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Beyond *MAD*: The Works of Harvey Kurtzman

A Thesis Presented

by

Timothy E. Cole

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Timothy E. Cole

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the

Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend acceptance of

this thesis.

Michele H. Bogart -Thesis Advisor

Professor, Department of Art History and Criticism

Andrew V. Uroskie – Second Reader

Director, MA/PhD Program in Art History and Criticism

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber

Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

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Thesis:

Harvey Kurtzman was an American cartoonist and editor. He is most famous for writing and editing the parodic comic book *MAD* from 1952 until 1956 and writing the "Little Annie Fanny" strips for *Playboy* magazine from 1962 to 1988. Kurtzman is known for his satirical display of popular culture, social critique, and his meticulous work methodologies through satirical engagement. Kurtzman critiqued, denounced and ridiculed cultural figures, politicians, and out of control consumerism.

This essay will explore Kurtzman's work through published examples and interviews. I will explore his early works, his work with *MAD* and several publications following his tenure with EC comics. In particular, in October of 2016, previously unpublished works for *TRUMP* magazine became available. *TRUMP: The Complete Collection*, contains never-before-seen art, including the surviving contents of the third issue. *TRUMP* was a satire magazine that Kurtzman created for Hugh Hefner, after leaving *MAD* magazine in 1956. *TRUMP* was expected to be a success but for financial reasons, Hefner cancelled the publication while the third issue was in production.

Throughout his career, Kurtzman regularly expressed his desire for full editorial control over his work. Although his work as a writer and illustrator is widely seen as successful, his work as an editor shows varying degrees of success. This thesis aims to examine the relationship of success versus editorial control in Kurtzman's work. In short, I intend to show that, to Kurtzman's dismay, his work was more successful when he was unburdened with the task of editorial control.

Beyond *MAD*: The Works of Harvey Kurtzman

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The Origins of *TRUMP*

When *TRUMP* was released, it had tremendous promise. At the end of 1956, the world saw the culmination of Kurtzman's most significant professional desire, namely, to edit an adequately budgeted "slick" color satire publication. *TRUMP*'s benefactor was Hugh Hefner, an enthusiastic Kurtzman supporter as well as the magazine world's rising celebrity as publisher of *Playboy*. Kurtzman was riding the high crest of *MAD*, a successful expression of his own creativity, he had been given an "unlimited budget"[1] by Hefner, and could thus acquire leading artists. The stars appeared perfectly aligned. Yet Kurtzman's aspirations evaporated quickly, following merely two issues, along with a third in progress. In aspiring for more, he quit *MAD*, left EC comics and a likely fortune in his foreseeable future. *TRUMP* is regarded as one of the most interesting what-if tales when it comes to comics history.

Kurtzman joined the comic book industry as an adolescent in 1942. He labored with the mainly forgettable *Super-Mystery* comics, while employed at the Louis Ferstadt studio, a publishing house, in New York City.[2] Soon after serving in the military, in which he perfected his creative techniques on army posters and educational drawings,[3] Kurtzman reentered the field in 1946, doing his original "Hey Look!" comic installment, for publisher Stan Lee, at Timely/ Marvel publications.[4]

From the beginning of comic books, during the mid-1930s, the industry's targeted audience was overwhelmingly juvenile and required the cheapest possible cover price. At a

[1] Harvey Kurtzman, et al., *Trump: The Complete Collection* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 2016), 9.
[2] William Schelly, *Harvey Kurtzman: The Man Who Created Mad and Revolutionized Humor in America: A Biography* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2015), 61.
[3] Denis Kitchen, Paul Buhle, and Harry Shearer, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 2009), 14.
[4] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 28.

miniscule ten cents retail, comics appeared to be at the very bottom of the publishing barrel. Publishers dependent upon sizeable quantity and working with penny margins needed to employ web presses (a printing press that was of lesser quality than, for example, Rotogravure printing) that could hardly maintain well-defined fine detail and inconsistently registered four colors on the least expensive possible newsprint. Artists working in the field had no other choice than to simply accept the constraints of sub-standard production.[5]

Kurtzman managed to graduate from arbitrarily designing positioned filler strips to creating war stories for the comics *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat* published by EC Comics during the early 1950s.[6] Today, these comics are considered as authentic classics of the medium. Kurtzman's impartiality in describing historic events and his refusal to idealize warfare added a fresh new realistic look.[7] Together with the editorial independence and forum to produce complex and significant content, Kurtzman's dreams for the medium developed. Nevertheless, the format and dime retail cost of comic books continued to be the same.

Kurtzman did not get a weekly stipend at EC Comics. Owner, William (Bill) Gaines, like several other comics publishers, paid freelance writers and artists on a piecework basis. Kurtzman was economically impaired by his own personal methodologies and work technique. The covers and stories he individually created had been produced in a number of labor intensive phases. Kurtzman would create individual mock-ups for each printing phase of his work, such as inked black and whites, then color layovers. Kurtzman also produced the particular arrangements he required from his collaborating artists in the same manner. Moreover, his insistence upon

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[5] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 9.
[6] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 60-61.
[7] Harvey Kurtzman, Gary Groth, *Corpse on the Imjin!: and Other Stories* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2012), viii.

performing monotonous and labor-intensive traditional research resulted in his editorial output generating an insufficient amount of income to care for his growing family. In the meantime, Kurtzman found EC's other principal editor, Al Feldstein, churning out practically research-free horror and science-fiction stories without providing sophisticated layouts and flourishing.[8]

