THE COMIC BOOK

Comics as an Independent Commodity,
1939–1945

In the 1930s entrepreneurs associated with the printing industry created a new medium for comic art, the comic book. Originally confined to reprinting newspaper comic strips, the fledgling comic book publishers discovered that original material featuring costumed superheroes would increase their sales. Harry Donenfeld, the publisher of Detective Comics, Incorporated (DC), was the first to recognize the appeal of superheroes in 1938, when his Action Comics, which featured Superman, outsold DC's other titles. Donenfeld expanded publication of superhero character comic books. The other publishers soon followed suit, and by June 1941 over a hundred comic book titles sold at a combined rate of 10 million copies a month.¹

The comic book business expanded just as comic strips had attracted a national audience at the turn of the century. Both comic strips and superhero comic books featured characters with distinctive appearances. Both media projected intimacy, giving readers the sensation of looking at and listening in on a private world. But comic books added a new dimension to the commodification of the art form. Whereas comic strips depended on newspapers to reach their market, comic books were packaged as discrete products. The production and consumption of comic art independent of newspaper distribution transformed its market.

Comic book publishers assumed they had a younger audience than those who purchased newspapers, and the initial content and marketing of comic books demonstrated this belief. Comic book creators were also young. Many of the artists and writers of comic books were in their teens or early twenties, a situation compounded when the United States entered the Second World War and many of the older creators joined the services.

THE INVENTION OF THE COMIC BOOK

Comic books owe their existence to the success of comic-art-style advertising in the early 1930s. Beginning in 1897 with the Yellow Kid, publishers marketed collections of comic strips, bound in cardboard, through toy stores and bookshops. Prices ranged from twenty-five to sixty cents, depending on the book's size and quality of paper and binding. In 1929 the Dell Publishing Company issued The Funnies, a tabloid-format comic magazine containing original comic strip material, but this publication ceased after a year and a half. These ventures did not produce the distinct comic book form.²

Not until the 1930s did companies publish works that had the properties of comic books. In 1933 Harry Wildenberg, an employee of the Eastern Color Printing Company, which printed Sunday comic sections for East Coast newspapers, convinced Gulf Oil to publish a tabloid-size comic to give away at its gas stations. After some experimentation Wildenberg developed a reduced format that allowed two pages of comics to fit on a standard tabloid sheet of paper. With the help of another Eastern employee, Maxwell (M. C.) Gaines, Wildenberg persuaded Procter & Gamble to commission Funnies on Parade, a thirty-six-page book of comic strip reprints, measuring seven and a half by ten and a half inches with a paper cover, to be given away as an advertising premium. This was the first comic publication with the physical attributes of a comic book. Eastern also produced comic book premiums for Kinney Shoe Stores, Milk-O-Malt, Wannemaker stores, Wheatena, and Canada Dry. All Eastern's comic book premiums reprinted popular newspaper comic strips.³

Weldenberg and Gaines's packaging of comic strips as advertising premiums followed the widespread use of comic art in advertisements in the 1930s. Manufacturers using these premiums wanted to attract the interest of children, who they hoped would induce their parents to
buy the advertised product. For instance, the Chicago Tribune comic supplement for Sunday October 1, 1933, contained an advertisement for a free comic book from Wheatena. The ad read:

Free! Famous Funnies! A book of popular comics. Boys and Girls—here's a book you'll all like, 32 pages including Mutt and Jeff, Hairbreadth Harry, Joe Palooka, Reg'lar Fellers and a lot more. . . . You can get a copy of this book free. Just fill out the coupon and mail it to us with the top cut from a package of Wheatena. If you haven't a Wheatena package in your home, ask mother to get you one from her grocer the first thing tomorrow morning!

Eastern produced Famous Funnies, which contained no advertising, as a free premium for various products. They printed between 100,000 and 250,000 copies for each product. The story goes that, struck by the demand for the comic books, M. C. Gaines believed they could be sold direct to the public through newsstands. In late 1933 he placed several dozen copies of Famous Funnies, with ten cents price stickers, on newsstands. When the newsstands sold all their copies in two days, Gaines convinced his employers that comic books had commercial promise. The story is probably apocryphal, though, given that contemporary sources, including Gaines himself, made no mention of it happening.

Lacking experience as a magazine publisher and distributor, Eastern approached Dell with the idea for a salable comic book. Dell commissioned Eastern to produce 35,000 copies of a sixty-four-page book priced at ten cents a copy. This comic book, also entitled Famous Funnies, sold through chain stores. But Dell decided not to proceed with the book after potential advertisers objected to both the poor-quality paper and the use of reprint material. In early 1934 the Eastern Color Printing Company decided to publish a comic book itself and arranged for the distribution of 250,000 copies through the newsstands controlled by the American News Company. The first issue of the new book, the third comic book to bear the title Famous Funnies, containing sixty-four pages and priced at ten cents, appeared on newsstands in May 1934 with a cover date of July. Eastern lost $4,000 on the first issue, but by the twelfth issue the comic book netted $30,000. Eastern reversed its early losses by selling advertising space. The first issue contained no advertisements, but by the ninth issue the comic contained full-page ads for Buck Rogers 25th Century casters, Daisy repeater ri-

fles, and Iver Johnson bicycles. As had Eastern's previous efforts the third version of Famous Funnies consisted entirely of reprints.

Other companies associated with the comic strip business soon joined Eastern as comic book publishers. King Features and United Features, two of the largest comic strip syndicates, began to publish comic book reprints of their material in April 1936. Another major syndicate, McClure, prepared comic strip reprint material for Dell's Popular Comics, which began in February 1936. But a newcomer to the comic field, Maj. Malcolm Wheeler Nicholson, issued comic books consisting of original material, an innovation that led to the development of superhero characters. He published his first title, New Fun Comics, in late 1934. Nicholson, a military adventurer and pulp fiction writer before his brief career as a comic book publisher, was eased out of his company in 1936. The new publisher, Harry Donenfeld, produced comic books that focused on individual subjects. The first of these, Detective Comics, appeared in January 1937. Detective Comics became the flagship title of Donenfeld's company, which would be known simply as DC. The detectives of the title did little detecting and mostly engaged in fistfights and gunplay. Coulton Waugh, a comic art historian and a contemporary comic strip artist, noted that Detective Comics "looked and felt different from the others." Waugh regarded Detective Comics as a "bold and sensational" step away from the format of newspaper strips.

