

2020

The "Mad 20" with Alfred E. Neuman; Or, It's the Covers, Stupid

Christopher J. Gilbert

Assumption University, c.gilbert@assumption.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/english-faculty>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gilbert, Christopher J. "The 'Mad 20' with Alfred E. Neuman; Or, It's the Covers, Stupid." In *Seeing Mad: Essays on Mad Magazine's Humor and Legacy* edited by Judith Yaross Lee and John Bird. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2020. Pages 147-176. <https://upress.missouri.edu/>.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at Digital Commons @ Assumption University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Department Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Assumption University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@assumption.edu.

7. The “Mad 20” with Alfred E. Neuman; Or, It’s the Covers, Stupid

Christopher J. Gilbert

“Stupidity has a knack of getting its way.”

—Albert Camus, *The Plague*

STUPIDITY IS THE organizing principle of *Mad* magazine. *Mad* emerged in the 1950s as an ironic, irreverent, and incisive send-up of “commercial practices, social conventions, and cultural institutions that underwrote postwar consensus ideology and the Great American Way,” as Stephen Kercher put it.¹ Simply, *Mad* made comic madness more virtue than vice, and artful stupidity a mode of smart satire. Since its inception, *Mad* has stood steady on the edge of praise and blame for the idiotic, with Alfred E. Neuman as its unsightly cover boy. Neuman’s iconography is significant because his aura and appearance on the cover of *Mad* often epitomize the content. Take infamous issue #166 in April 1974, which features the logo in flaxen over a cerulean background, the phrase “the number one ecch magazine” also in yellow, and Neuman’s hand protruding from the bottom and giving the middle finger. But there is much more to Neuman, and to *Mad* covers, than profane gestures. As Stergios Botzakis notes, the moronic mascot “has appeared on almost every cover since 1955 playing a wide range of characters, from Yoda to Voldemort, Justin Bieber to Uncle Sam.”² Numerous other scholars and commentators have offered genealogies of the figure who is now a poster child of stupidity, pointing to the pedigree of a fool who indulges blissful ignorance (if not downright dimwittedness) with his signature “What, Me Worry?” and evinces the merit in judging a proverbial book by its cover.³ This judgment is perhaps most apparent in the “Mad 20,” an annual compendium of “The Dumbest People, Events & Things.”

The “Mad 20” was rolled out at the turn of the twenty-first century. After honoring the dumbest of 1998 in its inaugural issue, *Mad* has designated the first issue of every subsequent year its “annual tribute to the year’s biggest idiots,” rendering the capture and celebration of stupidity a time-honored tradition. This leitmotif is no small thing. Thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, after all, have recognized in madness a break from reality based on a particularly distorted perspective of it. Madness is conventionally conceived as rashness, thoughtlessness, even lunacy. However, it is also folly, as Avital Ronell shows.⁴ What is more, it can signify an orientation toward the commonplace when it reminds us of the foolishness of conventional wisdom in collective habits. The covers of “Mad 20” toe the line of what constitutes our normative assumptions about the stupid, or the mad, while reminding us that madness itself can operate as a sort of comic enthusiasm for inanity. In this sense, dumbness is not degenerative but rather generative, reproducing shared (mis)understandings of what it means to lack intellect, intelligence, or perception. Yet in the generation of absurd content, *Mad*’s “stupidest” covers articulate what Michel Foucault might call “the comic punishment of knowledge and its ignorant presumption.”⁵ This type of comicality drives satire by punishing stupidity as a gaffe, not a crime, and positing objects of ridicule as somehow “smart on the dunce.”⁶ *Mad* goes further still, interpellating its audience as at once the arbiter of the stupid and as the pot calling the kettle black. Herein lies the amusement and the sting of the one-finger salute.

My purpose in this essay is to engage how the “Mad 20” hails stupidity. It unfolds with a look at Alfred E. Neuman as the face of human folly and its condition in *Mad* as both all too common and remarkable, nonetheless. An emphasis on *Mad*’s mascot is crucial for appreciating the covers insofar as he often adds insult to sociopolitical injury, serving as a figure of comic defacement by spoiling the appearance of people, places, and events that have already experienced defilement in one form or another. Next, I consider how *Mad*’s yearly coverage of stupidity portrays caricature as a form of satire, distorting even as it mirrors the cultural realities of U.S. public culture. I pay particular attention to the place of stupidity in *Mad*’s satires, and to the satire in the magazine’s stupidity, by homing in on the rhetorical composition of and the graphic representations within a selection of “Mad 20” covers. The selections variously *document* important events by travestying the “best of” trope,

reenact public controversies, and/or *allegorize* the ironies of high horses (namely by figuring hauteur in images of hilarious folly). This schema also underlies *Mad's* recurring treatment of real estate mogul Donald J. Trump's ascension to the presidency in covers that *satyrize* the disquietude (and derpitude) of American democracy.⁷ In turning to the ancient roots of satire in satyr plays, I am recollecting a deep relationship between comicality and crudeness, which combines the satirical thrust of much critical humor with the perversity of festive caricatures in the figures of mythic satyrs. If satire entails the good sense of mockery, in other words, what might be called satyre invokes perhaps a greater sense of, say, comic allegory as travesty that is drawn from decadent, folly-to-be-wise revelries. Trump's political rise has led *Mad* to take up a visual rhetoric of what Bertrand Russell might call "the triumph of stupidity," showing The Donald as proof that democratic politics can succumb to a tyranny of idiots. Hence my ultimate focus on each cover's caricatures as means to visualize thought and action, however obscene, during specific historical moments.⁸

Mad's caricatures graphically distill the relationships between public affairs and the abstract values attached to them, reconstructing social, political, and cultural images of people and events through distorted projections that might not be as workable in textual burlesques. I argue that the "Mad 20" covers humor readers into reimagining the significance of some of the most damaging solecisms from the annual scandal sheet. *Mad's* stupidity, then, is a rhetorical sign of comic distortion that enacts judgments on how we cover and what we document about the politics of our socialities, reshaping while reinforcing perspectives according to an allegorical play of comic alterity in the comprehensible and the perplexing. My turn toward the satyric simply magnifies the *Madness*. Of great significance is the extent to which the covers not only reiterate established conclusions about gradations of offense or recover common feelings of outrage, but also prod the shared stupidity in the circumstances themselves and the cultural milieus that made them possible. So, while the "Mad 20" may be daft, it is certainly not stupid.

Seeing Through Stupidity

To look at Alfred E. Neuman is to see the face of stupidity on the body of satire. *Prima facie*, the boy is the stereotypical redheaded stepchild. He is gap-toothed. His ears are not only uneven but also slightly too

large for his head, which seems a bit too big for the neck that supports it. And his ruddy tangle of hair rests above a general expression of uninformed contentment, signaled by blue eyes that stare blankly forward above a wide, freckled nose and a broad smile. Indeed, Neuman is a picture of congenial witlessness. But *Mad* is not the only outlet to imagine him so. His print history dates back to the 1890s, when he appeared as a carefree imbecile advertising a traveling comedy troupe and its risible production, *The New Boy*. In the early twentieth century, his likeness emerged in the public domain on a postcard over the caption, "Me Worry?" Earlier still, the new boy was also the "It Didn't Hurt a Bit" kid, advertising pain-free dental procedures and curative "brainfood."⁹ In each instance, and then again in his formal debut on the cover of *Mad* in December 1956 (#30), Neuman is, as Arden G. and Joan Christen describe him, "a grinning nebbish; more a mental defective than a lunatic; [possessing] a vacuous, strabismic, slightly leering face; the quintessential nerd; and everything that parents pray deep-down that their kids won't become."¹⁰ He seems to embody the Latin *stupidus*, or a state of being "struck senseless." Yet contained within Neuman's unknowing air is the "knowing" smirk of a boy who may look dumb but actually knows more than we think.

