

# DITKOMANIA

# 50

## DITKOMANIA - YEAR ONE

*The first issue of DITKOMANIA was released January 1983 during my comic-shop-owner days. The cover was drawn by a Tim-Boo-Baa-obsessed customer-turned-pal named Ken Hahn. The big news of the issue was that Eclipse was planning on releasing what was hoped to be the definitive ART OF STEVE DITKO. Also included was an alphabetical list of Ditko's work (minus reprints and fanzine work). The best part of the eight-page issue was Christoph Melchert's very first contribution, a review of MARVEL TALES #146.*

## REPRINT REVIEW

by Chris Melchert

I was not going to buy any of the new Ditko reprints in MARVEL TALES because I already have them in the original or in the early reprints. However, there is only one store in Princeton that sells any comics at all, and they offer a selection of about four titles. I was ready to read almost anything, one day a couple of weeks ago, and so I was forced into picking up MARVEL TALES #146 reprinting the first Electro story from AMAZING SPIDER-MAN #9. As it turned out, I had so much fun re-reading it that I mailed in a check for a subscription the same day.

Steve Ditko's artwork is distinguished by much more variety from panel to panel than we may remember him for. Seldom does he give us one medium shot after another like so many of his contemporaries. Furthermore he carefully deepens almost every panel by putting persons and objects at different distances within the frame. This kind of visual variety seems particularly effective in the context of nine panels to a page: when three shots in a row are from different angles and distances, we notice. (We may notice, too, when the pattern is broken and we get three shots from the same angle and distance; e.g., J. Jonah Jameson, page 15/ panels 3-5.) The Hulk paperback of several years ago particularly alerted me to the variety of Ditko's artwork because it puts his next to other work by Jack Kirby. Kirby has his strong points, but variation in camera angle and distance is not among them.



Ditko uses variation of camera angle and distance just to make the page more interesting to look at, but it has important dramatic uses as well. When Electro frees the prisoners, the first group ignores his orders and runs outside. Appropriately, the fleeing convicts occupy the foreground while Electro is a small figure bobbing helplessly in back. The panel in which Electro takes command of those who remain looks different: now he dominates the foreground, while the convicts are all on one plane (reinforcing their submission to discipline) behind him. The contrast between these two panels makes Electro's power much more impressive.

One of the finest dramatic sequences in the story is the one in which Peter visits Aunt May in the hospital. When Peter enters the room, he is at the bottom of the frame, his aunt and Betty together at the top. Immediately, he breaks them up. In the middle panel our eye is naturally drawn by the strong receding diagonal from Aunt May's face to Peter's to Betty's. Aunt May looks in that direction, and Betty might like to return the look. However, Peter emphatically blocks her view, shutting her out. He puts his back to her, and visually his body covers her up. "I came to see if there was anything I could do," Betty has just said. "I hope you don't mind." "Mind?" replies Peter. "Gosh no, Betty! I appreciate it!" In ironic contrast, the picture shows him ignoring her. At the same time, he occupies center frame and towers over Aunt May, whom we only see in side view. He does not sit with her as an equal, the way Betty does in the previous panel. "It's as though he carries a deep secret within him," thinks Betty in the concluding close-up - "one which no one can ever share!" Ditko has already shown us how Peter does not share.

Effective as it is, the same sequence may also show us a certain weakness of Ditko's style. For example, it is difficult to see where Peter might be standing in the middle panel. Did a hole open up in the floor? The drawing becomes almost symbolic. Ditko gets his effect, showing us how these characters relate to each other, but it might be even stronger if grounded in mundane reality.





There is an unexpected example of continuity from panel to panel in the prison fight, page 18, panels 1-3. Spider-man kicks the prisoner's gun into the air, and our eye follows the motion into the next panel. There, the stairway leads us with the prisoners around and down straight into the next panel, below where the police and prison bars stop their escape. One of the unique characteristics of the comic-book medium is that successive images appear next to each other. This kind of motion across the page shows us that Ditko is not a mere storyboarder, whose panels could be frames from a movie, but a true comics artist, judiciously exploiting the features that make comic art unique.

