

## Re-Making History: A Review of *The Onion's 'Our Dumb Century'* (published 1999)

As the twentieth century ends, satirical internet newspaper *The Onion* has found a unique solution to our PMT (pre-millennial tension): a parodic rewrite of the entire century in 'contemporary' newspaper form. With devilish glee, *Our Dumb Century* anarchically destabilises our entire construction of the past. The sinking of the Titanic (1912) is headlined 'WORLD'S LARGEST METAPHOR HITS ICE-BERG/ ...REPRESENTATION OF MAN'S HUBRIS SINKS IN... SYMBOLIC TRAGEDY,' while the hollow relief of 1918 is hideously perverted: 'WAR OVER AS FRANZ FERDINAND FOUND ALIVE/ 'How Fares Europe?' Asks Presumed-Dead Archduke/ Long and Hideous War Was Simple Misunderstanding'.

The modern present always assumes superiority over its past, and *Our Dumb Century* broadly colludes in this, reconstructing it in today's terms to laugh at historic small-mindedness: 'NEW STUDY REVEALS WOMEN NOT AT FAULT IN ALL RAPES' (1919), 'PRESIDENT WILSON CALLS FOR CREATION OF USELESS WORLD GOVERNING BODY' (1919), and, predictably, '**Stock Market Invincible!**' (Oct 22, 1929). Unlike its regular format, *The Onion* here frequently takes today's preoccupations for granted, and it is particularly questionable whether the pervasive sexuality here will endure any better than its earlier repression. 1999 too will be derided one day: *Our Dumb Century* may be less a satiric record of the twentieth century than a reflection of the arrogance of its moment.

Yet the actual past is only one focus for mockery. More fundamentally, *Our Dumb Century* exposes how notions of the past have to be constantly constructed, often reflecting the present's concerns rather than truth. So our noble, ideological dream of the Second World War is shattered as 1942 blares 'San Francisco Grocer Henry Nakamura Chief Suspect in Pearl Harbor Bombing/ 'I am Loyal American Citizen', Scheming Jap Declares,' alongside 'Ladies, Negroes Momentarily Useful', as a 1944 sideline urges '**Kids!** Join [Editor] Zweibel's Jap-Smashers!' The Korean War endures primarily through M\*A\*S\*H: 'Korean War Ends in Tearful 3-Hour Finale/ ...Over 50 Million Americans... Watch Final Instalment of Popular, Long-Running War' (1953). The present, and its limited representations of the past, are the subject as much as the past itself: '[President] Harding Elected, Forgotten About' (1920 sideline). Our longing to reclaim and revisit the past likewise perverts events: '*Normandy Invasion Force Crippled by Nostalgia*/ Thousands of GIs Die as They Pause to Reflect on the Momentous Day' (1944).

*Our Dumb Century* is a candid and brilliant work, a literary masterpiece perverting every assumption of our political, social, economic, personal and popular culture across a century that has often taken itself far too seriously, and crossing every barrier of ideology and genre to deliver its postmodern

manifesto. In 1937 we find 'Art Critics Impressed by Saturation Bombing of Guernica/SLAUGHTER OF HUNDREDS IN SPANISH TOWN CALLED 'A STUNNING BREAKTHROUGH IN POST-CUBISM', while the backward-minded German authorities incidentally complain 'that the only destruction they would inflict would be three-dimensional, proportional, and realistic, and feature Valkyries on winged horse-back'. In *Our Dumb Century*, twentieth-century Revisionism has reached its logical conclusion. Future decoders of turn-of-the-millennium culture need look no further.

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