Something had to be done. The answer Kurtzman and Gaines put together "out of desperation"[9] was *MAD*. Kurtzman spent countless hours at the New York Public Library finding historical information, for example, the proper trim on uniforms. By producing a humor anthology that required little to no researching, instead of historical works, he could, in theory, provide more hours. As a result, Kurtzman could operate with greater efficiency. The launch of *MAD* in 1952, though purely practical in the beginning, turned out to be a critical point in time in terms of both Kurtzman's profession as well as comics history, and one having a far-reaching effect on the larger tradition.[10]

Kurtzman didn't simply design *MAD* and edit it. He had written every word. He designed every page, initially in small thumbnails, then in bigger pencil designs on full-sized vellums, by collaborating closely with leading comic book artists like Will Elder, Jack Davis, and Wally Wood. He also drew or designed the individual covers himself, one of which I will discuss during the case study review. Kurtzman's unique brand of humor, flair for dialogue, distinct satiric intuition, and staunch work ethic, quickly reaped rewards.[11]

Following an initially sluggish beginning, *MAD* caught on. Circulation hit three-quarters of a million copies, a remarkable goal, since comic book sales on the whole had been slumping

[8] Kurtzman, *Corpse on the Imjin!: and other stories,* ix.
[9] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 81.
[10] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 82.
[11] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 83.

during the beginning of the '50s. Several dedicated fans, "Kurtzmaniacs,"[12] were creating mimeographed fanzines, the initial indications of what was to turn into an established fandom. Positive nationwide publicity, particularly uncommon for comics back then, also followed. As the twelfth issue of *MAD* reached the newsstands, *Pageant* magazine, in June 1954, reported "Now Comics Have Gone MAD" in a feature article. Pageant's publisher, Alex Hillman, had an ulterior motive for complementing Kurtzman with positive press, as he wasn't just an admirer of Kurtzman's work but also wished to entice him to his own business.[13]

Several months afterwards Kurtzman was given a worthwhile job offer from *Pageant*, although he did not jump at the opportunity for a raise at a bigger company. Rather, he used the proposal as leverage to gain what he urgently needed from Gaines: a magazine format for *MAD*. As Kurtzman later said, "I never felt I was a part of the legitimate publishing establishment. Comics were a bastard form. I wanted to get into the world of slicks. That was publishing." [14] Gaines had for months opposed Kurtzman's drive in that direction, as he believed magazines happened to be distinctive from the comics business he understood. Afraid of losing the originator of EC's most important title, Gaines relented, later observing, "Harvey stayed, made *MAD* a slick, and didn't even take as much money as he would have gotten at *Pageant*, because Harvey was never money-crazy. He could spend it like a maniac [laughter], but for himself, he was never demanding in that sense." [15]

In 1955, with issue No. 24, *MAD* made its magazine premiere. It sold out right away and had to be reprinted, something practically unprecedented in the magazine industry. Kurtzman

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[12] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 10.

[13] Schelly, *Harvey Kurtzman: The Man Who Created Mad and Revolutionized Humor in America*, 309.

[14] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 10.

[15] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 10.

was at last near to realizing his longtime objective. The format switch and newsstand positioning ensured *MAD* would connect with the audience he identified in the "Very Important Announcement" in the last comic book we find the message, "For the past two years now *MAD* has been dulling the senses of the country's youth. Now we get to work on the adults." Kurtzman's editorial choice of words strengthens the idea that he believed that the comic format was intellectually inferior to magazine format. The bigger page size and practical doubling of the previous page count offered fresh possibilities for satire. Kurtzman could now ask for text-heavy contributions from well-known media personalities. Humorists like Steve Allen, Ernie Kovacs, Stan Freberg, and Doodles Weaver worked with *MAD* in spite of its pitiful twenty-five-dollar page rate,[16] the equivalent of about $225.00 in today's dollars.[17]

The larger size, considerably better paper stock, and upgraded presses allowed artists much like Davis, Wood, Elder, and others to draw in an unrestrained method with no worry about their detailed cross-hatching or frenzied group scenes, appearing unclear in print.[18] An example of this style would be the cover of *MAD* # 27, which I will discuss later in this paper. Photographs could also be more clearly reproduced when needed, and national publication marketing campaigns could be successfully parodied at the same overall size format of the original advertisements.[19]

Nevertheless, the poor page rates had been an ongoing problem, and another main factor of Kurtzman's slick-magazine objective was still lacking: color. *MAD's* cover price had more than doubled to twenty-five cents but manufacturing costs had also increased, as had editorial

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[16] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 10.
[17] http://www.dollartimes.com
[18] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 120.
[19] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 120.

costs from the extended page count. *MAD's* earnings were coming exclusively from newsstand revenue, without the advertising cash flow that supplemented EC's comics. In order to insure the bottom line, Gaines maintained that *MAD* magazine's interior pages had to be black and white.

MAD magazine was distinct from any other periodical. Its jam-packed cover art, with Kurtzman's incredibly elaborate framing device and complicated logo, as very early trademarks, demanded close examination. Would-be readers could hardly casually look at the covers and the content, as they required attentiveness. The magazine's madcap topical humor, complex as well as sophomoric, and its crazy but robust design captivated an audience more mature and somewhat more cultured compared to the audience of the comic book version. Much of the broadened market included a good number of students and professionals.