Neuman *does* look dumb. However, he also looks awkwardly dapper. His hair is relatively neat and clean, and he is from the earliest images forward dressed up in a coat and bow tie. As such, he is not simply an idiot, but rather "a likeable, inept, inspiring, mischievous," and puzzling figure.¹¹ This characterization is telling insofar as nerds often connote a certain measure of intelligence, brainpower, and even sharpness. The 1950s saw Neuman's emergence as a presiding comic spirit for *Mad*, initially appearing as himself but soon thereafter playing cameo roles, parodying familiar icons, or travestyng public figures. For instance, in February 1957 (#31), cover artist Norman Mingo portrays Neuman as another dignitary on the granite walls of Mount Rushmore. In April 1960 (#54), a "special April Fool issue," cover artist Frank Kelly Freas depicts Neuman as a modern-day Tom Sawyer whitewashing a red fence. Neuman faces forward and covers his mouth with his right hand as if he has just been caught in the act or is just about to vomit. His face is green, his eyes wide. In his left hand is a brush dripping with white paint. On the massive wooden panels behind him are the words "this magazine is revolting" scrawled in bold capital letters. Beneath them, as

if painted on as a mocking aside, is the conditional phrase "... against Conformity!" The point is that Neuman functions as a figure of image corruption in comic defacement. He is a caricature. Through a form of what Roxana Marcoci calls "comic abstraction,"¹² Neuman at once breaks and remakes images of stupidity, serving as the satirical stooge for mockery and ridicule.

Todd Gitlin notes in Neuman's "grinning caricature" the "bubble-gum nihilism of the late Fifties—and its refutation."¹³ Herein lie the seeds of his satire, for embedded in Neuman's refutations of the stupid is a laughing approval. Satire "strikes roots in the soil of stupidity," Northrop Frye declared.¹⁴ But satire is also about sowing its seeds in order to despoil them. Its figurative as well as its "physical effects" come from the fact that, with visual satire in particular, "a person is literally 'defaced.'"¹⁵ While satires can work to "save face, deface, and make faces," they can also "praise, insult, excuse, stake claims, and warn off trespassers."¹⁶ Satirical caricatures foster "offending images,"¹⁷ remaking public characters into (and out of) the stupidity they help to create. This practice is especially manifest in *Mad* covers that key in on people and their pratfalls, which I examine below. For now, I aim to establish caricature more broadly as a satirical means of seeing through stupidity.

Thinkers as early as Aristotle have recognized in stupidity a certain appeal.¹⁸ If nothing else, it has been approached as a site for pointing out "reproachable ignorance."¹⁹ In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that to act *in* ignorance is one thing, and to act ignorantly is another.²⁰ The same could be said about being stupid and acting stupidly. In either case, the implication is that a body politic should be informed about the ignorance, or the stupidity, of others. To put it differently, we should be aware not only of dullness or gross wants of intelligence but also errors in judgment. This goal animates what Christie Davies calls "stupidity jokes,"²¹ which *Mad* deploys to bring the stupid front and center. It is also more often than not the underlying motive of the magazine's satire. Kenneth Burke defines satire as "imagery of the secret vice shared by" all.²² Its display is therefore a revelation, even though it is a "public secret" taken and understood only at "face value."²³ In this way, satires of stupidity are projections meant to educate both on and against their very content. To the extent that their comic judgments point out mistakes, they also revel in human failings. As *Mad* over and again reminds us, satire is part sociopolitical critique, part self-reflexive celebration

of the stupid, and part demonstration of consequences that follow condemnations of stupidity with stupidity itself.

Understanding the place of stupidity in satire is significant for an examination of the "Mad 20," since stupidity *in situ* becomes a way of seeing, in John Berger's useful sense.²⁴ Stupid appeals tend to mock what Bakhtin called "lofty pseudo intelligence," and then again serve as rhetorical resources for "regarding the world through the eyes of the fool."²⁵ Such appeals provide a means of making the strangeness or the madness of stupidity more familiar, so it appears as commonplace as it is shameful. What is more, these appeals alter even as they affirm perceptions of personal defects and collective flaws.²⁶ In the "Mad 20," the appeal of stupidity appears in a few notable ways. First, the satirical caricatures on *Mad* covers do not simply put down stupidity; they reinforce it as constituent of so many comedies of human errors. Second, they contribute to a more general mockery of form. Many magazines produce "best of" editions. The "Mad 20" satirizes these imprints through its own thinly veiled moralism, affecting an ironic sense of "prudence, prudence, prudence, mixed with stupidity, stupidity, stupidity."²⁷ By extension, *Mad's* celebration of stupidity also makes fun of the Nietzschean modes of moral indignation that tend to define "human, all too human folly."²⁸ The "Mad 20" makes stupidity praiseworthy. It turns vices into virtues. Nevertheless, insofar as its caricatures comprise a mode of comic ridicule, there remains the question of just who or what is the target. It would be easy to say that the reading and/or viewing public of *Mad* is superior. Yet in serving up stupidity as something of a public good—never mind a product to be consumed—the "Mad 20" offers a meditation on the weight of particular types of stupidity, its gradations and varying magnitudes, and the burden it places on how we imagine what stupid persons, places, and events say about *us* as audience members.

This meditation is no doubt why Neuman "seems to fit, perfectly, the role of the trickster,"²⁹ laughing at even as he laughs off the very stupidity he epitomizes. On the one hand, he is a symbol for mock admiration. On the other, he is an uncritical ignoramus. His fatuous appearance, though, is the source of his rhetorical force as a caricature when he harbors what Amelia Faye Rauser calls "the standard symbols and ideas of old idioms but with a new affect of subversion, doubt, and negation."³⁰ In this way, Neuman also plays something of a *satyric* role inasmuch as, like the characters of ancient satyr plays, he becomes grotesque versions

of the very people, events, and things that he abhors in jest. The satyr, as I have argued elsewhere, is a satirical figure par excellence insofar as it is wild and unhindered in its outrageous and comic caricatures.³¹ Through Neuman, we see the same things we see in popular media, only differently, distortedly, and debauchedly. Neuman cannibalizes the stuff of photographs, drawings, films, television images, newspapers, and so on. His likeness is leveraged as evidence for how "stupidity can body-snatch intelligence, disguise itself, or, indeed, participate in the formation of certain types of intelligence with which it tends to be confused," as Ronell notes.³² This fluidity is how he can come off as simultaneously oafish and overconfident. It is also how he reflects even as he reconstructs the normative assumptions of, and the common ways of representing, our madness for stupidity. The "Mad 20" is rife with these foolish reconstructions.

The "Mad 20" as the Flagship of Foolery

It is not difficult to find delight on a ship of fools. For *Mad*, the ship is society, which is defined by the stupidity its members affect. From cover to cover, the writers and illustrators of *Mad* redistribute this Usual Gang of Idiots alongside Alfred as the ringleader and "the moronic face left when authority is stripped of all pretense," as Edward Rothstein of the *New York Times* put it.³³ It is therefore unsurprising that *Mad* would come to devote entire issues to "The Dumbest People, Events & Things" that are yearly at the helm.

Numerous covers stand out as exemplary. However, since stupidity (like satire) is by nature "fitting," or serving "as the jointure of timeliness,"³⁴ it is better to demonstrate some of the key features of *Mad's* satirical coverage of the stupid itself as a sign of the times. Consider that each cover tends to celebrate high-profile characters and controversies, which in turn require a certain amount of popular or political awareness, let alone an investment in particular kinds of collective memory. These factors suggest why, as caricatures, the covers rely upon what E. H. Gombrich describes as a satirical "demonstration of equivalence" between art images and cultural realities.³⁵ Consequently, even though they are appeals to stupidity, the "Mad 20" covers actually encumber their audience to enact habits of mind that neglect to draw conclusions beyond the observation of already articulated judgments. At the same time, the covers flag certain objects or ideas as resources for reconstructing those

judgments in an outlet that plays on the notion, posited by Kenneth Burke, that “*all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools.”³⁶ The “Mad 20” is thus a conflation in caricature of comic intervention and willful ignorance.

To organize my analysis, I highlight three core tropes of graphic representation that exemplify the types of rhetorical flags flown in *Mad*'s caricatures, and one more that has swelled in the Age of Trump. These tropes serve as signposts of satire, with Neuman as the main marker for the rhetorical work of comic judgment that covers do when they *document*, *reenact*, *allegorize*, and *satyrize* the stupidity they purport to represent. These tropes overlap. I isolate them here only to enlarge the dimwits, dolts, and dopiness in their details. I also parse them under the assumption that stupidity is the overarching satirical framework for grasping not only what appears in an image or thing but also what is conveyed about people, places, and events. The “Mad 20” covers exemplify comic judgments in caricature.