SUPERMAN AS TRADEMARK

The first issue of Detective Comics contained two stories, Slam Bradley and Spy, by the Cleveland writer-artist team of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Siegel and Shuster had earlier sold a story to Nicholson's New Fun Comics, which appeared in the October 1935 issue under the pseudonyms Leger and Reuths. As teenagers in the late 1920s and early 1930s, both Siegel and Shuster had immersed themselves in science fiction, pulp magazines, and movies. In 1934, at age twenty, the pair had already devised their most famous character, Superman, but had been unable to sell him to a comic strip syndicate or a comic book publisher. In 1938 Harry Donenfeld decided to publish another single-theme comic book concentrating on fast-paced action stories. He purchased the Superman material and all subsidiary rights from Siegel and
Shuster. The first issue of DC's new comic, *Action Comics*, dated June 1938, featured Superman on the cover and as the lead story. According to Donenfeld, the first three issues of *Action Comics* did not have outstanding sales, but the fourth issue saw a significant increase. Its publisher conducted a newsstand survey and found that children asked for the comic book “with Superman in it.” Donenfeld told a reporter in 1941 that he made sure subsequent issues of *Action Comics* displayed Superman prominently on the cover. Thereafter sales rose at a dramatic rate; by 1941 *Action Comics* sold 900,000 a month, a figure close to 10 percent of the monthly sales for all comic books. Superman became a ubiquitous comic art figure. In January 1939 the McClure syndicate began distribution of a Superman comic strip to 230 newspapers. In the summer of 1939, DC started a quarterly comic book composed solely of Superman stories. When the company converted it to a bimonthly book in September 1940, *Superman* had a circulation of 1,250,000 and grossed $950,000 for the year.

When Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster invented Superman, they created both a character and a type, the comic book superhero, around which comic book publishers could sell a product and expand their nascent market. Superman’s success inspired a plethora of costumed superhero characters. The most familiar and lasting of these characters were DC’s Batman and Wonder Woman, and Timely/Marvel Comics’ Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, and Captain America. But these were just a few of several hundred costumed adventurers who first appeared in the pages of comic books in the late 1930s and early 1940s. According to Coulton Waugh, the number of comic book titles published in this period peaked at 160 in 1940, then fell to 100 by the summer of 1942. But sales increased slightly from 10.0 million a month in 1940 to 12.5 million a month in 1942. These sales produced $1.5 million of revenue annually, of which 75 percent came from children’s purchases. By the mid-1940s more than 90 percent of children aged six to eleven across the country read an average of fifteen comic books a month. Between ages twelve and eighteen, readership fell to 80 percent and the average number read fell to twelve a month.

Between 1933 and the early 1940s, entrepreneurs transformed comic books from an advertising medium into a commodity and created a new market of mostly young readers. Comic-art-style advertising had already blurred the distinction between such art as entertainment and as advertising. Comic art had always been a commodity, albeit one sold through another medium. But comic books transformed the market for it. The comic strip, an entertainment feature within the larger newspaper, became an advertising tool for a variety of commodities. With comic books the art form became an entertainment commodity in its own right.

Superhero characters, such as Superman, became synonymous with the comic book form. Recognizing the commercial value of their characters, publishers moved to protect their property. For instance, Donenfeld’s Detective Comics, Inc., sued Bruns Publications for copyright infringement when the latter published a comic book featuring Wonder Man, a superhero whom DC successfully argued derived from Superman. To give Superman further protection, DC registered his image, name, and the title logo of the comic book as trademarks. Trademark registration gave Superman a legal identity as a business symbol, an asset or property, above and beyond that of a fictional character. This status guaranteed DC’s ownership and control of Superman for all time since trademark protection, unlike copyright, can be renewed perpetually. To ensure its trademark, DC labeled all of its comic books “a Superman DC publication,” even though most did not contain a Superman story.

Assured of its property rights in Superman, DC embarked on an extensive marketing campaign. The company licensed a Superman radio series, which commenced broadcast in early 1940 and was soon heard three nights a week across the country. In 1940 DC produced a special *World’s Fair Comic* featuring Superman, and 36,000 children attended the fair on Superman Day. A Macy’s Christmas Superman exhibit drew an audience of 100,000. In 1941 Paramount Pictures released the first of twelve Superman animated short features produced under license from DC by the Fleischer studio. In that year DC also licensed thirty-three Superman products, including a doll, a toy ray gun, two wind-up mechanical toys, and a wristwatch.

Detective Comics was not the first organization to promote a comic art character as a business symbol. But DC’s control of Superman and the use of trademark rather than copyright law to protect its property interest differed significantly from other efforts at marketing comic art characters. Whereas Richard Outcault retained control of his creation Buster Brown, and licensed companies’ use of the character, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman, lost all their rights to DC. Outcault’s legal rights in Buster Brown derived in part from his
personal rights as the character’s creator. Detective Comics’ ownership of Superman rested on their registration of the character as a business symbol and the successful denial of Siegel’s and Shuster’s authorial rights. In the hands of a corporation, Superman was more important as a business asset than as a fictional character. Once DC recognized Superman’s status as a commodity, they defined and sold him as a product in all his incarnations. By 1941 Superman was not so much a character who helped sell comic books as a product that comic books sold.

Superman’s transition from a “character,” however commercial, to a product occurred not just in his legal status but in his story lines. In his first two years Superman was both a simpleminded liberal reformer and an isolationist. In the first issue of Action Comics alone, he saved a woman mistakenly condemned for murder, confronted a wife beater, and discovered a plot by a U.S. senator to embroil the country in a European conflict. In the comic’s second issue Superman prevented this outcome by giving the arms manufacturer behind the plot a firsthand taste of war. Exposed to gunfire and trench life, the manufacturer reformed. Superman also brought the opposing generals together so that they might realize their differences were artificial. Another story, in Action Comics’ third issue, had Superman confront the owners of a dangerous mine. In his guise of Clark Kent, a reporter for “a powerful newspaper,” he threatened to reveal the unsafe conditions. When this strategy failed to move the owner, Superman exposed him to the dangerous conditions in the mine, after which he quickly recognized his folly and vowed to improve the mine’s safety.

Occasionally Superman resorted to more drastic measures to ensure change. In one story he destroyed a slum so that “the authorities” would be forced to replace it with the “splendid housing conditions” offered by “huge apartment projects.” In another story he destroyed an automobile plant because its shoddy products and the owner’s greed caused the loss of human lives. The early Superman stories were a version of New Deal politics for juveniles. Jerry Siegel acknowledged that Hollywood’s social consciousness films of the 1930s and Franklin Roosevelt’s fireside chats inspired the reform content of his early stories. But Superman’s social activism dissipated as his owners and creators grew aware of his potential as a commodity.

