Queer Absences, Queer Presences

Lecture #2 for “Queering Comics”

By Jess Whatcott

Assigned reading: *“*Presence and Absence in Theory and Practice” by Anna F. Peppard (in *Supersex,* 2020, University of Texas Press)

**Early Queer Subtext**

1. Krazy Kat created by George Herriman ran from 1913-1944 in the New York Evening Journal, owned by William Randolph Hearst, he was a huge fan despite not huge popularity in the public
2. Portrays the relationship between a carefree cat named Krazy and a short-tempered mouse named Ignatz. Krazy is in love with Ignatz, but Ignatz responds only with acts of violence, such as throwing bricks at Krazy’s head. Another character, Officer Bull Pupp is in love with Krazy and appears to protect him from Ignatz, sometimes by jailing Ignatz.
3. Krazy Kat was beloved by intellectuals such as poet e.e. cummings and treated as art.
4. Many modern cartoonists have cited the strip as an influence.
5. What’s queer about Krazy Kat?
   1. Krazy’s gender is ambiguous in the strip. Other characters in the strip refer to Krazy as he/him, but many fans of the strip (including cummings) refer to Krazy as she/her.
   2. At various points, the creator Herriman said that Krazy has “no sex” and “can’t be a he or a she.” (Schwartz, Ben (2003). "Hearst, Herriman, and the Death of Nonsense." Printed in *Krazy & Ignatz 1929–1930: "A Mice, A Brick, A Lovely Night.")*

**Queering the Superhero Genre**

1. Wonder Woman created by the American psychologist and writer [William Moulton Marston](about:blank) (using pen name: Charles Moulton),[[2]](about:blank#cite_note-NYT-20141023-3) and artist [Harry G. Peter](about:blank)
2. First appeared in DC Comics All Star Comics #8 (1941), as a founding member of the Justice League. She had her own title shortly after and DC Comics has published it since then.
3. Wonder Woman, or “Princess Diana of Themyscira” was sculpted from clay by her mother Queen Hippolyta, given superhuman powers from the Greek gods, and raised on all female island nation of Amazons.
4. Her first adventures were fighting the Axis forces during World War II, later she fought monsters and gods from Greek mythology.
5. What’s queer about Wonder Woman?
   1. Marston was a self-identified feminist, who believed that women were superior. He created Wonder Woman to give girls an example of a strong woman archetype that they could embody to become leaders that he believed should run society.
   2. The all women society of the Amazons was textually linked to the island of Sappho, for example, one of her catchphrases was “Suffering Sappho”
   3. Marston practiced polyamory and bondage and submission, the imagery of the latter is central to the visual depiction of Wonder Woman, who uses a “Lasso of Truth” to whip and bind villians, and who is also frequently seen freeing herself from being tied up.
   4. In the twenty-first century, representations of same-sex desire by Wonder Woman are more concretely represented

**Fear of Queers Contributes to the Comics Code Authority**

1. Fredric Wertham’s 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* linked the homoeroticism and gender non-conformity of comic book characters from Batman and Robin to Wonder Woman to juvenile delinquency and violence
2. Part of a cultural discourse that equated queer people with violence
   1. Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock describe mass media representations of “gleeful gay killers, lethal lesbians, and deceptive gender benders” going back to at least the 1890s that justified the criminalization of LGBTQ people
3. Televised United States Senate Subcommittee investigation into comic books and juvenile delinquency; Wertham testifies
4. Comic book industry created its own self-censorship program called the Comics Code Authority (CCA)
   1. From 1954-1989, the code “prohibited American comic book publishers from depicting ‘nudity in any form,’ ‘illicit sex relations,’ and a loosely defined and potentially vast array of ‘sexual abnormalities and perversions’; for most of the Code’s history, same-sex desire was one such perversion” (Peppard, p 2).
5. Peppard argues that the code was designed to suppress queerness in comics, and indeed, explicitly sexual comics were driven underground and out of mainstream outlets.
6. The suppression of horror, crime, and “weird” comics made superhero comics the dominant genre.

**Both “Presence and Absence”**

1. Given the queer subtext of superhero comics, Peppard argues that sexual and gender deviance continued to be both “obvious and elusive, conservative and subversive” (Peppard, p 3).
2. One strategy of reading we will employ this semester is to look for both absences of queer content that have been suppressed in mainstream comics due to the CCA and general heteronormativity, but also look for presences that can be read as “queer,” even if they aren’t explicitly named as queer.
3. Queer themes to read and look for:
   1. Gender ambiguity/androgyny
   2. Gender non-normativity – masculine women, feminine men
   3. Homosocial spaces and relationships
   4. Tools/weapons/outfits/spaces suggestive of BDSM – leather, dungeous, whips
   5. Sexually suggestive outfits – tight cuts, underwear on the outside
   6. Encounters that are suggestive of sex – gooey projectiles, entwined bodies
   7. Others?

**Practice #1: Build visual and textual literacy:**

* Describe what is occurring in the frame – what is present?
* Can you tell what comic this is?
* What is absent from the frame?
  + Presences and absences together send a message about what is normal, natural, and acceptable, from physical form to social behavior.
* What messages do the presences and absences in these strips send about normal, natural, and acceptable bodies?

**Practice #2: Queer reading:**

* Describe what is occurring in the image – what is the “text”?
* What are the visual and textual cues that something queer is happening or could be happening? What is the “subtext”?
* Are there any stereotypes about queerness are being depicted here?
* What is the message about queerness that emerges from this single representation?

**Final thought:**

Single images or comics do not happen in a vacuum, but are part of a repetition of images and texts that work together to create a discourse.

* Examples of trans villains to stereotyped superheroes to more complex queer characters, that still reference earlier representations.
* Discuss: What happens when these messages are repeated over and over again? What about when there is only this single representation and not a diversity of representation?