Documentation

Mad's documentation of stupidity is apparent in the first of the stupid retrospectives. On the cover of the January 1999 issue, Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky share the top spot for their infamous sex scandal (#377). Shamed sportscaster Marv Albert appears, as well, and so too does the virility pill, Viagra; the multinational technology company, Microsoft; the disgraced home run kings, Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa; and others. Alfred E. Neuman is construed as a crude face collage. In his hair is an image of Clinton smoking a long stogie, with Lewinsky eyeing it in awe (mouth agape) while an American flag burns above her. A Viagra bottle rests on Neuman's forehead, its contents spilling just to the right of Albert, who is situated as a reflection in Neuman's eye and below the major league sluggers. McGwire is swinging a bat that appears to be connecting with Clinton's throat, and Sosa is pinching his pointer finger against his thumb as if to signal a small amount of guilt, perhaps, or of performance-enhancing drugs, while the pill bottle is positioned upright just before McGwire's crotch. I could go on. The takeaway is that, from its debut, the “Mad 20” is presented as a catalogue of dunces at whom we should take offense. Each individual image is only quasi-photorealistic, to be sure, but the caricature is much more evident in the pictorial collage that makes up Neuman's face, neck, and shoulders.

Through the metaphor of the collage, readers/viewers are urged to recognize that the dumbest of the dumb have been deemed so in the eyes of our patron saint of stupidity. They are simply made in his image.

Then again, the "Mad 20" is situated as a public record of prerecorded stupidity. Its documentary function is evident in its ranking and differentiation of stupid people, events, and things that made headlines. This function is most prominently displayed in the January 2002 cover (#413) by artist Roberto Parada (see fig. 7-1). The cover features Neuman reading *The Potrzebie Dispatch*. Tellingly, the word *potrzebie* is Polish for *need*, and was instituted by former *Mad* editor Harvey Kurtzman as a meaningless and nonsensical non sequitur in early cartoons and articles. Here it evokes a twofold implication: one, audiences *need* to see the rituals of public shaming that usually accompany appeals to stupidity, and two, how we select who or what is stupid (and why) often does not follow from logical premises. These insinuations are even more obvious given that a purportedly random selection of the year's dumbest creates the front and back pages of the newspaper—a broadsheet's most coveted placements. Yet who knows what Neuman is reading or viewing? His brow is furrowed, and we can imagine his surprise. However, other than the hair on his head, the upraised eyebrows and wrinkled forehead are all that we see of Neuman, and the imagined expression does not comport with his usual stupid-looking grin. Moreover, who can tell from the cover alone which people, events, and things are the dumbest? A look at the table of contents reveals that Jerry Falwell, the controversial televangelist who infamously blamed the 9/11 terrorist attacks on pagans, feminists, gays, and other "undesirables," received top billing. But he is nowhere to be seen on the cover. And though the story "Rehab a Fab Career Move for Celebs" is second in the pecking order, it is awarded pride of place on Neuman's newspaper.

This cover exemplifies the tendency of the "Mad 20" to mock the documentary form of "best of" lists. Foremost it is a meta-caricature of how stupidity is validated and verified as such, especially when it comes to judgments of relative magnitude.³⁷ Rashness and idiocy mark the cover stories. Michael Jordan, for example, appears in black-and-white on the back page under the headline, "Hoops! He Did It Again!" This image parodies Britney Spears's 2000 hit pop song. The story alludes to Jordan's decision to come out of retirement, and the caricature depicts His Airness lacking finesse as he floats his oversized head into the rim



Fig. 7-1: Roberto Parada's cover for *Mad* #413 (1/02) exemplifies how "MAD 20" artists satirize the "best of" commonplace. MAD used with permission.

of a basket. But what James Parton calls "comic stupidity"³⁸ also frames *Mad's* cover insofar as it seems to poke fun at what is advertised as stupid. This implication appears in one sense at the level of reenactment, which I discuss below. In another sense, the caricatures portray a certain flexibility in *Mad's* definition of stupidity. While on the back page Jordan is hitting his head, on the front page we find Elton John, with a sly smile that is uncannily similar to Neuman's, clutching a phallic microphone. Notorious rapper Eminem is shown holding or grabbing for the same mic but staring at the singer-songwriter's hands as they wrap around his own. The caricature evokes a duet that emerged out of a controversy sparked by Eminem and his overblown homophobic rants. But what is stupid? Is it Elton John's reaction to Eminem (or vice versa)? Is it the seeming publicity stunt? Furthermore, the caricatures reveal themselves as distractions from what might be the "real" content on the inside. Neuman is by now an unsubtle comic foil. Still, here he seems to be recollecting a *Mad* cover from the 1950s that simply contained the word *Think*. In other words, this cover offers ambivalence about what Neuman really believes (or sees, or reads) and what we as readers/viewers should therefore know and feel about how we document the best of our society's worst. It is tempting to believe that Neuman is so dumb that he misses the big stories. However, what if one imagines that Neuman is so

smart that he purposefully avoids them, only to discover what is beyond the headlines and, perhaps, above the fray? The insinuation here, of course, is that some higher so-called truth masquerades as low art in the pages of *Mad* itself.

But who are we to judge? Who is *Mad* to judge what is more or less stupid? Who are we, as audiences, to judge the stupidity that is publicized to us? And what do we do with stupidity as a second-order judgment? Regardless of how we answer, a prime critique is that stupidity sells.

Reenactment

In gathering superlative stupidity, the "Mad 20" has since 2005 also recreated its exemplars' originary moments and their contextual surrounds. Before 2005, though, the covers tended toward more oblique patchwork caricatures of featured personages. For instance, in January 2003 (#425), the cover showcased "the biggest bobbleheads of the year" and included nine of the top twenty as bobblehead dolls laid out around the border. Cardinal Bernard Law is one of them, personified as a Roman Catholic dignitary with his arms folded and his face affecting a stern gaze as if to condemn the promulgation of sex abuse cover-ups in the Catholic Church. Martha Stewart is another, smiling widely and wearing a white apron as she serves up a platter of cash in a reference to her 2001 investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission for fraud. These and other bobbleheads allude to the stupidity that they claim to signify; and they, like the covers mentioned above, also flatten the hierarchy of stupidity. Here, though, they do more to exaggerate the images or even the characteristics (physical and/or ethical) of their targets.

By 2005, the "Mad 20" covers had begun to amplify this sort of exaggeration and recreate signature people, events, or things in caricature. If some fodder for cover art in 2002 was a reflection on the fact that stupidity sells, in 2005 it was a consideration of the fact that so does sex. This theme was played out on two cover editions (for which *Mad* mockingly advised, "be dumb—get 'em both!"). Each in its own way caricatures the low cultural purchase and the high sociopolitical stakes in public forms of perversity. Together they also comment on how stupidity is peddled: like a newspaper, like a media scandal, like a bobblehead. The juxtaposition of graded stupidity is the most jarring element insofar as the covers work in tandem to trouble how we buy into public schemes or cloak-and-dagger plots. In addition, each implies that we are distracted

from the other, if, that is, one does not imagine them as equally appealing and perverse.

On one cover is the #2 stupidest event, perpetrated by the #2 stupidest people (#449, 1/05; see fig. 7-2). The cover story is “Janet Jackson’s ‘Wardrobe Malfunction’—Tempest in a C-Cup” (27), and it references the Super Bowl XXXVIII halftime show when Justin Timberlake tore off a piece of Jackson’s outfit, purportedly by accident, to reveal her breast. In the “Mad 20” cover text, the zero in the numeral 20 doubles as Jackson’s right breast, complete with a tribal sun nipple shield and a piercing. The singer appears horrified. Nevertheless, the roles here are partially reversed, inasmuch as Timberlake was the one who seemed most shocked in the moment. What is more, Timberlake in *Mad*’s rendition is Neuman, holding Jackson’s misplaced attire in his left hand and smiling as stupidly and contentedly as ever. Articulated here, the so-called “nipplegate” is reenacted as a scandal of diminished proportions (even as it is ironically praised) and hardly harkens back to the hundreds of thousands of complaints filed with the FCC, the court cases over sponsor reimbursements, or the swirling debates about explicit content on prime-time television. This satiric diminution is only magnified when compared to the second cover for #449, which recreates the controversial Abu Ghraib photographs that documented the torture by U.S. soldiers of detainees at the war prison in Iraq.