The contrast between two stories, one from November 1938 and the other from January 1941, demonstrates the ascendancy of Superman’s status as a commodity over any other feature of the character. In the first story, which appeared in the sixth issue of Action Comics, a businessman, Nick Williams, claimed to be Superman’s manager and sold commercial rights to Superman’s name. Products endorsed included a breakfast cereal, gasoline, automobiles, bathing suits, physical development exercises, movie rights, and a comic strip. But Williams, an unscrupulous promoter out to make a fast buck, did not represent Superman. The story presented the promoter as a criminal who not only stole Superman’s name for profit but threatened to kill Lois Lane. Siegel and Shuster used Nick Williams to criticize Harry Donenfeld’s appropriation and commercialization of their character. The pair had signed away all rights to Superman and in 1938 were contracted employees of Donenfeld, who paid them ten dollars for every comic book page. At the time they wrote the Nick Williams story, Siegel and Shuster were negotiating with Donenfeld for the right to do a comic strip version of the character for the McClure syndicate. The story may have suggested licensing possibilities to DC, but that was probably not Siegel and Shuster’s intention.

By 1941 Siegel and Shuster were more interested in Superman’s commercial possibilities. They had reached a lucrative agreement with Donenfeld; in return for working exclusively for DC, they received twenty dollars a page and 5 percent of all other Superman royalties. In a story in the January 1941 issue of Action Comics, Superman invented a krypto-ray gun that developed pictures in the camera and projected them on a wall. The story was little more than an advertisement for a new toy ray gun manufactured by Daisy. Daisy advertised the Superman “Krypto-Ray Gun” in the September 1940 issue of Playthings, the trade journal of the toy industry. The ad promised a special campaign by Daisy that would help retailers “cash in.” The January 1941 issue of Action Comics appeared on the newsstands in November 1940, in time to create a demand for the toy. Siegel and Shuster set aside any claims to Superman’s integrity as a literary character in favor of his commercial worth.

THE SUPERHERO AS WHOLESOME SYMBOL

Superman sold more than ray guns; in the early 1940s he sold the virtues of comic books themselves. In 1941 DC offered Superman as a symbol of the quality and wholesomeness of their comic books. The
company's actions followed a campaign against comic books launched by Sterling North, the literary editor of the Chicago Daily News. North argued that comic books were violent, crude, and an assault on the sensibilities of children. He accused parents of an indifference to their children's reading matter and denounced comic book publishers as "completely immoral." North's attack did not result in a widespread public campaign against comic books. The New York State legislature enacted Section 22-a of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which allowed municipalities "to seek an injunction against the sale or distribution of comic books which are obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, indecent or disgusting," but no prosecutions were brought under the law.18

Nonetheless DC, whose offices were in New York City, took steps to protect their business. To establish the virtuousness of their products, DC hired an advisory editorial board of child psychologists, educators, and welfare workers. Around this time DC also enacted standards for Superman stories that prohibited—among other things—the destruction of private property other than that belonging to a villain. By mid-1941 villains were no longer auto plant owners but mad scientists or common criminals. Members of DC's editorial advisory board included Robert Thorndike of Columbia University Teachers College; Ruth Eastwood Perl, a psychologist; the former heavyweight boxing champion and Catholic Youth Organization director Gene Tunney; C. Bowic Millican of the English Department at Columbia University; and Josette Frank of the Child Study Association. The company also employed Whitney Ellsworth as a copy editor to correct Jerry Siegel's grammar and syntax. DC proclaimed that they had always had a rigid policy of selecting material that upheld the "standards of wholesome entertainment." The company explained that with the increased number of comic book titles on the market, it was important "to discriminate between them," and that the Superman/DC symbol served as a guide "to better magazines."19

The same issue of Action Comics that introduced the editorial advisory board contained the first "Supermen of America" page, which ran in the bimonthly Superman comic book as well. The feature offered readers advice from Superman on the conduct of their lives. The first column, on "self reliance," set the tone for Superman's new role as the defender of traditional American values. The column evoked the authority of God, Country, Freedom, Liberty, Father, and Mother to proclaim the necessity for children to be self-reliant. Superman told readers, "It is your duty to yourself, your God, your country and your parents to care for yourself in body and mind. You must accept your share of responsibility thereby lessening the weight of responsibility from the shoulders of others. At home, in school on the playground—be Self-Reliant."20

The advisory board and the "Supermen of America" column positioned DC as a trustworthy publisher that sought to inculcate a sense of morality among youth. The company probably created the two features more to convince parents of the wholesome nature of Superman/DC comics than for the stated purpose of ensuring their moral quality. DC even commercialized the morality page. The first "Supermen of America" page contained an advertisement for the new Superman Club. Over 250,000 children joined the club at a cost of ten cents, for which they each received a pin and a Superman decoder, which suggests that the column succeeded in teaching children to be self-reliant consumers, or at least convinced parents of the harmless ness of DC's products.21 At the same time DC, and Siegel and Shuster, adjusted Superman's story lines in a way that, if it did not make them moral, probably made them more acceptable to parents.

Detective Comics used the Second World War to make Superman not simply a defender of virtue and wholesomeness but synonymous with American democracy. In 1941 Siegel and Shuster, who had attacked armaments manufacturers as the cause of war in Superman's first two episodes, created a series of stories in which Superman confronted fifth columnists and saboteurs working for an unnamed European power bent on destroying America's munitions plants. These stories established DC's commercial trademark, Superman, as a defender of American democracy. For instance, in the May 1941 issue of Action Comics, Superman battled an enemy invasion that had been facilitated by fifth columnist campaigning against rearmament. The story's opening panel declared, "The fate of the United States hangs in the balance as Superman ... ventures forth to engage the foe in a gigantic battle with the future of democracy at stake!" DC also gave Action Comics' covers a militaristic hue. The April, June, August, September, and December 1941 issues all showed Superman combating Germanic soldiers or saboteurs. All six 1941 Superman comic books contained war-related stories about saboteurs, terrorists, and fifth columnists.