Case study #1:

MAD **magazine: Front cover, number 27 (April 1956)**

To reiterate, when *MAD* magazine shifted from comic to magazine format, there were certain improvements to the technical production of the publication. The new size and better rotogravure printing presses afforded *MAD* more detail to the rendered images via the printing process. Kurtzman took advantage of this new founded ability and filled his covers with a visual assault. *MAD* magazine's *Front cover, number 27,*[20] needs to be looked at in two parts.

The logo and filigree border were conceived and designed for the first *MAD* magazine cover.[21] It was then reused several times throughout the course of *MAD's* early editions. Once

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[20] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 109.
[21] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 108.

Kurtzman left *MAD*, the filigree border was eventually dropped but his logo design is still in use and remains essentially the same to this day. The concept drawing for the cover remained a sentimental favorite of Kurtzman's, as evident by him hanging it prominently in his living room for the rest of his life.[22]

The logo was personally designed and drawn by Kurtzman and then inked by Elder. Looking closely at the logo, we find grape eating nymphs frolicking through the woods, chasing down centaurs through the white spaces of hollow letters. As for the border, rendered in the style of an etching, Kurtzman delivers small satirical vignettes, such as, *Business* which is depicted as a buxom girl sitting on her boss's lap and *Travel* which shows soldiers marching off to war. There are well over twenty of these small vignettes packed into the intricate border, as he wastes no opportunity to deliver an "eye pop" to his readers.

The main cover element was created by Jack Davis from Kurtzman's layout and rendered in color. Once again, Kurtzman wastes no visual real estate and packs the image with well over thirty references to popular and historical events from 1955. The image depicts a naked "baby new year" smiling, walking through a mob of people. He has "1956" painted over his rear end and looks back over his shoulder at the viewer, smiling. He walks, blissfully unaware, towards a trip rope held by "Alfred E. Newman", the fictitious mascot of *MAD* magazine.

Kurtzman's references depict most every facet of the news from 1955. A thorough analysis of every element in this image would be a paper unto itself, but here are a few highlights:

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[22] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 108.

- Juan Perón, who was deposed in Argentina that year, is found with the leader of Morocco in a garbage can. 1955 was the year that Morocco gained its independence.[23] [24]

- A Hal March lookalike (the host of the $64,000 question), hold a check for $64,000 from CBS as he looks in dismay at a person behind him holding a check for $500,000 from NBC, referring to the game show "21" winners.[25]

- The Brooklyn Dodgers win the World Series, defeating the New York Yankees 2–0 in Game 7 of the 1955 Fall Classic.[26]

- Bill Hayes tops the U.S. charts for five weeks with "The Ballad of Davy Crockett" and starts a coonskin cap craze.[27]

- Rocky Marciano, an American professional boxer, retires in 1955.[28]

- The Space Race began on August 2, 1955, when the Soviet Union responded to the US announcement four days earlier of intent to launch artificial satellites.[29]

Kurtzman's stylistic element for the cover, is an example of "horror vacui". The term is associated with the Italian art critic and scholar Mario Praz, who used it to describe the "suffocating atmosphere and clutter of interior design in the Victorian age".[30] Horror vacui, from the Latin translation of "fear of empty space", is the filling of the entire surface of a space or an

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[23] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan_Per%C3%B3n
[24] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morocco
[25] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_$64,000_Question
[26] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1955_World_Series
[27] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ballad_of_Davy_Crockett
[28] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rocky_Marciano
[29] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_Race
[30] William Lidwell, et. al. Universal Principles of Design, Revised and Updated: 125 Ways to Enhance Usability, Influence Perception, Increase Appeal, Make Better Design Decisions, and Teach through Design. (Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers, 2010), 128–9.

artwork with detail.[31] Included in the border, logo and the main cover element, there are over forty separate vignettes and over one hundred separate figural representations.

Kurtzman's attention, not only to artistic detail, but to obscure references of the day, are evidence of the time and energy that was spent on the creation of this cover. Furthermore, with this "Year in Review" cover being published in April, may be an indication of Kurtzman's dedication to the art and not so much to the logistical timing demands of an editor.

TRUMP Becomes a Reality

Some of the early followers of *MAD* and Kurtzman included a young businessman in Chicago named Hugh Hefner (born April 9, 1926). Hefner's own creation, *Playboy*, had likewise, first published just a couple of years before and was similarly a sensation. In *Playboy's* case, the draw was from a combination of nude pictorials with high-quality fiction and comedy along with in-depth interviews, fashion and music coverage.[32] In line with seeking an elegant image, and in contrast to any earlier "girlie" magazine, *Playboy* was printed on costly rotogravure presses to guarantee the highest-quality processing.[33]

Hefner, who actually started his career as a cartoonist, had an experienced and critical vision for comics. The dedicated and imaginative editor shared several other qualities with *MAD's* originator. Hefner wrote for his own magazine. He organized the pages in its beginning, and like Kurtzman, was a magnet for creativity. However, greatly in contrast to Kurtzman,

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[31] Lesley Brown. The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 360.
[32] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 121.
[33] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 10.