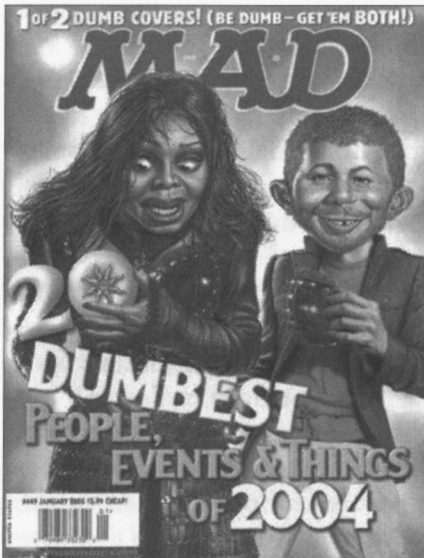


Fig. 7-2: This cover by Mark Fredrickson, one of two covers for *Mad* #449 (1/05), scorns the commodification of scandal. MAD used with permission.

Fig. 7-3: In the second cover for *Mad* #449 (1/05), Drew Friedman heaps comic contempt on U.S. war culture. MAD used with permission.



The reports, the release of the photos, and the public outcry that followed revelations of sexual abuse at Abu Ghraib constitute one of the darker moments of U.S. warfare. Various testimonies implicated a handful of soldiers in horrendous acts of carnal torture, including sodomy and sadism. One photograph displayed Private First Class Lynndie England standing alone and pointing at a prisoner engaging in forced masturbation while she smiles at the camera and gives a thumbs up. Another showed England with a comrade standing behind a pile of prisoners, all of whom are naked and heaped on top of each other in the form of a human pyramid. The story in *Mad* indicates "Jailhouse Shock" (26). On the cover, Neuman is clad in army fatigues, mimicking England's solo pose (see fig. 7-3). To his left and underneath the "20 dumbest" tagline is a mountain of celebrities, politicians, and luminaries. Shock jock Howard Stern is at the bottom along with Britney Spears. On top of him is then-President George W. Bush, who is joined by Donald J. Trump (whose open-mouthed countenance occupies the center of the human pile), John Kerry, and Paris Hilton. At the top of the big-name heap, partially bare breast and all, is Janet Jackson. And protruding from the pile is a collection of bare feet, shoes, and appendages. Remarkably, all visible individuals are fully clothed. Stern is in his standard leather jacket. The former president is sporting jeans and cowboy boots. The only one who is nude is Hilton, though she is covered up by Trump's

big head—a fitting premonition for the turpitude that comprises *Mad's* recurrent sendups of Trump just over a decade later.

Both covers are provocative. Each in its own way comments on the extent to which the consumption of controversy is consonant with the consumption of stupidity, and they imply that to consume unthinkingly is, well, stupid. Additionally, in reenacting two wildly divergent genres of controversy, the covers reveal how, as Nietzsche noted, power makes powerful people stupid.³⁹ This judgment goes from matters of pop cultural authority through national security to the exploits of, as *Mad* puts it, “a moron with a stupid haircut” but “a knack for making millions.” (It is all too appropriate that the moron in question eventually became president given that this text appeared on a parodic poster for *Forrest Trump* inside the issue.) Yet both covers have to do with the perversion of perceived decency. Both make appeals to the types of aberrance that matter, yet with some ambivalence regarding who is doing what to whom. On one level, Neuman seems to be shaming his victims. As Timberlake, he mocks Jackson's sartorial *and* ethical fitness as a cultural icon. At the same time, Neuman censures his (own) collusion and the absurdity of his feigned faux pas. The caricature of torture in the second cover reorients the spectatorial position from one of witnessing war crimes to one of observing dupes being delivered their just deserts. Once again, Neuman is the victimizer, restaging a controversial moment of public interest. But here, England-cum-Neuman is not only shameful, she is stupid. She is morally vapid, unable to comprehend a basic level of humanity, or maybe even more disturbingly, she is just bored and thus finding a way to entertain herself and her compatriots. Perhaps worse still, England and her co-conspirators are metonyms of the militarized U.S. nation-state. It is along these lines that the satire of *Mad's* reenactment stands out as the comic ridicule of public reception: as one controversy is piled upon another, misadventure not only loses its singular intrigue but also blurs into others such that the magnitude of them all is flattened. *Mad*, then, is mocking what Nietzsche might dub the “moral indignation” of those who render judgments without a proper appreciation of scale or degree.

Mad's imitative covers are therefore more than proclamations of stupidity through stupid portrayals; they are expressions of shared stupidity, revealed through their interpellation of audiences for controversy as themselves (in Robert Hariman's verdict on post-9/11 public stupidity) “dumb as a stump, way short of a load, stupid.”⁴⁰ In distilling dumb

people, events, and things, the covers also demand attention to the social, political, economic, and war cultures that might enable them. The "wardrobe malfunction" exposes the stupidity in a public that expresses outrage over an explicit sexual performance that is otherwise framed by a pop culture of eroticism. Treating prison rape as just another scandal discloses the indignity of war, but only before the backdrop of a more profound war culture, and on top of it a social order buttressed by sexism and sexual misconduct. We are mad, says *Mad's* covers, for imagining that we do not all perpetuate a cultural politics of offense that both instances lay bare. The travesty lies in the flagrancy of Neuman's ignorance in simply denuding these supposedly hidden meanings.

Allegory

I say *supposedly hidden* because *Mad* really does not suffer fools. That is, the stupidity covers are wasted on those in the know, showing and telling them what they probably already believe about the inanity of their public culture. Still, to call something *stupid* is to tap into shared assumptions about what is sensible, judicious, or good. Neuman's comic intelligence forswears such a principled approach to the world and instead opts for the sort of honesty and straightforwardness that often accompanies those whom we assume do not know any better. But Neuman *does* know better, in a sense, which is why one can discern the satire in his stupidity, his judgments thereof, and the stupidity in his sociopolitical jurisprudence.

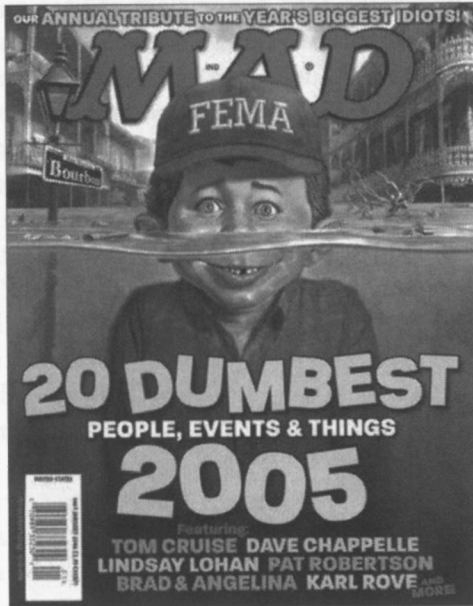
All this is to say that Neuman's stupidity maintains a decidedly thin veil. It is ironic. As it reenacts stupid people, events, and things, and reinscribes their documentary implications, so does it also constitute a duplicitous image of their stupidity. Its meaning hides in plain view. Consequently, *Mad's* stupidity is also ironically allegorical insofar as Neuman's stupidity, and within it what is upheld as stupid, is recognizable, even old news. Allegories function by saying (and displaying) one thing while saying (and displaying) another. Irony, too, exclaims with a whisper and a wink. The two are therefore more "complementary than exclusive," in James P. McDaniel's phrase,⁴¹ evincing the deep significations in textual surfaces. Moreover, as more recent *Mad* covers reveal, they exploit the tensions in and around images as ideas of public life. Such exploitation is most evident in covers beginning in 2006 drawn by Mark Fredrickson. It is at this point that Neuman more patently and

more regularly stands in as an abstracted political, institutional, organizational, or symbolic body affecting “the ironic temper: the self-as-dumb.”⁴² He portrays an “ironic allegory” that implores us to imagine how we “might recognize in the embarrassments of irony mirror images of characteristic embarrassments in democratic public life.”⁴³ The contradictions and conflicts so prevalent in the “Mad 20” are notable for the significance that gets laid on thick in their stupidity. However, insofar as irony—to be tempered—must accommodate a comic visage that mingles the nonsense of frivolity with the sting of satire, *Mad’s* ironic coverage of the stupidest of the stupid also embodies allegory tempered by farce.