Siegel and Shuster's stories were neither prophetic nor distinct. The United States had begun war preparations soon after Germany
invaded Poland in 1939, and many comic books addressed the threat of war between the United States and the Axis powers. As far as comic book publishers were concerned, the prospect of America's entry into the Second World War may have been fortuitous, giving them a dramatic and exciting context in which to set their stories. Many publishers tried to forestall criticism of comic books by having their most violent characters battle fascists. For instance, Timely Comics' superhero characters, the Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, and Captain America, fought Axis foes before and after the United States entered the war (see Figure 27). But as I will show, throughout the war DC's characters embodied American values by staying at home and expressing confidence in the fighting ability of the American people. Whereas Timely's characters marched off to war and slew America's opponents, DC's two major superheroes, Superman and Batman, stayed in the United States and fought domestic opponents of democracy. Moreover, DC did not simply use the war to sell comics, it used comics to sell the war.

COMIC BOOKS AND WORLD WAR II

Between 1941 and 1944 sales of comic books doubled from 10 million to 20 million copies a month despite paper shortages. Much of this increase can be attributed to the reading habits of servicemen. In 1944, 41 percent of men between the ages of eighteen and thirty read comic books regularly, which researchers defined as more than six comic books a month. In military training camps, 44 percent of men read comic books regularly and 13 percent read them occasionally. Female readership of comic books, which from ages six to seventeen was only 4 to 6 percent less than male readership, dropped to 28 percent for women between eighteen and thirty. At age thirty-one and over the difference between male and female readership returned to 4 percent. In that age-group 16 percent of men and 12 percent of women read comic books. The disparate rates of male and female readership between ages eighteen and thirty suggests that military service, predominantly a male activity, led to increased comic book readership.

John Jamieson's semiofficial account of the Army's Second World War Library Service attributes a general increase of readership among soldiers to boredom. The Army operated a library service in order to
maintain morale. As Jamieson put it the alternatives were apathy, discontent, drunkenness, and a soaring rate of venereal disease. As part of its attempt to provide soldiers with a regular supply of reading material, the Library Service organized a set of magazine subscriptions for companies posted overseas. In 1943, when this system proved cumbersome, the service began the centralized distribution of an overseas magazine set. The Superman comic book was one of the eighteen titles in this set and the only comic book. Through 1943 and early 1944 the Army distributed at least 100,000 copies of this comic book every other month, or about 10 percent of the comic’s sales. The Army dropped Superman from the magazine set in 1944 because it was readily available at post exchanges. Comic books outsold the combined circulation of Reader’s Digest, Life, and The Saturday Evening Post by a ratio of ten to one at these exchanges.26

Comic books were one of the most regular contacts overseas servicemen had with America. In 1944, as a result of the Soldier Voting Law, the War Department determined the magazines for which soldiers had shown a preference through paid subscriptions and readership.27 Comic books accounted for over a quarter of the 189 soldier preference magazines. A major in the Southwest Pacific combat zone observed the precious status of comic books among the men on troop transport ships. U.S.O. hostesses noticed that comic books were the first items to leave their tables. A photograph in National Geographic of a soldier with a pile of comic books showed that servicemen accumulated large numbers of the books, and officers reported that they passed among men until they fell apart.28 In Australia, where a great number of American troops took rest and recreation, and where American comics and other books were banned because of currency exchange restrictions, a local company published Gripping Yank Comics in the hope of cashing in on the servicemen’s demand for American comic books. The deception that this was an American comic book was enhanced by the “price in Australia” label. This comic book was successful during the war but ceased publication in 1945, when the Americans went home.29

Comic books owed their popularity among soldiers to a number of obvious features. They were cheap, easy to read, and light to carry. But two other factors probably contributed to their ubiquitous presence. First, the extraordinarily high prewar readership of comic books by young males may have given them an iconic status during the war. In owning and reading comic books, soldiers likely possessed a small part of what they fought for. Such an explanation parallels the war correspondent John Hersey’s report that the Marines on Guadalcanal fought the war for “a piece of blueberry pie,” “scotch whisky,” “dames,” “books,” “music,” and “movies.” It also echoes the sentiments of an American soldier who wrote home that he fought to maintain the right to drink Coca-Cola. Robert Westbrook has recently demonstrated that pinups served as iconic representations of soldiers’ private obligations to the war effort through their evocation of a generalized American womanhood in need of protection. Comic books may also have echoed pinups as reminders of home and like them given the individual soldier a reason to fight.30 Second, comic book story lines accounted for their standing among soldiers. Many comic books contained witless tales in which American forces easily defeated their foes. But the most popular comic book characters, Superman and Batman, appeared in stories set exclusively on the home front. These two characters both supported the war effort and protected American society from its domestic opponents. As well as reminding soldiers of home, the content of these comic books probably helped reinforce the purpose of the war in their minds.

Comic books from DC were the most popular of the war era.31 Part of this success was due to the company’s identification of Superman and Batman with the war effort, which established them as defenders of an American way of life. In the December 1941 issue of Action Comics, the “Supermen of America” page said readers could express their confidence in the U.S. government “and the Principles of Freedom and Justice and Democracy” by purchasing U.S. Savings Bonds or Stamps for Defense. The message from Superman stressed that, although young people could not hope to purchase bonds, defense stamps could be had “for as little as twenty five cents.” The column also urged readers to “do a little salesmanship job on the older folks.”

This bond promotion was part of a campaign by Henry Morgenthau, secretary of the Treasury, “to use bonds to sell the war, rather than vice versa.” In a radio address during the spring of 1941, Morgenthau explained that there were quicker and easier ways for the government to raise the money than through bond issues. But the Treasury had decided “to give every one of you a chance to have a financial stake in American democracy—an opportunity to contribute to the defense of that democracy.”32 Once the United States entered the war,
Morgenthaler continued the bond program to give civilians a sense of participation in the war effort.

Throughout the war DC supported the Treasury's bond campaign. The company donated space in the comic books for advertisements directed at children and used war bonds themes for comic book covers. For instance, in the summer of 1942 DC comics carried a message from Morgenthaler to the "boys and girls of America" reminding them that every stamp they bought would help their male kin defend the country. In 1943, after the Treasury Department's market research discovered that anti-Japanese messages sold bonds, the cover of Action Comics featured Superman promoting the slogan "Slap a Jap with War Bonds and Stamps." A Batman cover showed a smiling Batman firing a machine gun with a plea to "Keep Those Bullets Flying! Keep on Buying War Bonds & Stamps!"

Most wartime issues of DC's comic books carried an advertisement for war bonds and stamps. These promotions of war bonds made Superman and Batman salesmen for the war effort and suggested that a democratic society was something citizens could buy their way into. Furthermore by 1944 a large number of adolescent comic book readers had money to spend. A census survey of April 1944 revealed that one in five schoolboys ages fourteen to fifteen had jobs, as did two in five sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds. By the latter age 35 percent had left school and were working full-time. Girls were not as likely to be employed, but of sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds a third had jobs.