Hefner was the publisher and owner of his lucrative business. During a meeting between Hefner and Kurtzman in New York, Hefner stated, "If you ever want to work for me, look me up."[34]

EC Comics during the mid-'50s, as well as the comic book market on the whole, was going through market hardship. Comic book publishers had for several years been under constant attack for their product's supposed contribution to teen delinquency. The criticisms originated from parent organizations, politicians and specifically, psychiatrist and best-selling writer Dr. Fredric Wertham.[35] Publishers, including individuals with nothing to lose from tightening up standards, such as the owners of squeaky-clean "*Dell*" and "*Archie,*" implemented the Comics Code Authority, which successfully emasculated genres like crime and horror. EC Comics had become a specific target of critics soon after Gaines presented a devastating testimony at Senator Estes Kafauver's United States Senate hearings on comic books in April 1954.[36] Several merchants and wholesalers refused to sell his comics, returning them in unopened packages to EC's supplier, Leader News. The unofficial boycott and intimidation campaign worked well, as six months following the senate proceedings, Gaines was forced to discontinue his horror and crime comics entirely. EC's *New Direction* line, released in 1955, did not do very well either, and after that the news became even worse. In 1956, Leader News entered bankruptcy, leaving Gaines $100,000 in arrears to his printer. The company's future looked dismal.[37]

Kurtzman, recognizing *MAD* would probably go away due to EC's impending collapse, frantically insisted that Gaines keep going with its sole remaining successful title. A demoralized

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[34] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 10.
[35] Schelly, *Harvey Kurtzman: The Man Who Created Mad and Revolutionized Humor in America*, 113.
[36] United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on the, Judiciary. "Juvenile delinquency (comic books) : Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the / Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Eighty-third Congress, second session, pursuant to S. 190. Investigation of juvenile delinquency in the United States. April 21, 22, and June 4, 1954." (1954): BASE, EBSCOhost (accessed April 30, 2017), 97-109.
[37] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 13.

Gaines became sorely enticed to get out of publishing entirely. Nevertheless, he asked Kurtzman to take his message straight to his mother Jessie, at her home. She co-owned EC with her son, but retained ultimate financial control.[38]

MAD's reputation spoke for itself. However, it was Kurtzman's passion that proved persuasive. The Gaines family decided to commit $100,000 of personal family funds to bail out EC comics. With the new financial infusion, Gaines could repay EC's printing obligation. Its additional remaining titles had been terminated, and many workers, including editor Al Feldstein, had been terminated. The Greater American News Company replaced Leader for nationwide syndication, and *MAD* was quickly in a much better position than in the past.[39]

Kurtzman, hardly ever known for his business insight, had pulled a remarkable coup by talking Gaines away from the edge and in winning over Jessie Gaines to save *MAD*. The large potential worth of his vision is better seen in hindsight, as he was not compensated for his perception beyond an issue-by-issue job security. With *MAD's* circulation growing along with Kurtzman's professional fame, pride most likely took hold. He progressively resented Gaines's paternalism and stinginess, believed the publisher possessed no natural feel for satire. As Kurtzman once expressed, "The comic book was invented and shaped by people who basically weren't artists, who built a business that had little to do with the quality of the art." [40] Kurtzman believed he had hardly any "control" over *MAD*. The publication he had developed and designed, and which had preserved EC Comics, was owned and entirely regulated by the Gaines family.[41]

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[38] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 13.
[39] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 13.
[40] Greg Sadowski, *Harvey Kurtzman and Gary Groth. Harvey Kurtzman: Interviews with the Pioneering Cartoonist* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2006), 102.
[41] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 121.

Kurtzman shared his vexations with Hefner, who guaranteed him there was a place inside the developing *Playboy* organization for an alternative and more stylish variation of *MAD*, the ideal slick that Kurtzman had imagined. The lure to join Hefner was hard to refuse. In plain comparison to the tight-fisted Gaines, Hefner would have the funds to offset top magazine rates and draw in innovative talent. Those invited into Hefner's world discovered it hard not to be enticed on any level.

After just five issues of *MAD* had been published as a magazine, Kurtzman crafted a daring move. Shortly before he had leveraged the *Pageant* job offer to spark Gaines to change formats. This time he resolved to remain at *MAD* as long as he had full editorial control. Unfortunately, Kurtzman decided not to take the time to seek advice from a corporate lawyer who could have finessed an official employment contract providing Kurtzman the editorial control he craved, while also bargaining an equity share. Instead, in early April of 1956, only two months after convincing the Gaines family to invest $100,000 in *MAD*, Kurtzman faced off with Gaines, asking for stock in EC to be able to secure and protect the solid editorial control he demanded.[42]

Gaines, undoubtedly surprised by the unexpected demand, promptly presented 10 percent of controlling stock to soothe his editor. However, Kurtzman had not been trying to find a compromise. A few days after the offer, Kurtzman asked Harry Chester, his most seasoned associate and *MAD's* managing editor, to speak to Gaines on his behalf. Chester told Gaines that Kurtzman desired nothing less than 51 percent controlling stock of the business. [43]

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[42] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 13.
[43] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 121.

Kurtzman afterwards maintained that he wished only "control ... not the profits,"[44] but by asking for a majority stock share, without paying anything at all for this, he was in effect requesting Gaines to give over the business his father had founded and Gaines would be employed by Kurtzman. Surprised by the ultimatum, he called Kurtzman at home. Kurtzman confirmed the 51 percent demand. Gaines sullenly said, "Goodbye, Harvey," and the two promptly parted ways. In regards to the incident, Kurtzman stated, "Gaines and I had a confrontation, and I quit *MAD* because he didn't give me what I wanted. And I certainly can't say that I blame him." [45] Bitter sentiments between them continued for quite some time to come.[46]

