1</sup> of American and Italian comics, I am going to discuss the differences between their treatment of certain themes and subjects, and try to relate these differences both to conventions of the media for each of these countries and differing cultural « consenses ». My method will be essentially one of textual analysis though, of course, some historical information will be used.

I have used the word « comics » purposely, because I intend to concentrate my attention primarily on humorous fumetti, many of which have certain « classical » dimensions in Italian culture. While the French term « bandes dessinées » is probably more correct in that it covers all kinds of fumetti, the term « comics » happens, in this case, to be quite acceptable and accurate. Comics may be broadly defined as a series of drawings, usually involving dialogue, in which the adventures of a group of generally well delineated characters provide amusement and surprise, etc. for the reader. There are two basic kinds of comics: *anecdotal or gag strips*, which have

1. In an effort to make it possible for the reader to examine many of the comics discussed in this article, I have, as much as possible, analyzed characters and adventures found in *I Primi Eroi* published by Garzanti, and *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, though I have consulted and used other publications.

completed and resolved stories each day, and *serial strips*, in which the story may last weeks and months. There are generally recurrent patterns of events, which appear and reappear in a thousand different variations, and which the readers come to anticipate.

It is interesting to notice the ways in which « the military » is treated in American and Italian comics. The differences are so striking that you can't help but come to certain conclusions about the two cultures in general.

The great Italian « anti-military » comic hero is Marmittone, (1928) by Bruno Angoletta. Like many of the earlier Italian comics, it is very simply drawn with rather stiff, wooden figures, plain backgrounds and dialogue in the form of rhymed verse (which appears in captions underneath the drawings). As in many comics, the dialogue isn't really necessary; it only adds details, although the rhyme and humor of the poetry is very amusing to children.

Marmittone is an extremely enthusiastic and zealous soldier who, as a result of bungling or bad luck, always ends up in prison. Most of his adventures involve accidentally discomfiting officers or friends of officers and being reprimanded by being sent to prison. Marmittone is not rebellious at all; indeed, he is just the opposite... he *respects authority figures*, exhibits no desire to « cross » them, and if it were not for the fact that he is « jinxed » or perhaps even « doomed », he would be a model soldier. The only thing negative in the comic is that the hero, for whom we have affection and sympathy, ends up in prison — a dark, empty room into which a symbolic ray of light is always seen filtering. Thus, what criticism there is of the military is negative and rather weak. We feel that *something* must be wrong if Marmittone, a good-willed hero, can end up in jail, but there is no direct attack made on the officers; they are only obliquely ridiculed, and always at the *expense* of the hero.

This is not so in American « anti-military » comics like Morton Walker's Beetle Bailey. In this strip, which is currently one of the popular American comics, the common soldier

consistently engages in a battle of wits with his superiors and generally emerges victorious. The Sergeant and the Captain in Beetle Bailey are both, it must be added, relatively sympathetic antagonists whose cupidity and stupidity endear them to the reader. It is enlisted men who have the « upper hand » most of the time because they have the brains and because *authority is not seen as valid*. The Sergeant is a good natured, boisterous glutton and the Captain is a fool.

What's more, the ridicule is often presented pictorially. In one recent episode, for example, the Sergeant is seen coming through the « chow » line (getting his food) in the cafeteria. He has a tray loaded with steaks, potatoes, salad, etc. « Wait », he says to the Mess Sergeant, « I don't have any celery ». He also doesn't have any ice cream but the Mess Sergeant tells him that there is no room on his tray and also adds that there is « no coming through the line twice ». The dilemma is solved by stuffing celery in the Sergeant's ears and an ice cream in his mouth. He thus « succeeds » but at the price of becoming a clown.

You don't have this pictorial ridicule in Marmittone, in which relatively little attention is paid to expression. A contemporary Italian military strip dealing with the adventures of Gibernetta and Gedeone is somewhat closer to Beetle Bailey, though it retains the humorous poetry captions of Marmittone, and still has a reverential and respectful attitude towards authority. Rather than ending in prison as Marmittone always does, Gibernetta and Gedeone generally are awarded medals. The « fall guy » or the victim, this time, is the Sergeant who blunders and suffers for it. The fact that the awarding of a medal is seen as a proper reward for our heroes shows that the officers, the real authority figures, are still seen as *legitimate*. The Sergeant, who is, after all, only instrumental in executing the wishes of the officers is also, we must remember, an enlisted man who has risen but who is still *not* a true authority figure.