Detective Comics, Incorporated's promotion of war bonds was part of an intensive national campaign to sell the war that encompassed a variety of businesses and practices. Many businesses promoted war bond purchases. Entertainment industry figures lent their celebrity to bond drives. The singer Kate Smith sold $40 million of bonds in a sixteen-hour radio session on September 21, 1943. The Hollywood starlet Loretta Young sold bonds at a Kiwanis meeting, and the pinup girl Betty Grable auctioned off her stockings. Moreover the bond campaigns fit with the convergent thinking of the advertising industry, government, and consumer advocates on the notion of citizens as consumers.

Beginning in 1939, with George Sokolsky's American Way, the advertising industry consciously depicted consumer choice as a constituent element in and guarantee of political democracy. Advertisers had associated advertising and consumption with American values throughout the 1930s, but Sokolsky's book raised the conception to an ideology of "the American Way." During the war the industry's War Advertising Council acted as a clearinghouse for both the government's and private industry's wartime propaganda. Much of this advertising addressed citizens as consumers, urging them to cut back on their consumption of goods and cooperate with government measures to increase war production. The consumer advocate Caroline Ware saw responsible consumption as a "contribution to the war effort."36

Even before the United States entered the war, advertisements propagated Sokolsky's notion of a citizen-consumer democracy. A November 29, 1939, Good Housekeeping advertisement in the Chicago Tribune linked democracy to the availability of a wide variety of commodities. Under the heading "No Permit . . . No Stockings," the ad counterposed an anonymous dictator state, which limited women's purchase of stockings to six pairs a year each, against the United States, where a consumer could choose from 743 makes of hosiery and buy as many pairs as she could afford. Good Housekeeping's version of democracy required more than simple consumer choices. Those choices needed to be guided by the testing and approval of products conducted by the magazine's laboratories. Democracy entailed the consumption of appropriate commodities, to which the sure guide was the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

During the Second World War, this conception of appropriate consumption was used by many advertisers, including those selling war bonds. For instance, a number of department store advertisements for war bonds linked their purchase to an appropriate and responsible style of consumption. A May Co. advertisement for war bonds in the May 4, 1943, edition of the Los Angeles Times suggested that American soldiers were dying for want of ammunition. The voice of a dead soldier stated:

I was ready to die for freedom, but you've robbed me of a soldier's death . . . some of you didn't believe I was important enough to live . . . if you had, I would have had bullets. I died because some of you didn't have enough faith in my living. I died because you, John Smith, had to buy a new house. I wanted a new house too, but your freedom came first. Those pickets in your new white fence cost me my life.

Elsewhere in the same edition of the Times, May Co. advertised lingerie and other women's apparel. These two advertisements posited
that consumption had to be tempered by a commitment to those defending the right to consume. The dead soldier, and May Co., objected to John Smith’s purchase of a new house, which was inappropriate consumption. But May Co. wanted its customers to buy both bonds and clothes, an acceptable mix of purchases.37

An advertisement for Foreman & Clark, another Los Angeles retail store, acknowledged, “Sure we like to make money. But we have greater love for the American way of life.” To prove their commitment the store, its employees, and all 5 million retail store workers would buy and sell war bonds to defeat “hitlerism and tojoism.” A January 1943 advertisement for yet another Los Angeles department store, Bullock’s, defined the American way as “the unregimented right of every American to earn a living for himself and his family according to his desires and capabilities . . . unhampered by paternalistic and enterprise-stalling regulations. It is not synonymous with Capital. Neither does it mean Labor. The American Way is a unity of effort Capital and Labor . . . for the common good.” Bullock’s judged the American way superior to any other economic system of production and distribution because it provided “the highest standard of living in the world.”38

Other wartime advertisements stressed their products’ contribution to the war effort. For instance, the ads for Rainer ale suggested that it was proper for Americans to consume ale because the British allies deemed beer essential to their national morale, and the American brewing industry contributed $386,000,000 in federal taxes, equal to the cost of eight aircraft carriers or a thousand bombers. Other advertisers held out the promise of a richly commodified postwar era but warned Americans to temper their optimism and win the war so as to win the peace. A March 1943 Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation advertisement foresaw a postwar global economy driven by a new air-age geography. The ad promised that in this new geography, distances would be measured by elapsed flying time rather than miles. It suggested that “the peace we win must be built on a clear understanding of this new global geography and how it can work for us.” America had to be “supreme in the air—to win the war today, to win peace tomorrow.”39

A September 13, 1943, advertisement in the Los Angeles Times for Popular Science warned, “Keep your shirt on, America”; too many saw Victory as “too close, too easy.” Popular Science advised Americans that they could count on “better stuff, of better materials” but not to “count on them too soon.” A life insurance industry advertisement published in the Times on September 9, 1943, listed seven practical steps to build a “personal post war world.” The first step was to buy war bonds, the second to pay taxes, the third to buy life insurance. The overall message was to spend less and save more. The ad suggested that “good American families” understood that even though war production put more money in their pockets, “self-denial” was important in “the battle for a future not only secure, but full of the good things of life.”40

There was a striking similarity between the rhetoric of these advertisements and the content of stories featuring DC’s two most popular characters, Superman and Batman. General works on American society between 1941 and 1945 and internal histories of the comic book industry note that comic book superheroes and publishers contributed to the war effort. But these accounts only touch on the sale of war bonds and the superpatriotism of some superheroes, such as Timely’s Captain America; they do not consider the content of Superman and Batman stories.41 Superman and Batman stories often stood in marked contrast to the covers of DC’s comic books. In addition to their war bonds covers, DC published a large number of battle action covers and patriotic scenes. For instance, between May 1942 and April 1943, eight of the twelve Action Comics covers dealt with the war. On the cover of the May 1942 issue, Superman fought a Japanese plane; on the November cover he opposed a German submarine. Superman also appeared with the U.S. flag on the cover of two issues of Superman.42 DC’s covers gave the superheroes a military tone, but this characterization was largely symbolic and set off by the stories inside, which were about civilian life. Throughout the war DC published only one story in which Superman battled enemy armed forces, and even this occurred on American soil.43 Except for an explanatory note in Superman, no. 25 (November–December 1943), DC avoided the issue of Superman’s service. But in mid-February 1942 the comic strip version of Superman had Clark Kent fail his physical by accidentally using his X-ray vision to read the eye chart in the next office. Shortly after, on March 11, Superman told the U.S. Congress that “the American armed forces are powerful enough to smash their treacherous foes without the aid of Superman.” DC kept Superman out of the war because there was no way to explain why someone with his powers could not put an end to it.
Batman also stayed out of uniform, although he offered no excuse for his failure to join the armed services. Unlike Superman, and most other costumed heroes, Batman had no super powers. Batman was the secret identity of the playboy industrialist Bruce Wayne, who as a child had witnessed the murder of both his parents. Wayne then devoted his life to fighting crime and trained his body and mind for the task. If there was anything super about Batman, it was his psychotic drive to destroy criminals. Batman stories implied that he, as did Superman, believed the American people, empowered by democracy, needed no help from him on the battlefront to defeat fascism. Both characters dealt with fascist spies and saboteurs, and both *Batman* and *Superman* comic books ran stories about military training and on the need for greater public cooperation with the government’s war effort. These stories stressed that “America’s secret weapon [lay in] the courage of the common soldier” and that the war amounted to “Your Battle, Your Future, Your America!!!”