Things shifted rapidly for Kurtzman soon after he departed *MAD*. Less than three weeks following the breakup he came to terms with Hefner for the creation of a fresh color satire magazine. By April 20, 1956, Kurtzman had been pulling in a $300-a-week wage. Harry Chester began work as the managing editor concurrently, drawing $160. A variety of other ex - *MAD* staffers quickly followed. In early May, Elder became salaried at $215. A week afterwards Al Jaffee (doubling as staff artist and associate editor) joined at $200, after which Jack Davis, also at $200. Al Jaffee later said, "Harvey said to the people at *MAD*, I'm leaving *MAD*. Who wants to come with me? And nearly everybody went with him. He was like the Pied Piper." [47]

An additional strong contrast between Gaines and Hefner, at least in the beginning, was the different frame of mind of the two publishers regarding money. With *MAD*, Kurtzman, in his own words, had, "been used to working with budgets, with specific quantities" as Gaines always

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[44] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 121.
[45] Sadowski, *Harvey Kurtzman: Interviews with the Pioneering Cartoonist*, 114.
[46] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 14.
[47] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 14.

held the purse strings tightly. When initially Kurtzman asked Hefner about the budget on their

fresh publication, Hefner simply said, "We don't start with a budget; we start to make a good

magazine and then we'll see what it costs." Those had been particularly open-minded, although

potentially hazardous words to express to an idealistic editor like Kurtzman who had little

experience in the economics of magazine publishing. [48]

TRUMP's growing staff quickly included Irving Geis as art director, as well as some of

Kurtzman's previous *MAD* collaborators, such as, Arne Lewis, as his assistant, and cartoonist Ed

Fisher. Eventually the overall salaries ended up costing Hefner $1,670 a week, the equivalent of

about $60,000 a month in today's dollars. Wally Wood originally worked for both *TRUMP* and

MAD, but Hefner and Kurtzman were adamant about exclusivity. When forced to decide, Wood,

who occasionally experienced strong creative differences with Kurtzman, chose *MAD*. [49]

By Fall, gossip about the innovative project gained nationwide attention. A story on

Hefner was printed in *Time* (September 24, 1956). The article concluded with:

> Hefner's office is still the living room of his apartment .... But at the end of the
> month *Playboy* will begin moving from four different Chicago offices to a
> refurbished (for $500,000) five-story Playboy Building. That will give Hefner
> room for a new project. He has hired the whole staff of MAD, a short-lived
> satirical pulp, and out of Playboy's $750,000 profit (before taxes) in 1956, will
> launch a still unnamed new magazine this winter. [50]

For half a year, the magazine's working title was "X", a single-letter placeholder that

nevertheless, got its own stationery while a final name was discussed. Shortly following the *Time*

article, a choice was at last made. Kurtzman's title choice was first "Humbug," an irreverent title

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[48] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 14.
[49] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 14.
[50] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 14.

he went back to for his post-*TRUMP* series, one year later on. Kurtzman additionally preferred the name "Picklestick" for the unnamed publication. However, Hefner and a respected *Playboy* executive, Victor Lownes, chose the name *TRUMP*. Kurtzman hardly preferred that title but the man who paid the bills came out on top. In 1989, Kurtzman reflected on the title decision:

> We kept trying to think up a title, and we weren't really in the same track. ... Now knowing Hefner as I didn't know him then, he's a romantic, and I'm not a romantic, and that's really where we diverged; I'm interested in the reality of a situation, the warts, and he's interested in magic. [51]

Several years afterwards, when Kurtzman and Elder had been creating the "Little Annie Fanny" strips for *Playboy*, Hefner was thoroughly engaged at every level, sometimes even overpowering the creators with incredibly meticulous evaluations. But with *TRUMP*, Kurtzman has mentioned the fact that Hefner's hands-on strategy was distinctive: "He didn't get involved." But if Kurtzman imagined his prior employer, Gaines, possessed little expertise for satire, his latest publisher possessed quite strong sentiments and did not hold back. On May 29, 1956, in a letter to Kurtzman, Hefner said bluntly:

> I don't feel that *Mad*, even in its last issue, was a polished, consistently funny publication. X, we hope, will be. It has to be, if it is to be successful over any long period of time, particularly with its 50-cent cover price. I don't honestly feel that even if you had stayed with *Mad* and Gaines hadn't run into financial difficulties, that the magazine could have continued to be popular over any long period of time without some fairly radical changes. ... Has anyone ever told you that they found *Mad* funnier as a comic book than after it became a 25-cent magazine? There is a strong agreement on that point here in Chicago. [52]

Three hundred and fifty thousand copies of the first issue of *TRUMP* arrived at newsstands in December 1956. Comics and humor enthusiasts willing to find the money for it

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[51] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 14.
[52] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 14.

purchased an excellent treat. Nothing like it had been created before. Besides *MAD* transplants

Wood, Elder, and Jack Davis, the original lineup consisted of cartoonists Jaffee, Arnold Roth,

Russ Heath, R. 0. Blechman, and Ed Fisher, and humorists like Roger Price, quickly being

accompanied by the likes of Mel Brooks, Doodles Weaver, and Max Shulman.[53]

One of the most prevalent features in the first issue was a parody of *Life* magazine's

complex "Epic of Man" series, which across a number of years presented fold-out paintings of

mankind's cultural development. *TRUMP's* version went a few steps further, describing mankind

a million years in the future, when the era's architectural monuments and television antennas

emerged as only future archaeological curiosities. The *TRUMP* gatefold[54] describing this kind of

possible future likewise slyly incorporated a Playboy playmate once unfolded, a wink at the most

well-known hallmark of *TRUMP's* publisher. The gatefold, to be faithful to *Life's* format and

Kurtzman's challenging ideas, was essential to the focused satire, and Kurtzman pulled out all

the stops. The single cropped playmate image, for example, could easily have been drawn right

from *Playboy's* archives, yet in its place, Kurtzman planned an exclusive photo shoot and model

to produce the gag.[55]

Perhaps *TRUMP* did not go far enough to tempt the possible customer prepared spend

fifty cents, a large selling price for the time. At half a dollar price tag, it equaled *Playboy* but was

double the cost of *MAD* magazine and five times the price of virtually any comic book. For even

more 1957 side-by-side comparisons: *Time* was a quarter, *TV Guide* was fifteen cents and the

impressive pictorial *Life* was only twenty cents. [56]

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[53] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 15.
[54] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 50-53.
[55] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 123.
[56] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 17.

