



Comics, Comix, and Comi(cs/x): Mainstream “Comix” and the Restrictions Implicit in Branded Media



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The extent to which Marvel branding and attempts to market to a large audience limit the explicitness of comic book content compared to underground comix

Abstract

This project examines the limitations implicit in branded, mainstream media through a case study of comics in the 1970s. While mainstream comics were increasingly political, a countercultural underground comix movement was thriving. Through analyzing the counter-cultural underground comix, and comparing them with two attempts to adapt underground styles for mainstream audiences, this project examines the limitations ingrained in branded, mainstream media. Ultimately, the comics with less pressure from broader audiences and brand names were able to be more explicit, but branded mainstream media could covertly make similarly radical statements. The limitations on branded mainstream media had both positive and negative effects.

Introduction

Historical background:

The installation of the censoring Comics Code Authority (CCA) in the 1950s split the comic book world into two:



- **Mainstream comic books**, produced mainly by Marvel and DC, under the CCA, and sold to massive audiences. Generally, they were apolitical, or at least rarely controversial.
- **Underground comix**, founded on the principle of being free of censorship. Underground comix were published independently and sold to niche audiences. Steeped in the counterculture movement, these comix often included shocking, politically radical and provocative content.

After the cultural revolution of the 1960s and loosening of the CCA, the lines between mainstream and underground began to blur. In the 1970’s, Marvel even attempted to adapt underground comix for their mainstream audiences.

This project examines two instances in which Marvel attempted to sell underground-style comix to mainstream audiences and compares them with similar comix that were published underground. By identifying the ways in which these mainstream comix were unable to be as radical as their underground counterparts, this project seeks to determine what limits existed for branded mainstream media and their effects on media.

Methods

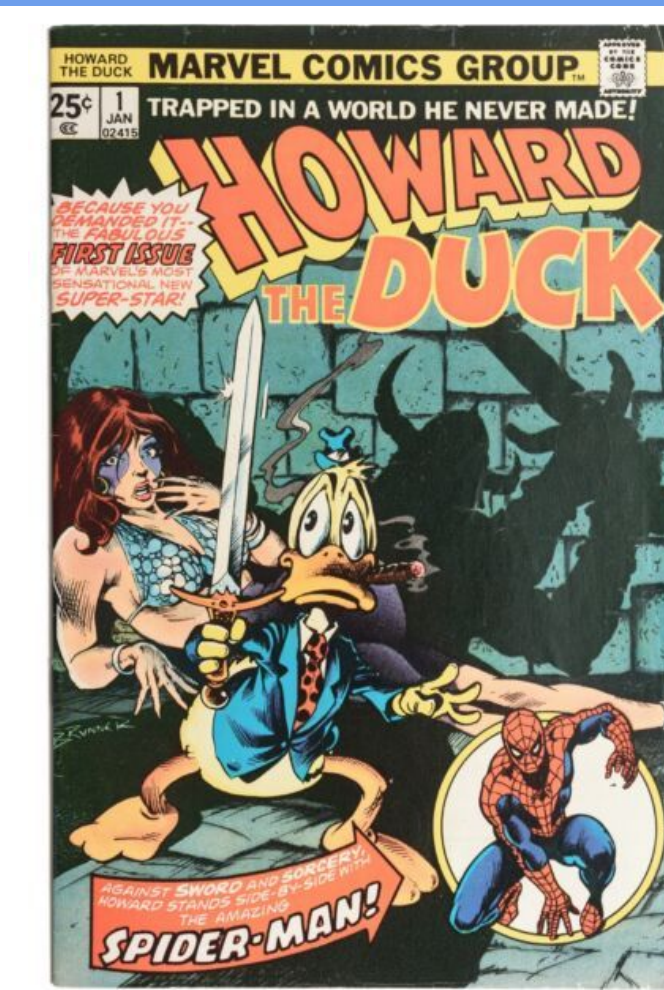
This project analyzes three primary sources:

- (1) **Howard the Duck**: a mainstream comic, published by Marvel for a mainstream audience. It carried the Marvel brand name, but was noted for its underground sensibilities
- (2) **Comix Book**: an underground comix magazine by underground creators, published by Marvel for a mainstream audience, but without carrying the brand name
- (3) **Arcade: the Comix Revue**: a similar underground comix magazine by underground creators, and a direct competitor of *Comix Book*, published for a small underground audience by a small underground publisher

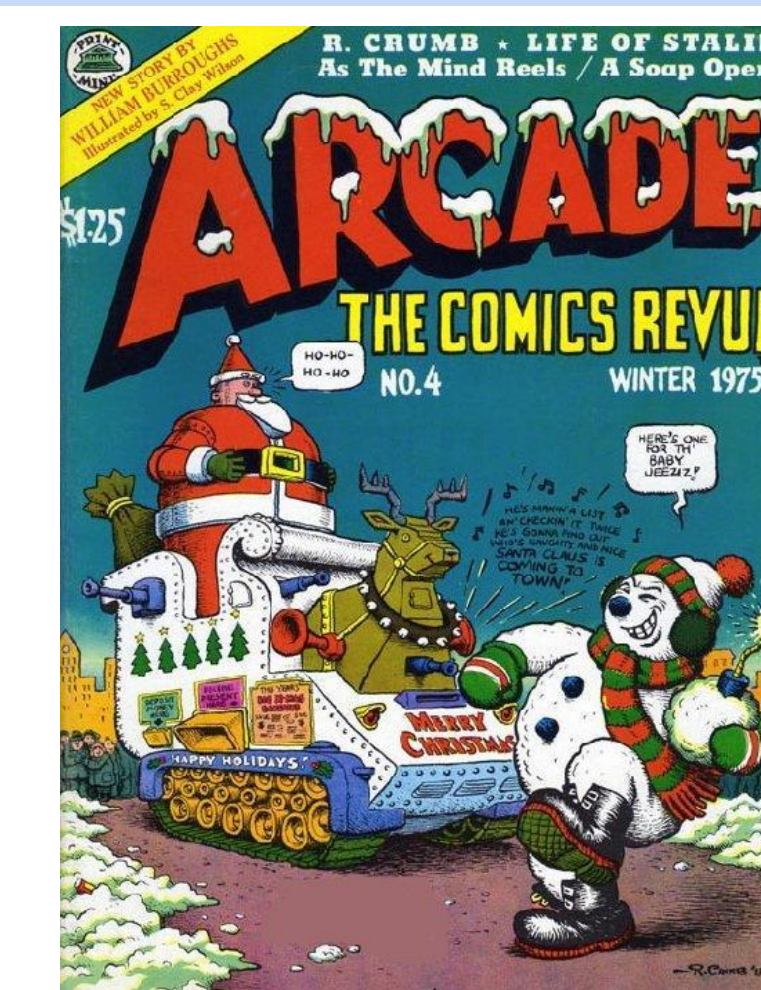
Mainstream



Branded



Underground

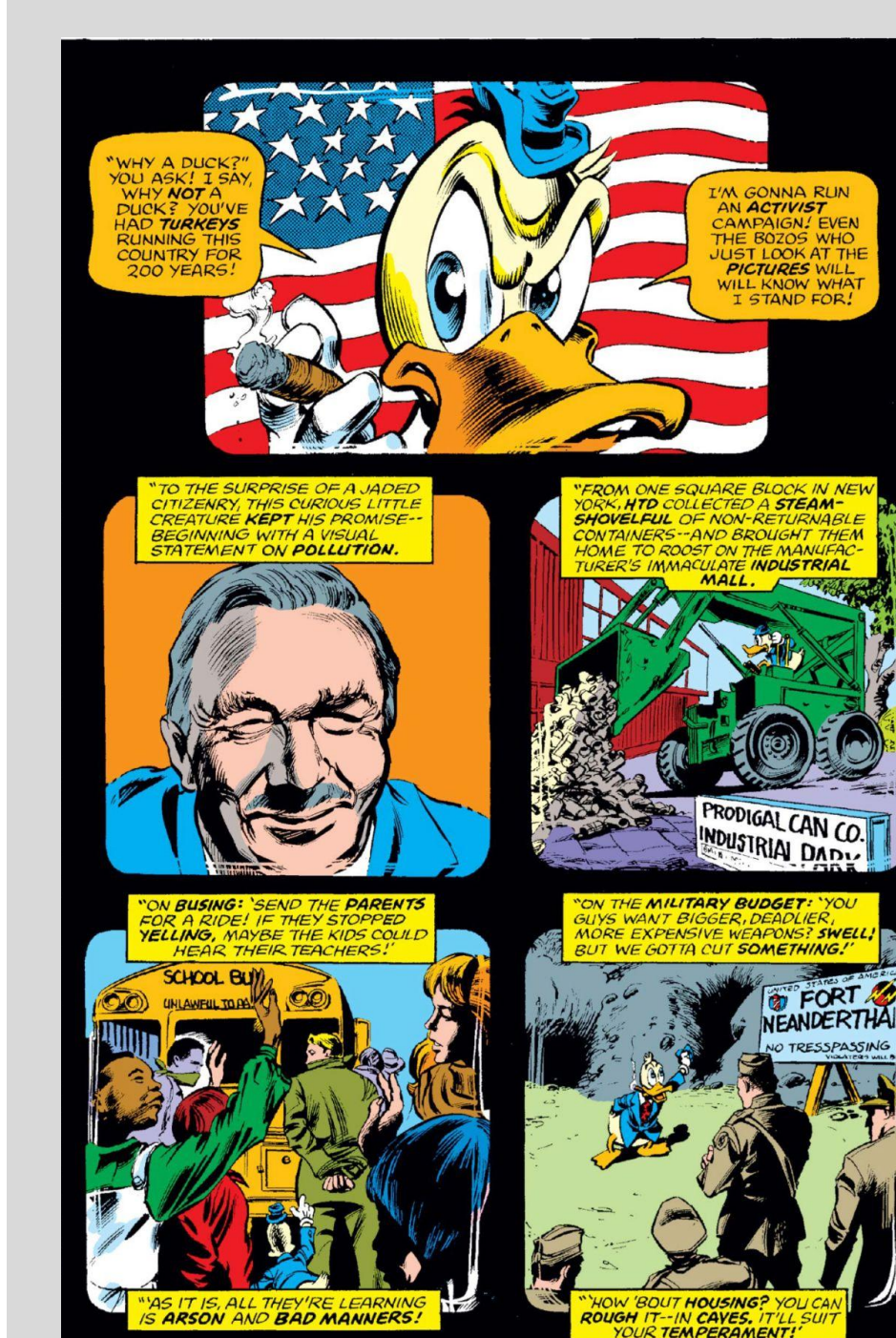


Unbranded

These underground, mainstream, and hybrid comics/x were analyzed for their content in 11 different categories: sex, violence, drugs, religion, women, LGBTQ+, race, religion, popular culture, political commentary, socioeconomic commentary.