Quite probably Cimpiani, who draws the strip, was influenced by Walker, for his hero, Gibernetta at times looks

strikingly like Beetle. He has the same round head, his hair sticks out wildly from under his cap, his legs are thin and like toothpicks (this applies to all Cimpiani's characters); the only real difference is that you can see Gibernetta's eyes, whereas Beetle's are always hidden under his cap.

Few of the « classic » Italian comics (such as Bonaventura, Bilbolbul, Pier Cloruro, or Pampurio) have the highly stylized, toothpick limbs and big feet that you find in Disney characters, such as Mickey Mouse. Both this kind of stylization and exaggeration and the realistic, « draftsman » type fumetti (which aren't usually comic) are more or less American innovations, and fairly recent ones at that. Mickey Mouse dates from 1928 and « draftsman » style fumetti from Milton Caniff's Terry and the Pirates, 1934.

Mickey Mouse, known as Topolino in Italy, is probably the most important comic strip figure in Italy. He is the hero of at least one weekly magazine, *Topolino*, and a monthly one, *Almanacco di Topolino*. Both magazines contain Donald Duck and other Disney characters and have some adventures that are written specifically for the Italian public. Almost 30% of the readers are between 16 and 34 years of age, which suggests that a good many of the fathers of children reading *Topolino* also read it. Considering that the weekly edition has a circulation of 260,000 copies per week, and that *Almanacco* has a circulation of 140,000 copies per month, it means that a large number of children and adults see the magazine.

The Disney characters have a « supra-national » appeal because they are simple animals and indulge in slapstick-filled cops-and-robber chases and other such activities that are amusing to all children. Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, and their friends have also inspired a host of imitators so that there is now a comical cartoon character for almost every animal that exists.

But why should a mouse be so popular with children? Possibly because the mouse is a small, defenseless, and in a way, « household » creature that most children have seen, with whom they can empathize, and of whom they need not be

afraid. Historically, Mickey Mouse is a descendant of the mouse Ignatz in one of the greatest American comics, Krazy Kat, which flourished between 1911 and 1944 (until Herriman, its creator, died). But Krazy was much different from Mickey Mouse. Ignatz Mouse was a decidedly *anti-social character*, constantly in rebellion against society, whereas Mickey Mouse is decidedly well adjusted, internalizes the values of his society, is on the side of « law and order », and conformism. He is decidedly comforting to children since he shows that submitting oneself to the values of a given order ends in well-being, rewards, and acceptance.

If we return, for a moment, to the older « classics » in the Italian and American comic repertoires, we find another interesting pair of « anti-social » animals, the American mule, Maud (1906), and the Italian goat, Barbacucco (1909).

Both animals are pitted against human beings — the goat butts people and the mule kicks them, but there is an important difference in the consequences, for while Maud always ends up « victorious », the goat's actions always come to nothing. For example, he will butt a tree in which a boy and a girl are sitting and the fruit will fall down, which they then eat. On the other hand, all attempts to « tame » Maud, the ornery mule, are useless and people who try to do so are most always discomfited, though they might have momentary and temporary successes.

Maud is a rebel who succeeds; Barbacucco is a rebel who does not, and perhaps, in some strange way, they mirror two different attitudes: the American type of individualism and the Italian idea that somehow the « given order of society » is too strong to be bucked, that things are « fated ».<sup>2</sup> Whether

2. You might almost say that American individualism is economic and political, whereas Italian individualism is social. The American is a friendly fellow who « conforms », invites you to dinner at the drop of a hat, but believes in free enterprise and classical economics. The Italian (and European) lives in a much more closed society, people are more self-directed, but politically, he has much more of a sense of the group — at least this is suggested by the various Socialist parties in Italy.



the fates are smiling or not is beside the point, for if things are ultimately fated, individual initiative and efforts are of no great importance — « whatever will be will be » as a popular song puts it.