In the event that there had been worries about the large retail cost offsetting revenue, the uncertainties had to have been alleviated by solid sales. The first issue of *TRUMP* sold almost two-thirds of its print run, an exceptional sell-through, especially for a brand-new publication. And customers of *TRUMP* No. 1 were seemingly pleased with the product and the second issue had a similar sell-through. [57]

However, expense was taking its toll on the *Playboy* publication's income. Along with the almost $7,000 a month for employee wages at *TRUMP*, Kurtzman paid out an additional $3,500 over one nine-week period on outside artwork and writing. Assorted expenses during the same period increased by $1,000. Rent in *TRUMP's* New York City office, located at 23 East 37th Street, was $500 a month. Finally, the printing cost for 350,000 copies of the initial issue was $55,000. In all, as outlined by Kurtzman's own personal records, the first issue cost $76,500 to create. Even a rather respectful 65 percent sell-through had not been a sufficient amount to get the publication to break even.[58]

Publications traditionally require a period of years to gain footing in the always-competitive magazine industry. Publishers fully anticipate new venture magazines to be unprofitable for a stretch of time. For example, Time-Life publications held out a dozen so years for *Sports Illustrated* to show profit. However, Hefner, irrespective of his stratospheric growth, did not enjoy the deep purses of Time-Life during 1957. Hardly any earnings via strong newsstand sales from the premier issue of *TRUMP* had been paid out by the troubled national

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[57] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 17.
[58] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 17.

distributor, and by the time the next issue was going to press, *TRUMP* acquired costs of nearly

$100,000. [59]

In 1957, a significant setback to many publishers of the time was the bankruptcy of the

national distribution company, Leader News. American News, which was in business for over a

hundred years and had long led periodical distribution, replaced Leader. Nevertheless, American

News, which distributed *Playboy*, *TRUMP*, *MAD* and many additional magazines, itself had

gone belly-up in June 1957, creating chaos for several publishers. While American News failure

undoubtedly damaged Hefner's organization, circulation problems by themselves did not cause

TRUMP's rapid collapse, specifically as its third issue was cover dated May 1957 and could have

been editorially finished well in advance of American's bankruptcy. [60]

Case study #2:

*TRUMP***: Front cover #2, (March 1957)**

After Kurtzman left *MAD*, he took the editorial helm of *TRUMP* magazine as chief editor

under the auspices of Hefner's publishing company. For an example of work from this period in

Kurtzman's career, I will look at the front cover of *TRUMP* #2.[61]

Whether Kurtzman intended for the cover to be the antithesis of his *MAD* covers or that

he thought that this style was more "adult" is up for debate, but as for his approach to the new

magazine we do know this. In an interview with Kurtzman he states:

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[59] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 123.
[60] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 17.
[61] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 89.

> [W]e tried to do a magazine with a professional look. We did layouts, we used in art director. We'd never had an art director. We had a good-looking magazine. It looked like a magazine, not a kid book. Mad was still a comic book and still is, but with Trump we were trying to do something adult. We were using coated stock and four-color process. We had – well, look at the magazine![62]

This quote is indicative of other accounts from Kurtzman on the methodology of creating *TRUMP*. When it comes to *TRUMP*, he emphasizes the physical quality of the finished product while the content is sidelined.

The *TRUMP* logo is rendered in a fast, painterly style with all capital letters. Subdued, impressionistic colored letters are employed and are given a white stroke, as to give the illusion of carved, beveled edges. The entire cover is predominantly black, reminiscent of the works of Kazimir Malevich. Beyond the logo, which takes up only 15 percent of the upper portion of the layout, there are only three additional elements to the layout. First, we find a small, full bodied cartoon of a knave blowing into a horn. His face is shown in profile, as his cheeks puff out, as if blowing into the trumpet that he holds. Lines emanate from the horn as to signify sound coming from it. The knave wears a full-length "sandwich board" style playing card. The figure is shown hopping in the air, as a ground plane line is evident to give the illusion of movement. This graphic eludes to more of a logo that may have been designed to accompany the logo, more than a separate design element. This is further supported by the use of the same layout on the business stationary used by *TRUMP*. [63] Above this figure, we find "March 50¢" Aligned to the top of the logo. The edition and price signifier is in a sans serif font and is colored in a subdued grey on the

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[62] Sadowski, *Harvey Kurtzman: Interviews with the Pioneering Cartoonist*, 118.
[63] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 186.

black background, as not to distract from the overall layout. The main layout element is a dashed, grey box with the words:

> If you are reading this, you're interest-
> ed, and you should look inside where
> it's more interesting because the
> printing is better for your eye-sight
> which will be soon gone if you're
> still reading this and… (trails into unrecognizable type).