Another feature that distinguishes comic art is the simultaneity of words and pictures. The style of writing that nowadays prevails at Marvel is a kind of ironic detachment, characterized by jokes and grandiloquence. Stan Lee has widely advertised his own ironic detachment from the characters. However, he still seems quite serious in late 1963. Captions are usually straightforward and functional; e.g., "Once inside, Electro moves swiftly..." "And, minutes later, as Peter is on his way to the hospital, he hears..." (page 13/ panels 1 & 2). when Lee goes on at greater length, it is to become sentimental; e.g., "And so the long minutes tick by, as two figures sit in the silent waiting room -- each deep in thought -- sharing a bond which needs no words to explain" (page 13/ panel 7). Maybe Lee simply did not know what the bond was, but he really doesn't need to explain it. Peter is not sure what it is, as we see from Ditko's ambiguous artwork, continually showing them come together but then pull apart. For example, Peter and Betty are unified page 14/ panel 3, equals page 14/ panel 6, but out of balance, averting their looks page 14 panels 7 & 8. Lee's copy neither depreciates the visuals by making fun of them nor verbosely overwhelms them, but rather complement them perfectly..



It is important for us to acknowledge the good in Lee's writing. The sudden decline of AMAZING SPIDER-MAN after Ditko's departure is telling evidence of how much is due to Ditko. On the other hand, much of what makes AMAZING SPIDER-MAN so gripping in the Ditko period must have come from Lee, for it is missing from Ditko's super-hero work for Charlton. I am thinking in particular of Peter Parker's highly personal involvement in everything that happens. He does not tackle the villain because it's his civic responsibility, as the Blue Beetle might. He must fight Electro to vindicate himself of Jameson's charge that he is himself Electro, and to make money for Aunt May's operation. In consequence, we too feel involved. the comic form is a visual-verbal blend. Lee carries his end well, reinforcing Ditko.



*On March 1983 the second issue of DITKOMANIA was released. It boasted a Mr. A. cover by Roger Stewart, who also supplied excellent interior illustrations of Spider-Man and J. Jonah Jameson. Ken Hahn illustrated a two-page review of his favorite Ditko story - "The Terror of Tim Boo Baa".*

*My editorial revealed that the previous issue's checklist contained numerous errors. Corrections came from Mike Wileman, who was already known by the Ditko-faithful for his impressive 50's DITKO COVER GALLERY. I also supplied a short (favorable, of course!) review of the first appearance of the Mocker in SILVER STAR #2.*

*Christoph Melchert provided his second gem in as many issues.....*

## REVIEW "DITKO'S 'H' SERIES"

by CHRISTOPH MELCHERT

Ditko came out with four "underground" comics, all dealing with the political themes that characterized his work for the NY companies. First to come out was MR. A., 38 pages, 8 X 11 inches, quality paper. It mainly comprises four unrelated reprints. Unfortunately, however, the stories are replete with speech after tedious speech, the art is largely long shot after long shot of the same dreary character - this was one dull comic.

How about a randomly-selected example? Here's page 6 of the third story, copyright 1969. Panel 4 has the police commissioner reprimanding Rex Graine in medium shot while corrupt, bleeding-heart businessman Alex Swet glowers in right foreground. The right half of the next panel has another medium close-up of Swet, holding up in the left side of the frame a photo of the killer Graine beat up the page before. Panel 6 has Swet ranting in long shot to a like-minded crowd. Clearly, these three panels were not laid out to complement each other. In the right side, you go from medium close-up of Swet to medium close-up of Swet to a word balloon, from Graine and the commissioner to photograph to long shot of Swet in the left. There's just no sense to it.

As I recall, the MR. A. collection came out in the summer of 1973. Joe Brancatelli lists himself as the Editor in the introduction but I doubt he did much editing. Future volumes were promised but the next in the series was an entirely different package, published in the familiar "underground" format - 7 inch X 10 inch, 32 black-and-white pulp pages, wraparound color cover. THE AVENGING WORLD is a series of posters, condemning moderation, altruism, big government and so on. Some of the pictures are compelling enough - the cover struck me as particularly good - but many are not. I imagine that few were inspired to read all the words.

The closest this book does come to a comic-book story, however, is actually quite good - superior to anything in MR. A. In a simple but effective composition, for example, a group of citizens stand in military order across the bottom of the panel as they watch their "social leaders" march into a house. The composition of the next panel is in comparative disarray: as we see faces for the first time, all attention is focused on the horror-struck face in back. The guy is saying, "But what if.. if they should, SOMEHOW FAIL!" An illiterate could tell instantly that he was introducing doubt. Panel 3 of the sequence is dominated by three panicky close-ups; "OH, GOD, don't even think of FAILURE!" Panel 4, finally, shows five weeping heads in profile, precisely indicating the crowd's resignation and rejection of individual action. Ditko may be crazy, but he sure knows how to make a point.





