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ENG 410 Horror and Science Fiction Comics

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The early 1950s was a period of social and political conservatism, anti-feminist backlash, and racial repression, all served up against a background of cold war paranoia. But EC bucked all these ideological trends in comics such as *Tales From The Crypt*, *Weird Science*, *Frontline Combat*, and *Shocking Suspense Stories* — anthologies of short stories in the Horror, SF, War and Crime genres. They offered anti-racist allegories, rebuked warmongers, critiqued the paranoid state, and challenged the patriarchal vision of matrimonial bliss with tales of jealousy, hypocrisy, and murder. EC comics were blatantly sensationalistic and violent, but they had a sense of humor and irony too — as would become apparent when the company launched a comic book called *Mad* in 1952 that parodied the genres and stories that were elsewhere their bread and butter. Publisher Bill Gaines encouraged his artists to draw in their own styles (rather than follow trends or try to create a “house” look) and the most talented artists in the history of American comics flocked to work for him: Wallace Wood, whose depictions of rocket-ships, star-scapes, and beautiful alien women shaped the youthful imaginations of such filmmakers as George Lucas and Stephen Spielberg; Johnny Craig, whose storytelling skills influenced a generation of subsequent creators, including Batman artist Frank Miller; Graham Ingels, whose horrific visions captivated the young Stephen King; and Harvey Kurtzman, the founder of *Mad*, and one of the greatest American satirists of the 20th century.

It was too good to last, of course. Politicians, parents, and educators alike recoiled in horror from what they saw in the comic books. EC titles were banned in schools and burned in bonfires, and in reaction the industry imposed stringent standards of self-censorship, until eventually Bill Gaines and his team found themselves unable to distribute their creations. Only *Mad* survived, by becoming a magazine and escaping the censors.

But the EC legacy has endured. For a generation of young readers, these comics hinted at a more exciting and less culturally repressive world; they became tokens of counter-cultural hipness, collected by such figures as Jerry Garcia and Ken Kesey, and cited as an influence by generations of writers, artists, filmmakers, and — of course — comics creators.

This class will therefore explore the creative ambition, political courage, and pop-cultural legacy of what was once regarded as a “trash” publisher of the 1950s.

Because our primary materials are comic books, we will spend a portion of our time thinking about what makes the comics form distinctive from other modes of representation, both in formal and cultural terms. We will also take advantage of the unique resource presented by the “Aliens, Monsters, and Madmen” exhibition that will be running concurrently at the JSMA; at least one assignment will be built around this unusual exhibition.