The point size of the lettering is of an unbearably small size (3 or 4 points) and the whole element only takes up about 20 percent of the page space and is positioned off-centered at about one inch above and to the right of the center, giving an off-weighted composition. The type seems to be the same font as the date and price mentioned before. Finally, in the most lower, right hand side of the page, we find another knave popping up to show only his hat and face. Not even an inch in height, the character looks up and puts his fingers in his ears as he grimaces with discontent.

The differences between *MAD* #27 (April 1956) and *TRUMP* #2 (March 1957) are so drastic, that it hard to believe that the same person created both of them within the span of less than a year of publication of each other. In sharp contrast to the detail-heavy logo and cover of *MAD* #27, we find a more subdued and sophisticated approach to the cover of *TRUMP* # 2.

After *TRUMP*

On January 21, 1957, Kurtzman was pacing in Doctors Hospital in New York. His wife Adele was in the maternity ward, where she was ready to give birth to their third child, Elizabeth, when he was given the news that *TRUMP* would be discontinued. The day seemed to be among the happiest in Kurtzman's life. Having been pleased to find Hefner walking into the waiting area and surprised that his busy employer had come so far out of his way to say congratulations and possibly have a congratulatory cigar. Instead, Hefner had come to personally notify Kurtzman the fact that he was discontinuing *TRUMP*. The second issue would be printed, he guaranteed him, although he held out only little hope that the publication could be revived. [64]

Kurtzman, stunned, did not take the announcement well. He was in fact devastated. In Adele's hospital room, he cried loudly and long. She later recalled, "It was the only time I ever saw Harvey cry like that." The day that should have been among the most joyful days of his life was all of the sudden one of the most unimaginably bittersweet: he had gained a child, yet lost a baby of another kind. Looking back several years afterwards, Kurtzman said, "I never did get to do the perfect humor magazine [but] *TRUMP* came the closest."[65] When asked after the fact why he believed Hefner terminated the publication, he recognized the same reason the publisher had provided him three decades before:

> Hard times hit *Playboy*, *Collier's* had folded, and the banks, running scared... pulled their credit on Hefner. He cut back the whole operation. Everything was cut in half-the advertising staff, salaries... The operation really went into a crash dive, and of course he needed *TRUMP* like he needed an extra nose. [66]

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[64] Schelly, *Harvey Kurtzman: The Man Who Created Mad and Revolutionized Humor in America*, 354.
[65] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 18.
[66] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 18.

The severe pay cuts along with attempts to reduce costs at *Playboy* had been undeniable facts and authentic, if short-lived, struggles for those involved, but near to an entire decade following *TRUMP's* collapse. Kurtzman's cynical response to what happened at the time of Hefner's early 1957 economic stress is summed up, as he states, "Everybody took pay cuts, and I got my throat cut."[67]

Financial problems aside, was there a further level to Hefner's decision, one that he never specifically showed Kurtzman, whom he admired and considered as a friend? Several years following the publications demise, *TRUMP's* assistant editor Al Jaffee met Bob Preuss, *Playboy's* longtime main financial officer, during a New York get together. Jaffee remembered his time at *TRUMP* fondly and conveyed regret that Hefner needed to cancel it because of economic difficulties. Preuss looked at Jaffee and explained, "That's not why that magazine was folded. That magazine was folded because with Harvey it was never going to come out on time." He noted that late production would disrupt distribution schedules, advertisers couldn't be attracted, and reserved presses, if idle, would mean financial penalties. "That was really the major factor," Preuss said, "Gee, that kind of surprises me," Jaffee countered, "because I was always under the impression that Hef would have liked to have gone on with it but he was pushed." Preuss responded, "Well, what is he going to tell you?"[68]

Preuss's comments regarding Kurtzman and his inferred lack of ability to get the magazine out on time may hold some basis in truth. *MAD's* somewhat irregular timetable, once Kurtzman headed the project, was a persistent annoyance to Gaines. It would appear that little or nothing had improved at *TRUMP*, summed up by a more recent Al Jaffee anecdote:

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[67] Schelly, *Harvey Kurtzman: The Man Who Created Mad and Revolutionized Humor in America*, 355.
[68] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 18-19.

I made a visit to Harvey's house to deliver my *TRUMP* art job. The phone rang while Harvey and I were chatting and he picks up. Harvey says, "Hi, Willie. How's it going? WHAT!?! You need more time? You won't have it done by tomorrow? You need two more days? But Willie, we're already two days late. The printer will charge a FORTUNE for this delay. WHAT??? DO I WANT A GOOD JOB? Of course, I do but… but… but… Oh, okay. But no more than two days!" [69]

Regardless, *TRUMP*, released in the form of bimonthly, hit Hefner's preliminary December on-sale target date, as well as the second issue likewise delivered by the due date. Preuss's statement regarding advertising is confusing mainly because *TRUMP*, like *MAD* (until many years later) carried no advertisements. Nonetheless Jaffee recalled that Hefner had discussed ultimately bringing in "high quality advertising" into a publication that, like *MAD*, frequently mocked advertisements.[70] In spite of *TRUMP's* substantial cost and absence of advertising income, revenue for the first two issues had been strong and circulation probably would have expanded. Did Hefner drop the publication exclusively due to cash-flow worries then, as Kurtzman was first told, or because he came to believe that Kurtzman could not produce a reliably on time product, as Preuss suggested.