The January 2006 cover (#461), for instance, features Neuman submerged in the floodwaters that followed Hurricane Katrina (see fig. 7-4). His countenance is familiarly unwitting, but now he stands in New Orleans with water up to his nose—just high enough to prevent him from being able to breathe. His eyes are wide, and his gap-toothed grin stands out just beneath the surface. A soggy cigar floats by his right ear, with other debris in the backdrop. Most important, he is dressed in a blue-collared shirt and a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) hat, hereby embodying a visual synecdoche for executive failure. The cover story in the issue punningly satirizes “The Bush League Response” and elaborates on the cover’s depiction of the much-reported and much-criticized maladministration of governmental disaster relief. Whereas in other covers Neuman might deface an individual as a visual caricature, here he travesties an entire agency, both ridiculing and acting as the ridiculous representative of political ineptitude. Stupidity in this instance comes off as heedlessness, imprudence, and even irresponsibility. Hurricane Katrina, after all, remains an exemplar of the utter failure of federal governance, and for *Mad* typifies the stupidity of ignoring how important “sound infrastructure and efficient public services are for the conduct of all phases of life,” as Mary Frances Berry put it in her cultural analysis of the storm’s impact.⁴⁴ The commander in charge of Joint Task Force Katrina, Lieutenant General Russel L. Honoré, held a press conference in New Orleans in late September 2005 and infamously admonished reporters not to “get stuck on stupid” when they asked about the poor coordination of relief efforts from Hurricane Katrina as another powerful Atlantic coast storm, Hurricane Rita, was approaching.⁴⁵ Honoré’s point about stupidity became moot when Rita bypassed the city. For *Mad*, however, the stupid is the enduring sticking

point. It is the rhetorical depth of surface appeals to the meaning of current events that are recast as allegories of the human condition in U.S. public culture.

Fig. 7-4: Fredrickson's cover for *Mad* #461 (1/06) uses avowedly inaccurate historiography as a comic mechanism for lampooning the politico-official organization of public stupidity. MAD used with permission.



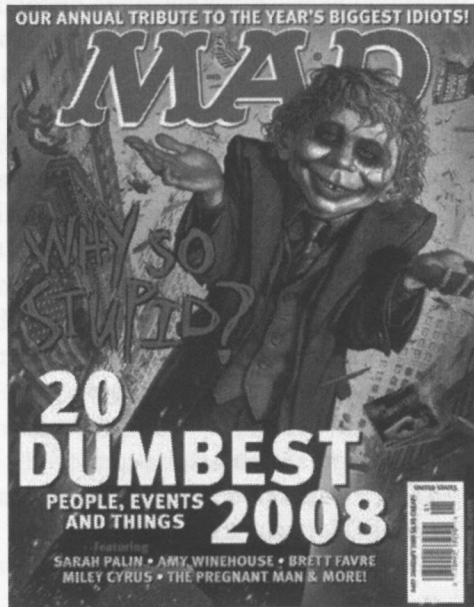
This position is plainly portrayed in *Mad*'s historically inaccurate reiteration of Hurricane Katrina and its fallout, elements that enable the cover to be read as an ironic allegory. The hidden message (with a nod and a wink to the political campaigns of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton) seems clear: it's the government, stupid. But more than this implication is the redeployment of New Orleans iconography to signify of a deeper, more profound loss ensuing from the breached levees, which should have protected the city from any storm surge. The structural oversight is the stuff of stupidity. *Mad* gets at this point with the situation by portraying Neuman underwater on Bourbon Street in between the familiar townhouse facades and fascia boarding. Bourbon Street is the ground zero of New Orleans's economy and arguably the best and worst parts of its reputation for food, music, and nightlife. But it was swamped only by virtue of the bigger disruption of the city. The Vieux Carré, or the famous French Quarter, where Bourbon Street sits, is on high ground. It therefore did not flood. What also stands out in this cover in particular, then, is what is *not* seen—the ill preparations despite warnings,

the bloated bodies of victims that floated in the floodwaters along with the debris, the looting and violence that accompanied the desperation of hundreds of thousands of displaced people, the conversion of the Superdome into a homeless shelter and quasi-refugee camp, the attempts by FEMA to limit reporters' access to the disaster/war zones, and the widely hailed class and racial components of the catastrophe.⁴⁶ In its simplicity, *Mad's* cover caricatures complex sociopolitical contexts and reframes them in a storm story about coordinated stupidity relative to what Scott Frickel and M. Bess Vincent called the "organized ignorance" of FEMA's Katrina response.⁴⁷

A similar sentiment is expressed in the February 2011 cover (#507), which shows Neuman in a BP inspector's jumpsuit and hardhat. In the background is the *Deepwater Horizon* drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico. The oil rig is in the process of exploding, while black smoke billows above it and an enflamed reflection spills over the water's surface. And there stands Neuman holding a clipboard in his right hand while joining the thumb and the forefinger of his left to indicate that everything is A-OK. The cover story is "Stupid Petrol Tricks," and the ironic cover portrait constructs a symbolic fiction about our delusions regarding energy production, distribution, and security. Once again, organizational folly is the fodder for mocking praise. But Neuman is not only used to send up administrative failure. In January 2009, he was the poster child of anarchic lunacy when he appeared as The Joker from director Christopher Nolan's 2008 film, *The Dark Knight* (Fredrickson #497; see fig. 7-5). In this cover, Neuman is not the subject of ridicule; he is, rather, the archetypal thug exposing the inadequacies of a cultural system by terrorizing its citizens and institutions. The Joker is a fascinating pop cultural icon in part because he has transformed over time from a wild and/or trump card (in the card game Euchre) to a witty jester, a pitiless killer, a frenetic prankster, a sociopathic madman, a lurid mobster, and a cartoonish criminal. In the body of actor Heath Ledger, though, The Joker transcends "comic criminality," as Ashley Cocksworth put it, into a self-described "agent of chaos" bent on inciting disorder, promoting misanthropy, and serving up the state as a lunatic soldier of bedlam.⁴⁸ The Joker's tagline is purposefully sardonic: "Why so serious?" *Mad's* reappropriation is deft, even dark. But it also makes sense. Ledger's portrayal was critically acclaimed not only *despite* but also *for* its disturbing allure. This effect was made more so by the swath of controversy around

his unstable mental state after filming, which many speculated to be the catalyst for his untimely death by drug overdose shortly before the film's release. With Neuman as The Joker, the anarchic and destructive symbolism converts a woeful story of both personal turmoil and systemic cruelty into an allegorical image of the annihilation of stupidity. The Joker is calculated and cunning. Neuman is barely astute, except that here again we see him as a mocking figure of (un)knowing socio-political disruption, affecting an awkward demeanor in the aftermath of ostensive clumsiness and yet provoking a somewhat indeterminate judgment of the "biggest idiots" with his expression, "Why so stupid?"

Fig. 7-5: On Fredrickson's cover for *Mad* #497 (1/09), a pop cultural icon articulates the capacity for planned stupidity to disrupt common sense. MAD used with permission.



He has obviously just carried out an act of terrorism. But encircling the scene are the flaming, indeed incendiary, remnants of the year in stupidity: NFL quarterback Brett Favre's jersey (recalling the publicity of his retirement, then his return to football, then his retirement, then . . .), singer Amy Winehouse's album (recollecting her substance abuse, her downward spiral, and the potential demise of her career), a snippet from a newspaper headline about Hillary Clinton (alluding to her failed 2008 presidential bid), and more. Ultimately, the cover exemplifies the ambivalence toward Neuman's idiocy, the foolhardiness of public figures, and the implied audience of human folly. This ambivalence is at

once ironic and allegorical insofar as it materializes abstract ideas and actual moments, while saying and/or showing what it “does not” mean by meaning what it “does not” say and/or show. Ledger’s Joker is an apt archetype here insofar as the express point of his anarchism is, in his words, to send a message.