(The story concerns the people's horror at the arrival of an "alien" who threatens to change their collective way of life. On the last page, it turns out that the alien is a new-born child - straight from AMAZING ADULT FANTASY. Strangely, however, there is a crucifix above the heroic mother's head. It seems like an odd touch for Ditko so hostile to the idea of sacrificing oneself for the good of mankind.)

The third book lives up to the great promise of "The Deadly Alien," for practically every story shows careful and deliberate manipulation of the medium. Preaching is kept to a minimum in most of the stories; in the first, for example, Sgt. Kage says, "You're under arrest, Rupt," instead of delivering a sermon on twisting facts and refusing to face consequences.

The message of the story is carried by the macabre weapon of the mysterious villain - the Silent Voice of the title. Just as its victims are moral cripples, so the voice is forever bound to a wheelchair. His words, too, are as meaningless as his victims', Professor Nowds has no sooner delivered a speech on "Definitions: the Curse of Man" than he is battered to death by the words "love, mercy, peace and pity." To use words meaninglessly is to say nothing - one might as well be a dummy. Furthermore, it is to destroy oneself - if not literally to commit suicide, then at least to destroy one's essential humanity. The dummy whose voice kills is only a horrifying reflection of its victims.

"Premise to Consequence" is more preachy than "Silent Voice" and the explicitness of the message makes for a dull story. In compensation the art is rather more interesting. More than anywhere else in the book, Ditko takes pains to avoid repeating himself as he varies angles, distances and compositions with consummate skill. At the same time, it is practically a textbook for the way successive panels are related for easy continuity.

Page 2 has a wonderful example. The second row of panels begins with a long shot, as a guard walks in saying, "I have the men, my president, the men to defeat Co.De." A reverse-angle cut and we see the guard's hands with two photographs: Professor Fre and his student Der. Follows a medium shot of the president looking at the photos, then another reverse-angle cut to a medium shot of the president's back and a close-up of the guard in profile. The continuity is simply effected both by composition - every panel is related to its neighbors' - and the slow movement to close-up.





More blatant zooms - dull, dull, dull - are probably the weakest facet of the story; one, for example, vitiates the climax. The crude verbosity of the speech is no help, though, as dialogue practically becomes narration. Even Steve Gerber is outdone.