The question was most likely settled once Hugh Hefner agreed to be interviewed by Bill Schelly, author of *Harvey Kurtzman: The Man Who Created MAD and Revolutionized Humor in America*. More than a half-century following *TRUMP's* collapse, Hefner shared insights that he had held back from Kurtzman. Hefner says he had mixed emotions regarding *TRUMP*, and that, "the magazine didn't seem to be coming together." Hefner stated:

I did not see it coming together in a way that looked as if it would be successful. Sometimes it's like a baseball game. When the bat hits the ball, you know it's

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[69] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 19.
[70] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 19.

going over the fence, you know it's a home run. I knew that from the very first issue with *Playboy* magazine. It was not there with *TRUMP*.[71]

Hefner's own words would appear to definitively sort out the question. Given Hefner's uncertainties, it was nonetheless the unexpected and profound cash-flow issue that forced Hefner's swift hand, getting rid of *TRUMP* prior to the second issue was published or the third even finished. Most probably, with no financial doom and gloom, Kurtzman could have acquired at least a little bit of extra rope. Might have the impressive third issue, with Kurtzman bringing in an increasing range of skill, have adequately motivated Hefner? Even the aging playboy himself can probably not answer that.

If Hefner was first disappointed with *TRUMP*, he unquestionably did not waver in his admiration for Kurtzman and "those strange ones"[72] with whom he surrounded himself. Hefner made it possible for Kurtzman to launch a new publication named *Humbug*. Hefner provided Kurtzman a location in *Playboy's* New York office at a decreased rate (rent that was eventually never paid) and also permitted work designed for *TRUMP* No. 3 to be used in *Humbug* (at discount prices which were nonetheless challenging for the ill-fated self-publisher to pay). Hefner even published a prominent, heavily illustrated article, "The Little World of Harvey Kurtzman," in the December 1957 issue of *Playboy*.

After the collapse of *Humbug*, five years after the demise of *TRUMP*, Kurtzman and Hefner were yet again working together, and this occasion, on a long-lasting basis.[73] "Little Annie Fanny" (a gender-reversing variation of Kurtzman's "Goodman Beaver") [74] found its first

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[71] Schelly, *Harvey Kurtzman: The Man Who Created Mad and Revolutionized Humor in America*, 357.
[72] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 131.
[73] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 19.
[74] Harvey Kurtzman, *Harvey Kurtzman's Jungle Book* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 2014), 20.

appearance in the form of a multiple-page comic feature in *Playboy*. Kurtzman and his main collaborator, Elder, devoted the final quarter century of their work on that feature, generating more than a hundred stories, and additionally they were not simply work-for-hire contributors but equity participants.[75] The lushly colored, relevant stories for several years included Hefner's personal editorial insight (unlike with *TRUMP*), and it was, potentially, that hands-on participation that allowed "Little Annie Fanny" the longevity not given to *TRUMP*.

Case Study #3:

Little Annie Fanny: Splash page from "Van In" (*Playboy*, May 1978)

After the demise of *TRUMP*, Kurtzman eventually found his way back to Hefner's *Playboy*. Now, with the help of longtime collaborator, Elder, they produced the long running, bawdy comic, "Little Annie Fanny". This time, Hefner took on a more active role as editor, while Kurtzman is able to concentrate on his art alone.

From the book, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman*,[76] we find four reproductions of Kurtzman's vellum workflow that illustrates his methodology and attention to detail. Four vellum pages overlap each other and together show the process of deriving the final printed page. The first of the vellums show the layout of the page in black and white pencil. "Word bubbles" with copy and cell layout is established. Evident, is the use of "White-Out" for the omission of errors and corrections. The second is a color mock-up, the third is a more comprehensive ink layout. The final vellum is a black and white pen and ink rendering of what the final page will look like.

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[75] Kurtzman, *Trump: The Complete Collection*, 19.
[76] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 226-230.

The story is of the lovely, buxom and slightly oblivious antagonist, Little Annie Fanny, and her visit to a "Van In." In popular culture of the 1970's, custom vans were a phenomenon. It entailed the customization of the interior of the van into an opulent bedroom. This configuration carried the connotation of having sex in the back, as the "free love" generation went mobile. Not only did Kurtzman deliver precise illustrations as direction for Elder but we also find him doing field research, reminiscent of his days at EC comics, 20 years earlier. In August of 1977 Kurtzman attended a Van In, in New Jersey and filled a small spiral notebook with sketches.[77]

Kurtzman revisits his older horror vacui style of page layout. Each panel is crowded with illustrations and the "word balloons" are tightly packed with text. Kurtzman emphasizes the over -sexualized themes by filling the frames with repeated visual references to breasts, sex and hedonistic actions. Small vignettes are found throughout the work that are stylistically reminiscent of Kurtzman's *MAD* #27 cover.

Conclusion

The what-if elements of *TRUMP* will probably never be entirely resolved. Precisely what's undeniable would be that the beautiful and then promising *TRUMP* was undoubtedly an extremely costly proposal. As Hefner, would dryly summarize the *TRUMP* experience years afterwards: "I gave Harvey Kurtzman an unlimited budget, and he exceeded it." [78]

Through the works discussed, we can trace a correlation between methodology and intent. When Kurtzman was unburdened with the role of editor, his work was far richer with

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[77] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 226.
[78] Kitchen, *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics*, 123.

visual details. In *MAD* and "Little Annie Fanny" we find the biting, satirical whimsy that I contend was absent from *TRUMP*. Kurtzman's return to more playful themes and bawdy aesthetics in "Little Annie Fanny" help to demonstrate that *TRUMP* was not an evolution of style but of a desire to produce something technically superior to the comic book medium.

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