For my part, this cover and so many others are most telling not simply for what they dispose us to but also for what they expose about public dispositions toward so-called stupidity. To get the jokes of the covers is to grasp popular and prominent moments of relative controversy in U.S. public culture—and to enjoy how Neuman’s comic distortions document those moments—through comic distortions. It is also to recognize the dissimulations and distortions that Neuman is often used for in order to dissemble—and to understand—how those moments are documented. However, a notion of ironic allegory also allows us to approach the “Mad 20” in terms of how they reconstruct their audiences. Ironic allegory provides a view of stupidity that relies on the power of *Mad*’s covers to accomplish what Joshua Gunn might call the rhetorical drama of comic revelation: “to push the reconstructing audience to other places, other sites of meaning, other texts, particularly past experiences of not getting it or being played the fool, all of which are other realities or texts not in the here and now” but also not unrecognizable in recent history.⁴⁹ To see through the surface appeals of the covers is therefore to see differently. It is to look upon subtexts and notice complicities where one might otherwise witness the comic fallibility of others. It is to look upon layers of meaning in a harrowing human comedy across the ordinary course of U.S. current events.

The matter of appreciating such nuance is a bit tougher, though, when the subject of *Mad*’s ridicule maintains a surface stupidity so shallow that any point of entry is easy to cross. A sham success story and shameless self-promoter in real estate and reality television, Donald J. Trump nevertheless hawked his way to the top of U.S. politics when he won the presidency in 2016. What makes him such a compelling figure for criticism in *Mad* is that he has long been regarded as an idiot—perhaps even too stupid to be president (given his lack of experience with congressional lawmaking, disregard for the Constitution, scattershot foreign policy views, superficial or utterly wrongheaded grasp of history, a fetish for issuing public remarks on the social media platform Twitter, and more). From his inauguration forward, one need not look very hard

to find headlines from any number of news outlets publicizing Trump's idiocy. In July 2017, for example, David Rothkopf proclaimed Trump the ringleader of "America's Golden Age of Stupidity."⁵⁰ This proclamation was odd not because it took a bad editorial tack or let slip some improper tenor, but rather because it reeked so much of an article from satirical news outlet *The Onion*, which just two months prior published a "News in Brief" exposé wherein Trump admitted what everyone in Trumpworld has always known: the man is "a big idiot" (a judgment also reported in the *New York Times*).⁵¹ The rub here is not that Trump is ripe for ridicule; it is that he is low-hanging fruit. *Mad's* drift into the satyric makes sense of a president who betrays a stupidity worse than ignorance and a madness too perilous to be written off as folly.

Satire as Satyre

An op-ed in *The New York Times* from March 20, 2017, remarks how Trump uses scare quotes in his tweets "to destabilize meaning."⁵² On the one hand, the piece is a jab at the executive cynicism behind Trump's accusation that President Barack Obama had him "wiretapped," or more exactly that Trump had his administration defend the claim amid widespread pushback by asserting that "wiretapping" could mean any number of surveillance practices. On the other hand, it is an overtly chilling forecast for a moment when Trump might tweet a *post hoc* disclaimer for nuclear war (no doubt with North Korea): "I said 'nuke' them," the tweet might go, "not nuke them." The op-ed is suitably titled "Trump Ruins Irony, Too." Then again, it might just as well be titled "Trump Is an Allegory of Going Nuclear," with his presidency part and parcel of a story layered with unhinged behavior and wild flights of political fancy.

Mad's shift to the satyric is a shift to a comic mode of caricature that represents the humor of human error in terms of democratic hellscape. Cognomens like *Commander-in-Tweet* and *Liar-in-Chief* frame Trump as a president who puts the "twit" in Twitter. The irony is that Trump seems to revel in his position as apotheosis of an idiocracy,⁵³ or catalyst to a Trumpocalypse, embodying what one observer of the 2016 campaign called "Triumph the Insult Comic Dog made flesh, a comically bouffanted racist oligarch who tweets like a fifth grader and brags like a cafeteria rapper."⁵⁴ The comic drama of satyr plays looms large here insofar as *Mad's* takes on Trump reroute the pity and fear that might come with his presidency toward satire that is over-the-top enough to

make reality seem fantastical. This move is readily apparent in the 128-page special edition magazine, *MAD About Trump: A Brilliant Look at Our Brainless President*, which features a collection of “all his stupidity from *The Apprentice* to the 2016 election” and beyond, and advertises a “comedy assault” on “the most idiotic idiot to ever reach the White House (George W. Bush and visitors included).”⁵⁵ Still, the “Mad 20” portrayals of Trump are exemplary because they satyryze his specifically presidential shenanigans through the lens of something like a mock allegory. Candidate Trump first disgraced the cover of a “Mad 20” in February 2016 (#537) when his election still seemed a nightmare, and his candidacy could be chalked up to the errant actions of a lurid minority content to “Make America Dumb Again,” playing into deep-seated resentments, white nationalist sympathies, and televisual theatrics. Here Trump is rendered as he so often is in caricature: with a strange facial expression, a puckered mouth, and wild blonde hair that looks more like a stray animal atop his head than a coiffure. Neuman looks just like him, standing next to Trump and giving two thumbs up as the president-to-be stares down at him over his right shoulder. This is a provocative view, foreshadowing his looming presence behind Hillary Clinton in the October 3, 2016, debate. But not until the next year does a “Mad 20” cover truly take up the satyric.

If Trump himself was the #1 dumbest of 2015, the dumbest thing in 2016 was that “Trump Got Elected!” On the February 2017 cover (#543) is an image of Neuman, clad in white T-shirt and blue jeans, vomiting into an iconic “Make America Great Again” red ball cap. In wearing the attire of what could be seen as a reincarnation of the Know-Nothing ethos, Neuman puts forth a gut-check on political choices by both looking with express ignorance upon what has happened and also looking forward to what is to come. Trump’s presidency is like a hangover. His candidacy was the I’m-With-Stupid logic of *getting stupid* on the spirits of the make-believe; his election was the snap back to reality that comes with the nausea and headaches that impair brain function and stimulate ill feelings. Such sentiments preview some tragic findings of scholars like David R. Williams of Harvard College’s T. H. Chan School of Public Health, who determined in June 2017 that millions of people were suffering from collective stress brought on by Trump’s presidency.⁵⁶ It is no stretch, then, to say that Neuman satyryzes *citizens* as the pits of stupidity, complete with his flagrant, fleshly paroxysms. Is Neuman a Trump

supporter? Is he one of the so-called Never-Trumpers? Regardless, he is either (both) a victim or (and) an agent of The (stupid, vengeful) Donald. Hence the reason why horror is aligned with humor in *Mad's* depiction of the foul idiocy of Trumpism. As Dana Ferrin Sutton argues in her study of this ancient Greek theatrical tradition, satyric humor "comes from the collision of the serious and the comic and requires the presence of both."⁵⁷ A seriously boorish buffoon for a head of state, in an ancient argot, is *serio-stupidum*. Hence, too, why Neuman's reaction is as laughable as it is revolting.

Instead of sticking with the themes of drunkards and dullards, though, the 2017 "Mad 20" cover from February 2018 (#549) goes hard in another direction, depicting Neuman as the caddie to a rich cretin. Trump has never denied that golf presents an opportunity for personal getaways to his own properties. As president, he has regularly proclaimed the golf course (and the clubhouse) a workplace. *Mad* portrays it as the allegorical site for imagining the consequences of Trump's documented retreats from presidential duties, namely when it comes to how he treats the presidency as though it is a game, if not a reality show. Nowhere is this game-like approach to the presidency clearer than in Trump's dealings with North Korea via Twitter. On the cover, Trump is standing on a fairway, glibly posed in the follow-through of his swing (a pose, it is worth mentioning, that mimics a widely used photograph taken by Ian MacNicol). Neuman is just behind him, his eyes wide, his expression anxious, and his hands positioned as if to urge his audience to stay calm in the same manner he might try to coax Trump's ball to sit—that is, to come down softly. Trump's shot is out of view. But in the backdrop is an enormous orange mushroom cloud. Satyric humor can be dark. But the prototypical satyr play has a happy ending. It revels especially in the dreary routines of ordinary ordeals. Here, the ludicrous brinkmanship in Trump's unseen bellicosity is illuminated by its potential fallout, which follows from what many have called the "axis of idiocy" that coordinates the president's diplomacy.