But DC published fewer than 15 of these stories among the over 500 Superman and Batman stories that appeared during the war. Most of these stories featured villains and criminals and had little military content. The powers and established characters of Superman and Batman probably limited DC’s options for involving the two heroes in the war effort. But these limitations proved fortuitous as the company aligned the characters with home front campaigns for responsible consumption—an alignment that led to Superman’s identification with the American way.

The majority of war-era Superman and Batman stories depicted a universe in which American soldiers fought to establish world peace while the two superheroes helped to maintain a domestic order that supported the country’s military endeavors. Most stories showed an American society relatively free from war-related strife and shortages but plagued by mad scientists, supervillains, and common criminals. Although the comic books encouraged the purchase of war bonds and supported paper, rubber, and metal salvage drives, writers and artists continued to present the United States as a consumer society with a bright future.

Consumption was not an explicit theme. Rather it formed the social backdrop in which stories were set. DC’s writers and artists used Superman and Batman in stories about seemingly manners of consumption in a war economy. Sometimes the company published comic book cov-
ers that affirmed consumption as a way of life. For instance, the November–December 1942 cover of *Superman* showed him carrying a car in which a family had all the accoutrements of a picnic. The comic appeared at the time of national concern over the shortage of rubber, and the cover showed tireless wheels. Amid the war-related covers of most of DC’s comic books in 1942–43, this illustration attests to the validity and continuity of the family’s way of life, even under war conditions. The cover was a celebration of ordinary American life enjoyed by the children and older folk pictured in the car and defended by men of service age, absent from the illustration. Life went on despite the absence of tires, sons, and fathers. The concurrent absence of servicemen and tires suggested that the two would return together.

Unlike war themes, which DC limited to covers and “Supermen of America” pages, writers created parables of consumption for Superman and Batman tales. Most Batman stories counterposed criminal consumer desire with virtuous acquisition of commodities through work. Batman dealt with a series of foes obsessed with acquiring gems and other high-priced gewgaws. Many Batman stories began with full-page surrealistic representations of these commodities, which suggested that it was an unreal desire for extravagant wealth that motivated criminals. Batman, who was in fact a millionaire, eschewed such wealth except insofar as it enabled him to combat crime. More important, he instilled the values of hard work and responsible consumption in his ward, Dick Grayson, who as Robin fought criminals alongside Batman. In a 1944 story Bruce Wayne puzzled over Dick’s frequent absences from the house, only to discover that he had taken a job as a telegram boy to raise money for a birthday present because he had spent all his allowance on war bonds.

Superman combated a somewhat more powerful group of criminals and mad scientists than Batman did. But in general the plots of stories featuring the characters were much the same. In a May 1942 story Superman confronted a group of secondhand car dealers who, in search of quick profits and under the influence of a mysterious figure known as the Top, sold faulty vehicles. Confronted by mounting accidents and bad publicity, most of the dealers sought to reorganize their businesses and run them in legitimately. They were able to do so when Superman broke up the Top’s criminal organization. The story associated criminal activities with illicit business practices. It also linked legitimate business practices, in this case the fair trade of commodities.
in the market, with patriotism as the dealers, “freed from the Top’s evil influence, . . . donated their imperfect cars” to the government’s scrap metal drive for national defense.49

One Superman tale, “The Million-Dollar Marathon,” stands out from other comic book stories as a commentary on appropriate and responsible consumption under wartime conditions. The story centered on Roger Treadwell’s attempt to spend a million dollars in twenty-four hours so that he might inherit a larger sum. This theme figured in a number of mass entertainment forms. Several film versions of Brewer’s Millions, four of which preceded the Superman story, used this plot device, and Cliff Sterrett used a similar theme for an extended story line that began in his comic strip “Polly and Her Pals” on November 20, 1927. All these stories centered on the struggle of the principal character to maintain his virtue, or unassuming manner, under the pressure of tremendous wealth and unrestricted consumption. But the Superman story stands out, for, unlike Brewer’s and Polly’s Pa’s, Treadwell’s virtue never falters, largely because he enlists the aid of Superman to accomplish his task.50

Treadwell, a research physician at a children’s hospital, planned to give his inheritance to the hospital but faced “the most perplexing problem he [had] ever encountered” in determining how to dispose of the initial million dollars, which he had to spend in single purchases of a thousand dollars each. His only idea was to buy a thousand dollars’ worth of war bonds. With Lois Lane’s help, he summoned Superman, who informed Treadwell, “It’s a lot of money and you mustn’t waste it . . . even though you can’t give it away you’ll have to spend it where it will do good.” Superman then proceeded to buy laboratory supplies, save a mortgage that was about to be foreclosed, underwrite small businesses, and bid on art treasures at a sale to aid servicemen’s families. In his most ambitious project Superman bought the material to construct a ship for an expedition in search of rare plants that would provide drugs to cure sick children. He even persuaded the government bureaucrat in charge of wartime resource allocation of the ship’s importance to the war goal of caring for children, America’s “best safeguard for the future.” With Superman’s aid Treadwell met the requirements of his inheritance, and all monies went to the children’s hospital.51

“The Million-Dollar Marathon” recast familiar tales about the dangers of unrestricted consumption as a parable of responsible wartime expenditure. But it was hardly a criticism of consumption as such. Approximating the numerous versions of Brewer’s Millions and “Polly and Her Pals,” the Superman story figured consumption as a test of virtue while inviting readers to enjoy vicariously its pleasures. The story’s prologue informed readers that they would be “excited . . . over this amazing story of a man who wanted . . . to get rid of that magnificent sum, all within twenty-four hours! And if you think it’s easy to spend and keep on spending, $41,666 an hour, nearly $695 a minute, you’ll get a new slant on high finances as you watch Superman.”52

