

Vittorio Frigerio

**Heer, Jeet and Kent Worcester (eds).
*Arguing Comics. Literary Masters on a
Popular Medium.* Jackson : University
Press of Mississippi, 2004. 176 p. ISBN:
1-57806-686-7.**

This anthology is presented by the publisher as "charting the long-standing cultural conversation that the comics sparked". This definition could be expanded and modified somewhat by talking of cultural divide, rather than conversation, and applying it not only to comics as such but to all mass culture phenomena starting from the Gothic novels of the 18th century, onwards and upwards to the present-day electronic games. Indeed, one of the striking aspects of many of the texts the two editors propose in their anthology, is the sheer predictability of the arguments brought to bear against the spread of comics, generally likened to some kind of intellectual pathology.

Many of the debates brought back to life in these pages echo eerily the precise same arguments that were once used against the spread of the virus of popular literature in European culture - images being the most visible element of its nefarious invasion. It is the discourse moralists, preachers of all ilk, puritans of whatever creed and amateur psychologists and sociologists have always put forward: mass culture as the destroyer of all morality and social and religious order. It is also the reason why "serious" intellectual publishers such as Seuil in France or Adelphi in Italy, whether they admit it or not, still eschew pictures on the covers of their books like the plague. For the early critics, the unholy alliance of the word and the drawing was not the only reason to denounce comics. More importantly, and beyond the almost technical question of the protection of the primacy of the word, it was simply a matter of limiting perceived foreign influences on the impressionable minds of children and of shielding them from vulgarity, not to mention subliminal impulses to disobey authority.

Luckily for the modern reader, this book does not simply dig into the archives of reactionary thinking but also attempts to show the evolution of critical positions concerning the comics, going from early rejection to grudging acceptance to serious study. The editors indicate in a footnote, as a caveat, Thierry Groensteen's comment that "an anthology of what was written about comics between the beginning of the century and the sixties would be extremely boring". It should be said in their defence, however, that

even in the cases of the most unimaginative critics, they have had the good taste to choose specimens endowed with at least the saving grace of lively style, and often wit.

The first section of the anthology is thus reserved for "Early Twentieth Century Voices", going from radical enemies of the new genre such as Ralph Bergengren (a Christian poet with some major axes to grind) to curious souls like E.E. Cummings and Gilbert Seldes, who were among the first to try to understand comics as comics, and not as either impoverished literature or debased art. One article that warrants mention in this section is Thomas Mann's introduction to *Passionate Journey: A Novel Told in 165 Woodcuts*, by Frans Masereel. We are of course not dealing here with comics proper, but it is really one of the strengths of this anthology not to have restricted its field to the genre per se, but to include some stimulating general reflections on the relationship between words and images.

The second part, entitled "The New York Intellectuals", offers excerpts from the writings of authors often connected to the *Partisan Review*. Some relatively minor snippets by Clement Greenberg are followed by a well-argued piece by Irving Howe with useful references to the movies, and several other excerpts including a humorous article by Robert Warshow that brilliantly illustrates the appeal of comics and the motives for their rejection by many intellectuals of the post-war years.

Part three, "The Postwar Mavericks", brings into focus the growing curiosity for comics by some relevant intellectual figures such as Walter J. Ong and Marshall McLuhan. It ends on a piece that truly marked the beginning of modern cultural studies and the entrance of comics in the halls of academia: Umberto Eco's *The Myth of Superman*.

Pleasant to read, well-thought out and well-presented, this anthology manages to put into perspective the long road of comics towards cultural legitimacy. Beyond this, it serves as a useful reminder of the perennially repetitive arguments that conservative critics have always used to marginalize new productions that break accepted rules.