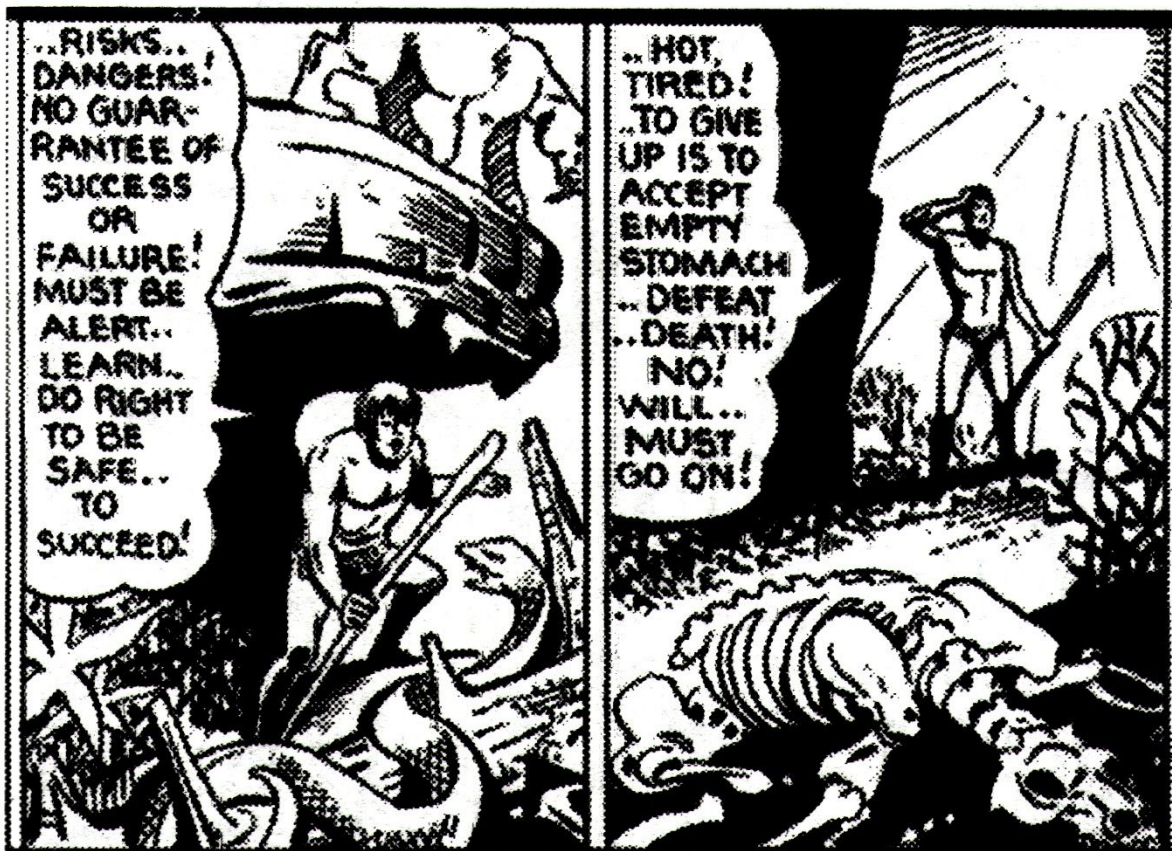
The next story is named "The Void" after its mysterious, apparently supernatural, hero who reminds criminals where evil leads (the crumbling pathway so familiar from MR. A.). The message (that a bad life brings a bad end) is implicit in the story more than explicit in the speech, hence more powerfully conveyed. For example, the hypocrisy of Blake Kell, "well-known sportsman and retired lawyer" who actually works with a gang of thieves, is expressed without long speeches, without crowds of hysterical liberals and so on. His marbled smoking jacket is halfway between the criminal clothing and his daughter and her fiance's pure whiteness - an obvious artifice, but I think it works well.

One excellent sequence (there are a number) is the middle row of page three. Coming from a medium close-up of Brad Dole being punched Ditko starts with a profile of Mer interrogating the investigator, who's tied to a chair. He cuts to a low angle, then, of Mer hitting Dole in the background as his men quake at something behind them. Panel 3 shows just their legs as a freezing mist sweeps the room: only a detail is necessary, only a detail is shown. Ditko could have been watching Pudovkin.





"The Captive Spark" is a four-page feature more like AVENGING WORLD than the rest of WHA?!? It's Ditko's version of the story of mankind, how civilization was built on selfish co-operation and endangered through the ages by lazy-bones who want something for nothing from those who work. Basically it's a lot of ♀♂☉♂! Ditko ignores, for example, that there can be no equal exchange between one who sells goods and one who sells his labor power (an inequality pointed out to me by the thoroughly bourgeois sociologist Max Weber).



The last story, "Masquerade," is surprisingly the earliest (1973), the least moralistic, and the least satisfying of the bunch. Its shorthand speech and hysterical expressions are crude. Backgrounds get less and less detailed as the story goes on. The art is repetitious and unimaginative.

