Paul S. Hirsch, **Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism**, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 337 pp., $30.00 (hardcover).

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As Paul S. Hirsch (2021) notes in his brilliant book, ***Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism***, tremendous economies of scale were baked into comic books as a medium during the 20th century. A comic book from the 1940s or 1950s included 64 pages of detailed full-color artwork on glossy paper and sold for just a dime—a feat that was only profitable because publishers adopted production line tactics, churning out numerous titles for minimal cost and printing almost unfathomable quantities of each. Early in the book, Hirsch notes that in years following the Second World War,

> publishers sold nearly a billion comic books every month, some translated into more than a dozen languages, while American companies, soldiers, tourists, and diplomats transmitted many millions globally, distributing comic books wherever the machinery of World War II or the Cold War was found. (p. 6)

Throughout *Pulp Empire*, the author is able to show, in terms of circulation numbers and other measures of popularity, how comic books of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s easily matched or outstripped the influence of many other U.S. media exports, ranging from magazines to jazz music, only to be largely overlooked by contemporary media scholars because of their perceived status as lowbrow, disposable culture. Conversely, it was this same under-the-radar quality that ignited tremendous interest among the state and government-affiliated actors responsible for America's propaganda mission throughout the mid-20th century.

Pulp Empire tells the story of how these organizations, which at various points have included the State Department, the Writers' War Board, the United States Information Agency, and the Central Intelligence Agency, worked with and alongside the comic book industry to promulgate state-sanctioned messages across the globe, taking advantage of the reputation of comic books as mundane objects and guilty pleasures to plant propaganda in a medium where few audiences would suspect state intervention. It is a focus that sets *Pulp Empire* apart from other recent histories of the comic book medium, such as Shawna Kidman's (2019) *Comic Books Incorporated* or Jeremy Dauber's (2022) *American Comics*.
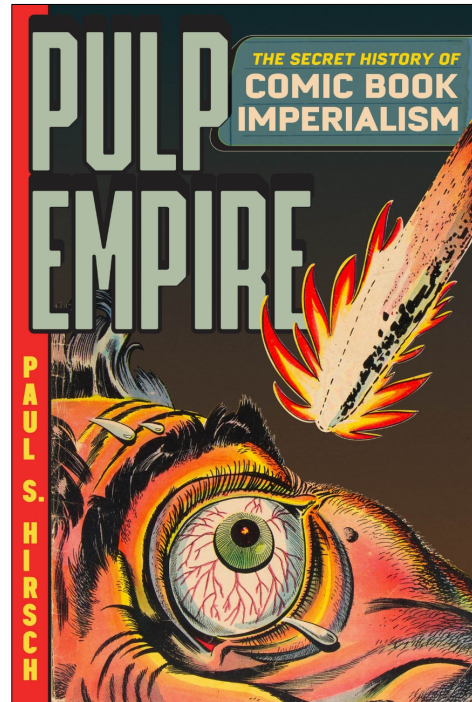
Hirsch's book is beautifully, evocatively written and—with its full-page color illustrations and gorgeous production value—will easily appeal to general audiences soaked in contemporary comic book culture. At the same time, it is a remarkable academic work based on years of archival research and painstaking scholarship. In the latter role, it will be of great interest to media historians and critical media studies scholars alike.

For example, Hirsch explores how comic books were shipped overseas by the millions. The way they subsequently spread—propagating hand-to-hand and via secondary markets to successive waves of geographically dispersed readers—invites a fascinating contrast with accounts of international broadcasting. Like the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe, comic books crossed borders with little regard for national boundaries or sovereignty and could be consumed privately by audiences. Put another way, comic books as a medium possessed many qualities media researchers have traditionally ascribed uniquely to electronic media. In fact, comic books as a propaganda tool may have been superior to international broadcasting of the same era in some regards. Audiences who missed a VOA broadcast might never have a second opportunity to hear its message, but comic books could be reread and passed hand-to-hand for years until they finally disintegrated.