Probably the best example of this reliance « on the gods », which can be, at once a source of great optimism and pessimism, is the famous Italian comic hero, Bonaventura, who started amusing children in 1917. Graphically, Bonaventura is typically « old school » Italian — the figures are stiff and crudely stylized and greatly over-simplified), there is not much expression on the faces of the characters, there is much fantasy, and the dialogue is given in captions that are rhymed verse.

Bonaventura is not a character for whom things *always* turn out well, though most often they do. When he instigates actions and activities — such as trying to drive a car, or trying to become a social lion — things turn out badly for him and he generally retreats and goes back to simpler ways and more secure activities. It is only when, by chance (and the malicious acts of his nemeses are also chance events) what seem to be « disasters » happen to him, that happy consequences result and he earns his « milione ».

Thus, at the end of an episode in which Bonaventura tried to drive automobiles, with calamitous results, he decides that from now on he will walk; or at the end of his adventure in which he tried to « enter society », he decides that society is full of delusions and that he will remain with his sweet and good family. For reasons such as these, I think we can call Bonaventura a decidedly *conservative* character, or one who embodies a conservative outlook towards experience.

This, in turn, suggests that Bonaventura isn't really as optimistic a strip as is commonly believed, since generally speaking, a conservative tends to be less optimistic than a radical. Bonaventura's « rebellions » against the more cloying aspects of family life or the limitations of being a pedestrian end in

defeat. And even when he gets his « milione » it is generally the result of a freak occurrence in which he was involved; it is always rather « miraculous ». Individual initiative is played down; luck is all, and the best of all possible rewards is seen as money. Bonaventura is a materialist who symbolizes for his readers, that the only way that one can become a success in the world is as the result of a miracle... and this is not particularly hopeful.

There are several other comparisons between American and Italian comics that suggest themselves — attitudes toward royalty and aristocracies and the treatment of the « mischievous » child.

Soglow's *The Little King*, which started appearing in 1934, is very close to the classical Italian comic in style, but far different in attitude. The « king », a fat dwarf who has a big mustache, always wears his crown, and generally wears an ermine robe, is humanized. He fetches the milk in the morning, he rushes to bargain clearances in department stores, and is generally shown to be « just like anyone else ». He is made into a good democrat and there is no suggestion of any divinity « that doth hedge a king ». Indeed, both the title of the strip, « *The Little King* » and the fact that he is mute, indicate this.

Rubino's *Lola and Lalla* is much different. Here, Lola, the daughter of a rich man (we have here an aristocracy of wealth), is always elaborately dressed and quite vicious towards Lalla, her social inferior. Lalla is always shown in « modest but clean » clothing, decidedly inferior to that of Lola. As a result of being pushed around by Lola however, she ends up with more beautiful clothing. Generally this is accomplished by having some sticky substance fall on Lalla, to which flower blossoms, etc. become attached.

Here the aristocracy, as represented by Lola, is seen as vicious and brutal, repulsing any attempt by the common people (Lalla) to be friendly, or to gain recognition. Social class is shown by clothing, as in *The Little King*, but whereas the King is warm and very human, as we might expect from a

democratic American king, the European aristocracy is demonic and insists that the people « know their place ». Social mobility is impossible and any attempts at it are repulsed. Even Lola's dog, conventionally a friendly animal, is shown as nasty and cold, corrupted, we imagine, by his relationship with Lola and the « upper classes ».

A relatively similar attitude exists in Italian comics dealing with « naughty » children. That is, in many of the episodes the mischievous child is caught and punished; the price of rebellion is a spanking or some kind of humiliation. This is different from many American comics, in which the child often succeeds in his pranks.

Take, for example, Rubino's remarkable strips Pierino, and Quadratino, which appeared from 1909 on. Pierino is a little boy who is always trying to get rid of his doll, but never succeeds in doing so. He buries it, he gives it away, he throws it down the chimney — but no matter, it keeps coming back. Generally in the last panel the same shaft of light that fell on Marmittone in jail, falls on Pierino, although in this case the ray of light probably symbolizes internalized conscience rather than socially « objectionable » activities as in the case of Marmittone.