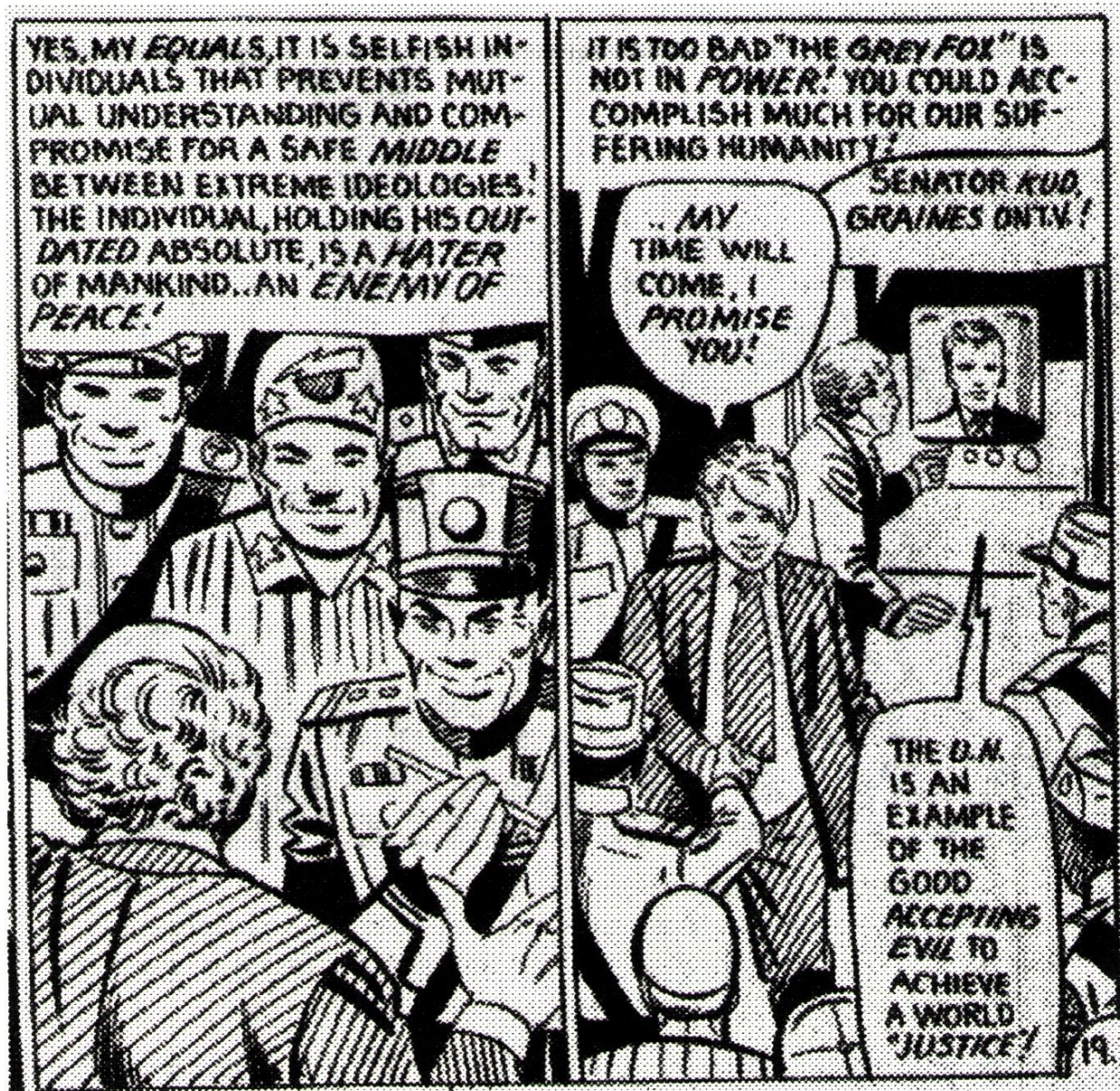
Ditko's fourth "underground," again published by Bruce Hersensen, was a second MR. A. This collection, however, comprises only two stories, both new and 16 pages each. The space allows for some real plots. The second of the two, untitled, has fewer speeches and I prefer it to the first. In general, however, everything is spelled out very plainly and the art shows few of the subtleties I enjoyed in some previous stories. (I have to admit that he does play with repeating patterns of black and white in the backgrounds and even uses shading for continuity.)

I am a trifle puzzled by two of the characters. One is liberal Senator Kud. Pudgy and foppish, explicitly identified with the United Nations, he could be Daniel Moynihan. Moynihan recently remade his reputation by viciously attacking hypocritical third-world dictatorships there; personally, I regard him as a dangerous right-wing fanatic. Can Ditko be so hostile?

The other mystery character is the new president of Graine's paper, Victor Forge. Ditko has repeatedly characterized through names; e.g., Rupt (corrupt) in "Case of the Silent



Voice," Professor Fre (free) in "Premise to Consequence," Mr. Coniv (conniver) in Count Rouge." Normally, then, I should assume that "Forge" is a denunciation of the former American president as a fraud. In both stories, however, Forge says he dislikes extremes but protects Graine, is willing to admit that he could be wrong. Perhaps Ditko does have such a positive view of Ford, and we're supposed to be thinking of Valley Forge?



If these four comics have not converted me to libertarianism, I have at least been persuaded to read some powerful libertarian propaganda. When Ditko has gotten impatient and resorted to direct harangue, his rhetorical weakness has done his passion a disservice and he does not convince but only bores. Trusting his own skill as a comic-book artist, however, he has produced some very effective arguments. I look forward eagerly to more.