Other Superman tales also depicted a highly commodified society. For instance, in a 1943 story Lois Lane obtains a mink coat and goes on a shopping spree for accessories in six department stores, all of which are abundantly stocked. In 1944 DC prepared a special Superman comic book as a Christmas promotion for Bailey’s department stores in Cleveland. The message of this twenty-page book was that American servicemen fought the war to ensure the right to celebrate Christmas. The accompanying advertising copy made it clear that Americans observed Christmas by purchasing and distributing large numbers of gifts, preferably from a Bailey’s store. Shortly before the war’s end a Superman cover depicted a domestic scene complete with refrigerator, anticipating a postwar America with a plentiful supply of consumer goods.53

Comic books were advertisements that tied the promise of a society abundant in consumer goods to the defense of the nation.54 But they were also commodities themselves. Between 1941 and 1945 American servicemen purchased more of these commodities than any other reading material. The Second World War helped make comic books and the most popular superheroes, such as Superman, American institutions. Sales of comic books expanded to 60 million copies a month in 1947. The Superman/DC line of comic books was the most popular, selling an average of 8,500,000 copies a month in that year.55 DC expanded their marketing of Superman as a product. For instance, in the late 1940s the company licensed Superman movie serials and a television show that promoted him as a hero who fought for “Truth, Justice, and the American Way.” DC also protected their market by suing the publishers of another comic book superhero, Captain Marvel, for copyright infringement. The success of this case removed Superman’s major competitor and ensured DC dominance of the comic book field throughout the 1950s.56
Comic book publishers, particularly DC, bound the war effort, democracy, consumer culture, and their superheroes together in the comic book and sold the total package as a commodity. Comic books illustrate the close connection in American society of democratic ideals and consumer culture. Superheroes’ promotion of the war effort by upholding American values, such as the sanctity of private property and the pleasure of shopping, and the consumption of those heroes through comic books, demonstrate how corporate America has defined democracy in terms of the consumption of commodities. So successful were Superman and comic art in promoting the American way that even relatively militant unions produced comic book stories about democracy and consumption. In 1944 the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) published a million copies of a comic-book-format pamphlet, *With Victory*, that looked forward to a richly commodified postwar America provided workers organized and voted to ensure the government took appropriate action (see Figure 28). According to this comic, every soldier at the front dreamed of “a good job, a good wife, a good car, and some good kids.” Reading comic books was one way soldiers sustained that dream throughout the war.

If comic books suffered a temporary setback in the 1950s, comic strips retained their place in American culture, and syndicates introduced new features. One of the most successful comic strips of all times, Charles Schulz's "Peanuts," featuring Charlie Brown and Snoopy, began on October 2, 1950. "Peanuts" is one of the most extensively licensed strips; products include dolls, watches, sheets, a Top 40 pop song, a Broadway play, television specials, greeting cards, toy catalogs, reprint books, posters, and an ad campaign for Metropolitan Life insurance. The strip also featured in a 1990 exhibition on childhood in the 1950s at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.

Superhero characters also withstood Wertham's onslaught on comic books. Even amidst the outcry against comic books in the mid-1950s, Superman appeared in yet another licensed venture, a television series, as did another comic book superhero, Captain Midnight. Although comic book aficionados believe television aggravated the decline of comic books in the 1950s, television proved to be an important factor in the persistence of comic art as a commodity. In the 1960s artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol created pop art by recycling comic book and advertising images. Although formulated as an elite critique of mass culture in the camp tradition of a knowing, smirking beholder, pop art posed as the discovery of an egalitarian aesthetic in the objects of everyday life.4

In 1966 the television network ABC sought to cash in on the pop art phenomenon by creating the campy Batman series. Producer William Dozier reasoned that if the show played up the comic book origins of Batman to present a hyperreal conflict between good and evil in garish colors, adults would find it funny. At the same time he believed children would watch the show for its comic book superheroes. The show ran for three years, allowing DC to license numerous Batman products.

For DC licensing profits exceeded revenue from comic books in the late 1960s. This licensing success caught the attention of executives at the entertainment conglomerate Warner Bros., which subsequently bought DC for the licensing rights of its superhero characters. In 1978 Warners released the first of four big budget Superman movies. The first movie grossed $245 million at the box office, and Warners licensed a range of ancillary products. Profit margins for the film and spin-off products were not reported, but they certainly exceeded profits from Superman's comic book incarnation, which at best grossed

From 1896 until the 1950s, the market for comic art expanded with little encumbrance. But in the 1950s a brief disruption occurred in its steadily increasing place in American culture. Fredric Wertham's Seduction of the Innocent, published in 1954, highlighted the violence of the crime and horror comic books that had sprung up after the Second World War and drew a simple causal link between comic book readership and juvenile delinquency. Ignoring the distinctions among comic books, he attacked superhero and funny animal comic books with the same ferocity as horror and crime books. Wertham's work galvanized criticism of comic books, forced publishers to establish a code of self-censorship, and energized Estes Kefauver's Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency. Among comic book enthusiasts Wertham's efforts to ban comic books, and the publishers' establishment of a code limiting violence, are held to have destroyed a "Golden Age."1

The production and sale of comic books declined after Wertham's attack, and many comic book publishers went out of business. But the industry survived and began to recover as early as 1956, when DC relaunched one of their lesser superhero characters, the Flash.2 In 1961 Stan Lee of Marvel Comics added a new twist to the superhero character. Lee's heroes were neurotic individuals who sought therapeutic redemption through superhero do-gooding. Marvel's comic books found a large audience, and the industry boomed.3

**EPILOGUE**

The Persistence of Comic Art as Commodity

Epilogue
$500,000 in 1979. The movies invigorated the character of Superman, reinforcing his mythological dimension, which DC and Warners continue to cultivate.5

In 1983 the president of DC comics described Superman as the “first god of a new mythology: definitely American, not borrowed, wholly our own.” Although Superman may not be the first god used to turn a profit, he is, as Neil Harris has pointed out, the first to be privately owned. In 1988, on the occasion of Superman’s fiftieth anniversary, Time magazine featured the character on its front cover. In the accompanying article, his hagiographer Otto Friedrich praised Superman for embodying “that nebulous thing known as American character.” Appropriately, Friedrich compared Superman with another product, Classic Coke, to explain his position in the market. Americans, he said, regard Superman as “the real thing” because they have consumed so many of his products.6