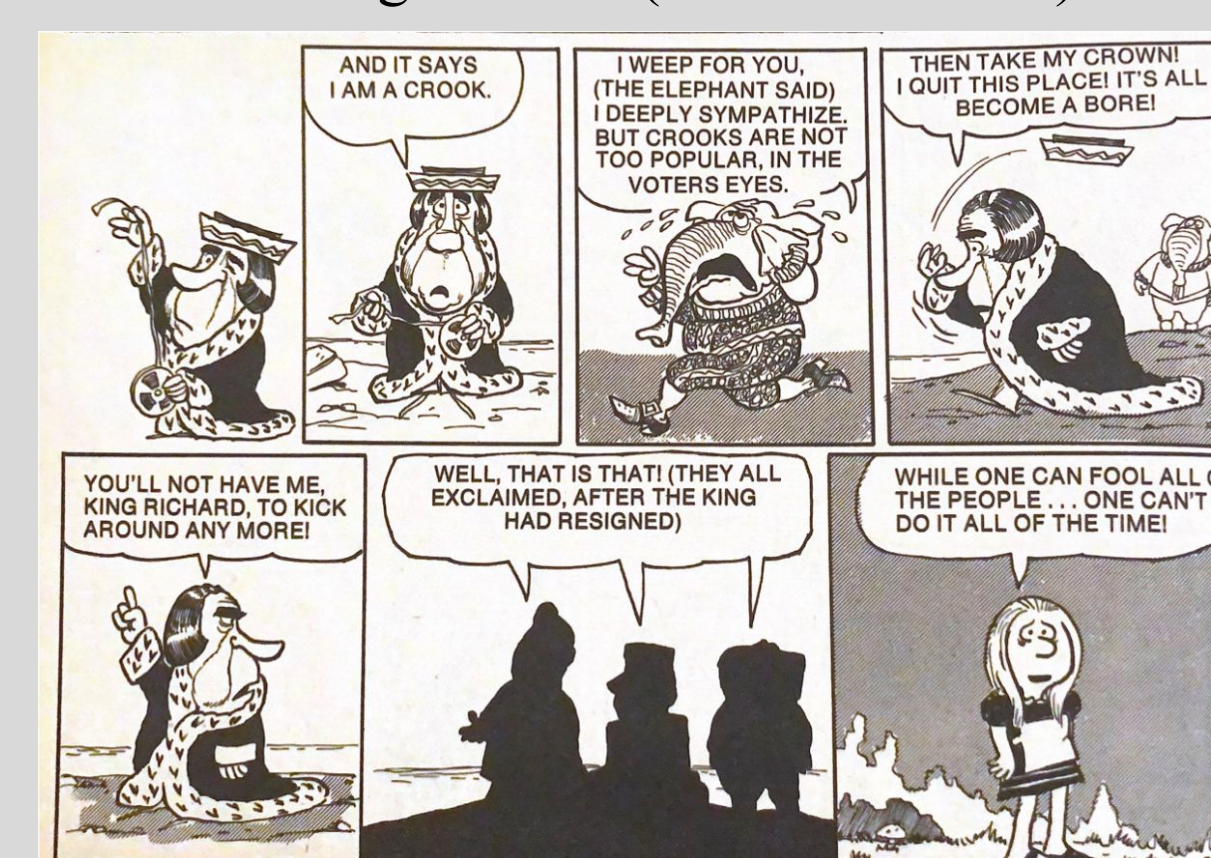
Each inclusion was analyzed with two major questions in mind:

- 1) To what extent were they radical, considering the politics/norms of the time?
- 2) To what extent were they explicit?



Howard the Duck criticizes the military and public policies while campaigning for president (*Howard the Duck* #8)

Bill Sanders comments on presidential corruption in his strip “Alice in Watergate” (*Comix Book* #1)



Bill Sanders, “Alice in Watergate” Comic Strip. *Comix Book* 1 1974: 20. Print.

Examples of political content across the three primary sources

Jay Kinney criticizes US military brutality in Vietnam in his strip “Sideshow” (*Arcade* #5)



Jay Kinney, “Sideshow” Comic Strip. *Arcade* 5 1976: 40. Print.

Results

(1) Mainstream, branded content was restricted in the extent to which it could include provocative content

While all three sources included provocative content, *Arcade* was much more provocative than *Comix Book*, which was in turn more provocative than *Howard the Duck*.

“no Marvel-published title could possibly contain the unrestricted content defining undergrounds”
-Denis Kitchen (Editor, *Comix Book*)

Denis Kitchen, foreword to *Best of Comix Book*, ed. John Lind (Milwaukee: Kitchen Sink Books, December 2013), 11.

(2) Mainstream, branded content could still make radical political statements, as long as they were not explicit

All three groups of comix (mainstream, underground, and hybrid) were able to make similar political statements, but presented them differently. For example, while all three criticized government officials, *Howard the Duck* only joked about their ineptitude, while *Comix Book* called them corrupt and anti-democratic, and *Arcade* compared them to Nazis.

(3) These restrictions had negative and positive effects

While mainstream content was not able to be as radically feminist and antiracist as underground comix, they were also held back from being as racist and sexist in their representations of oppressed groups

References

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