Quadratino is a boy whose head is a square. His escapades generally result in his head getting changed in shape, so that the fact that he has committed « crimes » becomes obvious, objectively visible. There is much distortion in the strip and a good deal of plane geometry. But the moral of Quadratino (and of Pierino) is that bad boys always get caught or, in more general terms, *rebellion against properly constituted authority is perilous and futile.*

It might be objected that Hans and Fritz, the Katzenjammer Kids also usually end up being punished, and this is true, but there is an important difference to be noted between the endings in the Katzenjammer Kids and in Rubin's strips. Generally, the pranks of Hans and Fritz are successful and cause a great deal of discomfort to the adults against whom they are directed. Thus, the pranks are successful as pranks. It is only

that adults, having a monopoly on force, can get their revenge — and do so, that pales the victories of the kids (and tans their hides).

Let me summarize the underlying psychological and social attitudes we have found in these comics and which I am hypothesizing might be broadly accepted cultural values:

#### ITALIAN COMICS

<i>Character</i>	<i>Personality Traits, etc.</i>
Marmittone	respects constituted authority, zealous, but jinxed
Gibernetta	respects authority
Barbacucco	unsuccessful in his rebellion against people
Bonaventura	bad luck usually turns out miraculously for the best, conservative approach to experience
Lola and Lalla	intercourse between classes impossible, upper classes seen as demonic
Quadrantino	rebellion against authority (adult world) seen as futile
Pierino	

#### AMERICAN COMICS

<i>Character</i>	<i>Personality Traits, etc.</i>
Beetle Bailey	authority not recognized as valid
Mickey Mouse	values of the given order are valid
Ignatz Mouse	anti-social and rebellious
Maud	anti-social and rebellious (successfully)
Little King	democratic « King »—no different from anyone else
Katzenjammer Kids	rebellion against 'adult world' successful in short run, but often has had consequences

The conclusion that we reach from these particular comics is that the Italian comics reflect a basically conservative approach towards experience, society, etc. Authority is generally seen as valid, and rebellion against it as futile. Social mobility is seen as essentially miraculous in a rigid and hierarchical society in which all attempts to climb are brusquely repulsed.

The American comics, on the other hand, suggested a basically « irreverential » approach towards authority. It is seen as invalid and not necessarily worthy of allegiance. Because of this, naturally, there is much more anti-social and rebellious activity, which is viewed as possibly successful. Except for the conformist, Mickey Mouse, all the American comics mentioned above are rebellious and tend to see authority as invalid. Mickey Mouse is, as I have pointed out, extremely popular in Italy.

These conclusions are, of course, tentative ones. They have been drawn from a somewhat limited reading of a rather small group of comics and quite possibly, because of this, are somewhat distorted. On the other hand, I have tried to discuss some of the most important comics and have also tried to analyse comics that were contemporaries — to guard against unfair comparisons.

It so happens that the attitudes I have discovered in the comics square with the findings of social scientists and the insights of travellers such as De Tocqueville, Bryce, and Martineau about authority in America. Interestingly enough, my findings also are similar to the findings or opinions of a number of writers on Italian society. For example, the *Bompiani Literary Almanac* for 1964 has a number of articles which suggest that today's Italian youth respects authority and is not particularly rebellious.

### III

#### *A Postscript on the Contemporary Comical Scene in Italy*

Currently the comic book industry is flourishing in Italy, as it is almost everywhere in the world. Comics have a long history in Italy — the *Corriere Dei Piccoli* is more than fifty years old — but at the present moment, most of the comics published are either American comics which have been translated or imitations of American ones, generally in either the Disney Mickey Mouse « animal » school, or the Caniff Steve Canyon « realism » school.

Most of the « classic » old Italian comics are no longer being produced and, in a sense, it may be said that the *Corriere Dei Piccoli* has lost its « integrity ». It now tends to follow the lead of television and to print fumetti full of sentimental slush and « innocent romance » (such as Dr. Kildare) based on television heroes. It seems to be floundering with no clear-cut picture of its audience or what it should emphasize.