As gripping as the cover, then, is the image within the issue for number eight on the dumb list, entitled "Clash of Clowns." It is a graphic riff on *Clash of Clans*, a mobile game that puts players into so many tribal wars. For *Mad*, the crucial clash is between President Trump and North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un, which has metastasized as an ongoing exchange of insults and warlike instigations between the leaders (with

Trump using everything from the United Nations General Assembly to Twitter as his bully pulpit). At one point in August 2017, President Trump took leave of politics for a golf outing after casually telling reporters that he would bring “fire and fury” upon North Korea if its leader persisted with threats to the U.S. Arguably, like diplomacy in international relations, golf is a gentleman’s game. It requires honesty and decorum, but also a caddie willing to give advice and moral support. Trump is less a statesmanlike golfer than the man paid to taunt Adam Sandler’s character in *Happy Gilmore* (1996), calling other players jackasses right before they shoot. Unfortunately, Neuman is a caddie in the dark, unable to avert or advise a crack shot who channels the voice of the American people as the voice of a dope. Alas, *Mad*’s move toward the satyric recalls mergers of tragedies and comedies, kingpins and pinheads, words and deeds. A mockery of etiquette therefore meets a visual caricature of stupidity that drives the end of days.

In the end, Trump goads a comic orientation pushed to the end of its line. Rumor has it that onetime National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster derided Trump as an “idiot” and a “dope” in the summer of 2017 when he dined with Safra Catz, the CEO of Oracle and once a member of President Trump’s transition team.⁵⁸ That same month, during a national security meeting, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reportedly referred to Trump as a “moron”—well, a “*fucking* moron.”⁵⁹ Rupert Murdoch, too, is said to have mocked the president’s intelligence, as did FBI agents involved in the infamous Russia election meddling probe, and numerous other commentators and critics.⁶⁰ Indeed, less than a year into his presidency, conventional wisdom in some circles held that Trump had unequivocally made an idiot of everyone who put him into office. To borrow the words of a wise man, it is apparently true that the difference between stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits. There is perhaps something of a bad omen, then, in William Rivers Pitt’s reference to Trump as a “Mad Genius” just five years before he won the White House. There is likewise good reason to align his madness with ineptitude and rage, and then again to wonder if it is canniness or clownery. In either case, it is clear—at least from the perspective of the caricatures on *Mad* covers—that for all of Trump’s inflamed folly (and foolish ire), not he but the American populace has been played the fool. This is the satyre in satire: the penchant of *Mad* to make fun of the comic excesses in the Dionysian

elements of the American experience. In this context, *Mad's* portrayals of stupidity make the U.S. body politic even more foolish than its electoral politics make it sometimes seem.

Conclusion: Wasted Stupidity?

An old idiom has it that irony is wasted on the stupid. That is, to understand something as ironic, one must harbor a minimum standard of intelligence. The "Mad 20" covers challenge this adage insofar as they operate less on new information than recollections of old news. The hook, however, is that images and ideas from public memory are used as the media of de- and re-formed perspectives. Nonetheless, "Best of" lists run the risk of merely reaffirming what one already knows. Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction was stupid. So what? If *Mad* stops and starts with the recurrent scapegoats for idiocy, there is reason to believe that it wastes its judgments of the stupid—and, indeed, its own stupidity—as embodied in *The Usual Gang of Idiots* whose vision it projects. Its caricatures, then, are stupid solely for the sake of it, and do little more than establish some view of virtue in satirizing human vice. "Every virtue tends towards stupidity," says Nietzsche, "and every kind of stupidity toward virtue."⁶¹ For those drawn in by the "Mad 20," such a satiric tautology is banal at best—unless one reimagines what it might mean to comprehend stupidity not only as a foregone conclusion but also as a resource for self-criticism. To waste stupidity, in this sense, is to squander an opportunity to hold audiences for the dumbest of the dumb to a carnival mirror.

I see stupidity on the "Mad 20" covers as a framing device for comic judgments about the best of the worst in society. More specifically, recognizing caricature as a rhetorical form of distortion as well as a broader way of seeing, we can fairly easily see cover boy Alfred E. Neuman as simply a stooge in *Mad's* comedy of human errors or, better, as a simpleton in attitude and appearance who is forced to merely reflect stupidity as it is. Sometimes he *is* a stand-in for a soldier, a bureaucratic official, a celebrity, or a "media-baiting" buffoon-turned-American-president whose folly would be "cartoonish-if-it-wasn't-so-scary evil," as Steve Foxe put it.⁶² At other times, Neuman is the observer, maybe even the wandering eye of the public writ large. Then again, he is just himself, the quintessential ignoramus who cannot even recognize his own imbecility. Consequently, the visual compendium embedded in the

“Mad 20” can serve as an expression of reader/viewer superiority over the stupid people, events, and things depicted, not to mention how they are produced, packaged, and sold. The “Mad 20” also stretches the limits of what constitutes stupidity in that who or what is stupid is variously deadly (i.e., war), perverse or sadistic (i.e., church sex, torture photos), tragic (i.e., natural disasters), and so on. Stupidity is hereby endemic to public life, not to mention a function of everyday human conduct, especially when an idiocracy comes across as the ludicrous—and yet all too logical—outcome of democracy gone bad.

Yet if Neuman is also a prototypical everyman, an underlying implication is that if he is an idiot, then so are we. The “Mad 20” covers encourage this type of critical awareness. In fact, insofar as they are ironic allegories, they should cue readers/viewers to the idea that even as they are documenting the stupidity of others by reenacting it, they are also representing something else. That something else, I want to suggest, is the extent to which we, the ordinary citizens and everyday judges of sociopolitical culture, are at times the “unworthy, irrelevant dunces” in Jason A. Scorza’s setup for democratic citizenship.⁶³ Recall that *Mad* emerged at a moment in history when conformity was conceived by many official outlets as a good in itself. Conventional wisdom was to civic virtue what opposition was to vice. Even today, though, *Mad* reminds us that judgments of the stupid are no better (but perhaps worse) than what is deemed to be so if they are wrought through their own form of unthinking orthodoxy. To simply call President Trump an idiot, for example, is to risk casting off responsibility for the very inanities that imperil those who are downstream of his dumbness. The stupidity of *Mad* is therefore wasted if it leads to a wholesale separation of responsible audiences from those reviled objects of ridicule.

The “Mad 20” covers, I think, accomplish the exact obverse: instead of eliminating a broader public from the picture, the covers more often than not implicate their presumed judges in the very persons, events, and things being judged. In flattening out the swath of a year’s stupidity, or in homing in on a singular sign as somehow the standard, the covers disrupt the stable hierarchy of the listed content. They demonstrate, in other words, how one piece of stupidity can become just another on the pile. In this way, the covers admonish audiences of what Burke calls the “dangers of pride”: ignorance of the notion that satire enables projections such that the satiric judge “*gratifies and punishes the vice within himself.*”⁶⁴ There is

ambiguity, and comic possibility, in Neuman. *Mad's* poster child of stupidity is stupid. We can look upon him as everything we long not to be. Still, we follow his judgments of who and what is stupid, enjoying *with him* the position as spectators of the idiocy in others. We are therefore in cahoots with Neuman when we align ourselves with the "Mad 20," suggesting that in Neuman's idiotic smile is actually a sly insinuation: "See, stupid? You're stupid, too." The "Mad 20" feature, after all, documents, reenacts, allegorizes, and satyrizes just how much we, through our public culture, are enamored of stupidity, compelled to both celebrate and castigate it, and constantly goaded to grant it cultural purchase.