Warners followed Superman with the 1989 release Batman, promoting the movie as a celebration of Batman’s fiftieth anniversary. The film grossed $250 million at theaters and was the year’s highest earning box office feature. In 1989–90 licensed Batman merchandise enjoyed retail sales of over $500 million. Warners generated even more profits from the Batman movie through a sound track album and an album of music featured in the film by Prince. Warner Books published a paperback novel version of the movie, and DC brought out a series of Batman graphic novels, comic-art-format, paperbound books printed on glossy paper. The company then rush-released the movie on video to catch the lucrative Christmas market. Three years after the Batman movie’s release, estimates put the total revenue from its licensed products at $1 billion.7

Warners continues to merchandise the comic book superheroes it owns. In 1990 the company spent a previously unheard of $6 million on a two-hour premiere for a television series featuring the Flash, hoping to recoup their investment through product licensing.8 Although this venture failed Warners’ commitment to comic book superheroes remains firm. The company released a second Batman movie in the summer of 1992, a third in 1995, and a fourth in 1997.

Beginning in 1993 Superman appeared in yet another incarnation on television in Lois & Clark (The New Adventures of Superman). Although it received only modest ratings in America, the show consistently ranked in the top ten in Australia. Nineties demographics ensure that the current Superman is a sensitive new age guy who consults his parents about troubling issues. He hangs out in T-shirt and boxer shorts in his apartment and seems to need sleep just as we mere mortals do. Dean Cain, who plays Superman, is somewhat the modern Renaissance man. A graduate of Princeton, he was a star athlete on the college football team and dated his fellow student Brooke Shields. Moreover Cain is part Japanese, which gives him multicultural credibility. No slapping “Japs” for this Superman.

Warners is not alone in marketing comic art figures. Other heavily promoted figures have included the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, a set of characters who began life in 1984 as a satirical jibe at mainstream comic book heroes in a comic book published by their creators, Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, at a cost of $1,200. By 1990 they had sold $650 million of merchandise. By the mid-1990s the Turtles had spawned, and been superseded by, the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, a live-action television series complete with the usual product tie-ins, before they too faded and were replaced by the VR Rangers.9

There are comic art commodities for all tastes and expenses. At the end of 1991 Sotheby’s held their first auction of rare comic art collectibles. Comic books sold for up to $38,000. By 1996 the price of Action Comics, no. 1, was $125,000. In the early 1990s the demand for a piece of the comic industry was so strong that Marvel Entertainment Group floated its stock and reached a high of thirty-four dollars a share in 1993 before crashing back to earth when the company accumulated a billion dollars of debt. Ironically Marvel’s problems were caused by rival company DC. The 1989 Batman movie heated up the market for comic books and comic-book-related merchandise. The two companies released a swag of new titles and tie-in products. Both promoted comics as collectibles, and many people bought comics as an investment. In 1992 DC decided to “kill” Superman in a marketing ploy, setting off a wave of speculation about the collectibility of the “death” issue. Buyers seemed little deterred by the availability of thousands of copies of the “collectible.” When Superman made his inevitable return, the bubble burst and the industry’s billion-dollar-a-year turnover was cut in half. Marvel’s immediate troubles stem from soft sales of comic books and from trading cards. But in the long term Marvel’s weakness, compared with DC, has been their inability to in-
vigorate their characters through Hollywood blockbuster movies. Marvel has not realized the full commodity potential of their characters through other media.  

Meanwhile comic strip syndicates after a slow start have adapted to the possibilities offered by the Internet and Web sites. Syndicates such as King Features, United Features, and Tribune Media Services have all set up Web home pages that offer links to electronic versions of their comic strips. What makes these Web sites profitable is the potential to sell comic strip merchandise to those visiting the sites. Independent artists have also set up Web sites, complete with product tie-ins, each trying to find a character that resonates with the buying public.

Comic strip and comic book characters have surpassed the media of their creation. As commodities they are available through a wide range of artifacts. With the advent of the comic book, the art form—as distinct from the celebrity trademark character—was no longer dependent on its place in another medium. The transmission of images across the Internet means the form is no longer dependent on paper and ink for its existence. But collapsing the fictive entertainment function of characters appearing in comic strips and books into the instances of their commodification and equating the two would be a mistake. Characters developed solely as figures to be marketed, such as the Strawberry Shortcake dolls and the He-Man characters featured on Saturday morning television in the 1980s, have so far had short life spans compared with those such as the Peanuts gang, originally given form by Charles Schulz as a comic strip. Charlie Brown and company are among the most widely licensed comic strip characters, but this merchandising flowed from the characters’ popularity established in newspaper comic strips, not from their development as part of a corporate marketing strategy.

One hundred years after the development of comic strips and comic strip characters as part of the marketing strategy of Pulitzer and Hearst, it is somewhat ironic that the origin of a character in this form seems to give it an authenticity lacking in characters developed in other media. But this authenticity is not some inherent characteristic; rather it stems from a long familiarity with the form and the way it has become a defining element of the culture. Our cultural practices have naturalized comic strips, so they are, for adults, less obviously part of a commercial world than Saturday morning television cartoon characters. Moreover characters developed specifically for Saturday morning television cartoon series are specifically targeted at young audiences and lack the heterosocial character of comic strip characters. In the hands of Pulitzer and Hearst, mass media appealed to the broadest spectrum of people, first in cities such as New York, and then across the country in a unified national market. The market segmentation strategy of a mass medium such as Saturday morning television requires a large potential audience delivered across national and international boundaries, and an ability to track that audience through survey techniques developed by Gallup and others. But the same may be said of The Simpsons, an adult cartoon show that also appeals to children and whose creators have licensed a dazzling array of merchandise for all ages.

I may seem a Gloomy Gus, despairing of a world entangled in advertising, commodities, and comics, but this is not the case. These things are all products of our own endeavors and as such encapsulate our fears, hopes, and aspirations. The commodification of comic art does not necessarily rob it of a critical edge, witness The Simpsons and more obviously Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize–winning comic book Maus. Indeed Maus, a holocaust tale that represents Nazis as cats and Jews as mice, draws its power from our familiarity with the comic form, its conventions, and commodification. Maus plays to rather than subverts these conventions. It is the very ubiquity of comics that gives Maus its narrative power. Which is to say, without Mickey Mouse there would be no Maus.