In 1961 a number of the publishers approved of a « Moral Code » in order to prevent the government from « stepping in » with some kind of censorship. This code lists certain taboos which the publishers are to observe, including:

1. no discussion or doubts of the principles of family unity, marriage, *authority* [my underlining] of respect for parents.
2. no speaking of divorce.
3. nothing to cause lack of respect for Italy, the flag, democratic principles, or the institutions of the state.
4. nothing racist, or anything to offend human dignity.
5. religion is always to be treated with reverence, the utility of school is to be stressed, etc.
6. violence is to be toned down, the « good guys » are to win in the end, bad language is to be avoided and bloody horror scenes are not to be used. Sex and bad language are « out » and good grammar is recommended.

This code is just an explicit statement of the conservatism found in the older Italian comics. Being humorous, they tended to avoid the pitfalls the code was designed to eliminate, though on the other hand, there was a great deal of violence in them. The code was evidently made on the basis of a contention that young children are not capable of intellectually or emotionally assimilating complexities dealing with the family, justice, religion, etc. and it is best to present them with « security fostering » heroes, heroines, and stories.

While all this is possibly true in theory, and the code no doubt, is the result of both a certain amount of good will and a certain amount of shrewdness, there can be no question that it is impossible to legislate « correctness in the comics », and

that many of the values espoused by acceptable heroes are possibly socially dysfunctional.

Take Popeye (Braccio di Ferro) for example. Rather curiously enough, he is now being run on the pages of the Communist daily newspaper, *L'Unità*. This is perfectly understandable, that is, if the cartoon editor (or whoever chose Popeye) is a Leninist — for Popeye is an exponent of violence. In one typical episode he is one of a group of judges of a beauty contest. A number of beautiful girls parade by, but he does not like them. Finally Olive Oyl, his thin and ugly girl friend, comes by — number 13 among the contestants — and he decides she should be given the prize. The other judges disagree so Popeye knocks them out and awards the prize to his girl friend. « What's just is just », he asks Olive Oyl, « isn't that true? » « Of course », she answers.

On the other hand, we must realize that in this particular strip, and in many others, violence is a *convention* of sorts, a means to an end, true, but one which somehow is painless, has no bad effects, and therefore is seen as « funny ». In the beauty contest story, there are several morals that may be drawn: that « love conquers all », loyalty is commendable, that Popeye is a terrible judge of beauty, that there is « hope » for ugly girls, etc. We must realize that *violence* in the comic strips is an extremely involved matter and must remember that there are numerous conventions which the readers learn which qualify it, and most everything else. (I have not mentioned the moral issues raised by this adventure: is violence for a « good » cause justifiable, or what is a good cause? These are questions that are, I believe, within the grasp of many of the readers of this strip and other comics, and upon which, in simpler terms, quite possibly their unconscious and their consciences might be stirring). The comic strips may use *ordinary language*, but as the « Oxbridge » ordinary language philosophers have demonstrated, a great number of very important issues can be posed in extremely simple terms.

I might also add that, in addition to what I have found on *authority*, many of the conclusions of serious scholars about

American life may also be found in the comics. For example, philosopher Morton White wrote an important book on the anti-formalist nature of much recent American thought (19th and 20th century) *Social Thought in America: the revolt against formalism* and comic strip artist, Al Capp, has ridiculed formalism in *Li'l Abner*. There is one adventure in which a mailman, McSconk, is involved in a story about animals revolting and learning how to conduct warfare. They send for books on how to manufacture guns. The United States military establishment tries to stop him from delivering the books, but he will not be deterred, saying: « The U.S. mail gits delivered, even if it destroys the U.S. ».

McSconk's actions are self-destructive, since were the animals to take over America, there would be no more post office system, and he would be out of a job — but he persists. Capp is showing the absurd nature of irrational idealism and uncritical « devotion to duty ».

Let me end by saying that there is more than « meets the eye », (or meets the Popeye) in the comics, and in fumetti of all kinds. And, in addition, they are a fruitful source of information for the scholar who can disregard clichés and look at them with an open mind.

ARTHUR A. BERGER