However, while much work has been done on the history of international broadcasting—and is being done now on the affordances of the Internet vis-a-vis state-sponsored propaganda—prior to Hirsch's book, very little has been written on analogous uses of comic books.

Hirsch's account gets particularly interesting in the years immediately following World War II, when government authorities—having helped to create a new and massive adult audience for a medium previously seen as kids' stuff—suddenly left publishers to their own devices. Entirely unregulated and now free to cater to the basest, and most salable, interests of their new adult readership, publishers quickly began churning out new genres of comics featuring lewd and racist imagery, depraved criminality, and sexual abuse. These stirred substantial moral outrage culminating in congressional inquiries that explored possible links between comic book consumption and juvenile delinquency.

Such controversies ultimately led to an existential crisis in the industry, killing off many publishers and titles, while those that remained agreed to aggressively self-regulate. This sequence of events prefigured many similar debates that manifested in subsequent decades over violence on television and eventually in video games. As a forerunner to these other high-profile, industry-shaping clashes, the midcentury imbroglios between the comic book industry and its antagonists deserve thoughtful consideration from scholars and cultural critics, which Hirsch finally delivers in *Pulp Empire.*

At the same time, Hirsch notes that while—as with other media—the alleged link between violence in comics and juvenile delinquency was largely anecdotal and commonly remembered as reactionary, the domestic controversy over comic books provided a platform for a second set of concerns having to do with their impact internationally. A fair amount of attention has been paid to the hand-wringing produced by other American cultural exports of the Cold War, like film and television, and how they might damage the country's attempts to paint itself as an enlightened society abroad. As Michele Hilmes (2011) put it, "Hollywood—dominated by immigrants, permeated by internal transnational influences, disseminating vulgar mass culture to the unassimilated hordes—displeased the elite protectors of America's national identity as much as it did

those of other nations" (p. 3). Erik Barnouw's (1970) classic work, *The Image Empire*, gives a thorough accounting of how, as American TV shows became the dominant source of television programming across the globe in the 1950s and 1960s, the violence, racism, and xenophobia baked into their plot lines threatened to undermine the country's more official efforts at cultural diplomacy.

And yet, before television was even widespread domestically, the United States was already confronting these international issues with respect to comic books, on account of the distribution channels paved by, and the overseas markets initially built by, the government's enthusiasm for propagandizing via comics. American comic books continued to flood the globe long after the government's involvement and oversight had ceased. The new commercial titles being shipped abroad by the millions immediately after World War II were the same ones that appalled domestic critics, including crime and horror comics rife with images of domestic and sexual abuse, "jungle" comics depicting brutally racist caricatures, and still other genres and plot devices that likewise readily conveyed the worst aspects of the American psyche. The challenges these texts generated for American cultural diplomacy were in some ways far greater than the ones later presented by television, given the initially unregulated nature of the comic book industry, which promulgated themes and imagery that could make even the most violent or backward TV programs appear tame by comparison.

These are just a few of the major historical currents Hirsch explores at the intersection of the comic book industry and the American state in a book that goes on to document the advent of self-regulation, the rise of Marvel, and the government's own forays into comic book publishing after it shifted away from seeding its messages in major commercial titles. At every stage, Hirsch explores how visual culture, commerce, racism, and policy were intimately interconnected in ways that produced the political economy in which comic book publishers operated.

Pulp Empire also captures how the industry's unregulated phase could occasionally provide a platform for progressive themes, ranging from critiques of capitalism to antiwar and antinuclear messages. At the same time, the book pulls no punches in its thoroughgoing discussion of the ways race and gender—and racism and misogyny—were central elements of the industry's development, the images it promulgated, and the cultural policies surrounding it. *Pulp Empire* is an essential read for the current moment of reckoning in American culture, revealing how these issues shaped a business that has now, in the age of DC and Marvel blockbusters, become synonymous with America on the world stage.

References

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