Since 1928, *Time* magazine has named a "person of the year." Over the years, the predominant honorees have been people—presidents, popes, foreign dignitaries, freedom fighters, etc.—with notable exceptions for a machine (the computer, in 1983) a planet (the "Endangered Earth" in 1989), or particular cohorts ("The American Soldier" in 2004, "The Protester" in 2011). In 2006, it was "You." Given what I've just suggested about the "Mad 20," one might imagine a cover of *Mad* with the same designation, along with a comic account outlining a stupid person theory to counter that of the "Great Man." One might also imagine the cover with the word *STUPID* in big, block letters along with the less prominent admonition "don't be." In the end, this caution seems to be at least in part what that "Mad 20" is up to: reiterating and redisplaying the stupid images and ideas of the year in order to alter our perception and our judgmental projections in the course of pointing out idiocy. "Mad 20" covers are thus to some extent satires of those who presume to know enough, if not too much. Knowing as much amounts to an uncritical adherence to the vicious in the true, and that's just wasted intelligence.

Notes

1. Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*, 118.
2. Stergios Botzakis, "Mad," in *Icons of the American Comic Book: From Captain America to Wonder Woman*, ed. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, 1:468.
3. See Carl Djerassi, "The Quest for Alfred E. Neuman," 167–74; Arden G. Christen and Joan A. Christen, "'It didn't hurt a bit' Kid: Dental Precursor to *Mad Magazine's* Alfred E. Neuman," 53–55; Frank Spotnitz, "Tracing the Worrisome Origin of Alfred E. Neuman;" Peter Jensen Brown, "The Real Alfred E. Revealed."
4. Avital Ronell, *Stupidity*, 3.
5. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard, 26.

6. James Hannay, "Political Satire and Squibs.—Burns," 218; see also Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 39–44.

7. On *derpitude* as an insult of the internet age, see Stefan Becket, "The Origins of Derp."

8. I do not mean to suggest that the contents within the magazine are unimportant. Quite the contrary. To a large extent, the captions read like headlines from *The Onion*, and the stories elaborate verbally on what is portrayed on the covers. My emphasis on the "Mad 20" is driven by my interest in how *Mad* covers have long served an important rhetorical function of depicting snap judgments that are nevertheless complex in terms of their reliance on and disruption of common habits of reception. Furthermore, this essay engages the covers as evidence of comic judgment in caricature, and thus as distorted portrayals of ways of seeing stupidity.

9. Christen and Christen, "Dental Precursor," 54.

10. Christen and Christen, "Dental Precursor," 53.

11. Christen and Christen, "Dental Precursor," 53.

12. Roxana Marcoci, "Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making," 9–39.

13. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, 36.

14. Northrop Frye, "The Nature of Satire," 44.

15. José Lanteris, "Irish Satire," 477.

16. Ellen Oliensis, *Horace and the Rhetoric of Authority*, 3.

17. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, 124–44.

18. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, 1382a, 22–24.

19. Nancy Sherman, "Hamartia and Virtue," 177–96, 186.

20. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.15–20.

21. Christie Davies, *Jokes and Targets*, 20–21.

22. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 49.

23. Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, 7.

24. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.

25. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 403.

26. So much satire relies on shared perceptions of what is defective, imperfect, and so on. Indeed, collective judgments about what is excellent or even sublime enable something like a cartoon copy to render some person or thing ridiculous. Numerous scholars have fleshed out this orientation, especially as it relates to visual humor. See, for instance, Martha Banta, *Barbaric Intercourse: Caricature and the Culture of Conduct, 1841–1936*, 57; Thomas Conley, *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult*, 99; Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 131; Gillian Rhodes, *Superportraits: Caricatures and Recognition*, 12; George A. Test, *Satire: Spirit and Art*, 204; Robert I. Williams, *Comic Practice/Comic Response*, 59.

27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 198.

28. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Thomas Common, 191.

29. Maria Reidelbach, *Completely Mad: A History of the Comic Book and Magazine*, 151.

30. Amelia Faye Rauser, *Caricature Unmasked: Irony, Authenticity, and Individualism in Eighteenth-Century English Prints*, 96.

31. Christopher J. Gilbert, "Toward the Satyric," 280-305.

32. Ronell, *Stupidity*, 10.

33. Edward Rothstein, "Connections; Is It Still a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World?"

34. Ronell, *Stupidity*, 27.

35. E. H. Gombrich, "The Mask and the Face: The Perception of Physiognomic Likeness in Life and in Art," in *Art, Perception, and Reality*, ed. Ernst H. Gombrich, Julian Hochberg, and Max Black, 1.

36. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 41.

37. I am deriving a notion of *metacaricature* from W. J. T. Mitchell and his sense of "metapictures": images that exude a sort of "self-knowledge" or "pictorial self-reference." In short, metapictures offer images of images and thus provide a different depth of surface when it comes to understanding what we see. Metapictures disrupt representational stability. Tellingly, this process facilitates "a transaction between pictures and observers activated by . . . the shifting of figure and ground, the switching of aspects, the display of pictorial paradox and forms of nonsense"; see Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 57. Metacaricatures are therefore caricatures unto themselves, but they are also caricatures of broader appeals to distortive portrayals and representations of, in this instance, the stupid.

38. James Parton, *Caricature and Other Comic Art in All Times and Many Lands*, 41.

39. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Richard Polt, 43.

40. Robert Hariman, "Public Culture and Public Stupidity Post-9/11," 96.

41. James P. McDaniel, "Liberal Irony: A Program for Rhetoric," 298.

42. McDaniel, "Liberal Irony," 314.

43. McDaniel, "Liberal Irony," 301. Note, too, that George A. Test posits an "irony of allegorical worlds" in order to emphasize the capacity for judgment in satire. Test states: "Allegory presents its messages in terms of something else, a literal set of events, persons, conditions, or images having a corresponding level of existence involving meaning, conceptions, values, or qualities. So in satire there tends to emerge some standard on which the criticism or attack is based"; see Test, *Satire*, 187. Test calls this the "judgment of irony." I would characterize it as the caricature in the "Mad 20."

44. Mary Frances Berry, foreword to *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*, vii-viii.

45. Patrik Jonsson, "General Honoré, Katrina and the Army behind Him, Retains Civic Aims."

46. Henry A. Giroux, "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability," 171-96.

47. Scott Frickel and M. Bess Vincent, "Hurricane Katrina, Contamination, and the Unintended Organization of Ignorance," 181.

48. Ashley Cocksworth, "The Dark Knight and the Evilness of Evil," 541.

49. Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century*, 155.

50. David Rothkopf, "America's Golden Age of Stupidity,"
51. "Trump: 'I Am a Very Stupid Human Being'; Michelle Goldberg, "Everyone in Trumpworld Knows He's an Idiot."
52. Moises Velasquez-Manoff, "Trump Ruins Irony, Too."
53. This reference nods to the 2006 satirical film *Idiocracy*, wherein a black, muscle-bound, machine gun-wielding porn star named Dwayne Elizondo Mountain Dew Herbert Camacho lords over the U.S. as president of an American populace that has devolved into a hyper-capitalist, philistine government of fools, by fools, and for fools. The Office of the President, in particular, is showcased as a vanity enterprise gone mad. Most compelling in this reference is the fact that screenwriter Etan Cohen dubbed it a film about televisual and pop cultural folly taken to the end of the line, and that after Trump's election it had "become a documentary."
54. Jason Bailey, "Who Said It: Presidential Hopeful Donald Trump or 'Idiocracy' President Camacho?"
55. This 2018 issue is an extended print version of an online edition that appeared as a free e-book a year earlier, *MAD Dumps on Trump*.
56. David R. Williams, "Health Effects of Dramatic Social Events: Ramifications of the Recent Presidential Election."
57. Dana Ferrin Sutton, *The Greek Satyr Play*, 162.
58. Tina Nguyen, "An 'Idiot' and a 'Dope': McMaster Reportedly Unloads on Trump During a Private Dinner."
59. Dexter Filkins, "Rex Tillerson at the Breaking Point."
60. Goldberg, "Everyone in Trumpworld Knows He's an Idiot."
61. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 227.
62. Steve Foxe, "*MAD* Magazine Makes America Dumb Again with *MAD Dumps on Trump*."
63. Jason A. Scorza, *Strong Liberalism: Habits of Mind for Democratic Citizenship*, 159.
64. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 41, 49.