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KÄMIKS

Introduction

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Introduction: Kämiks

Thomas Keegan

I think it is fair to claim that until recently, comics – from the Sunday comic strip to the graphic novel and every instance between – have been critically and publicly regarded as a bastardized form of literature, worthy of marginal cultural importance. Without question Art Spiegelman's 1986 Pulitzer prize-winning work, *Maus*, helped call attention to the 'literariness' of the form, but too often *Maus* seems regarded as *the* comic that does literary and cultural work. The reality is that for a very long time now, comics have ceased to be kids' stuff – assuming they ever were. The form – if we can reasonably refer to the vast topography of comics in such a crude way – encompasses a dauntingly diverse array of styles, mediums, narratives, cultural and ideological concerns. In *Maus'* long wake there remains a dearth of insightful *criticism about* (not simply *praise of*) comics. Ironically, Hollywood's renewed fetish for superhero narratives has brought comics back into the public spotlight. Today, in the wake of films such as the superhero "industries" of Batman, Spiderman, Superman, and the X-Men, as well less hyperbolized films like, *From Hell*, *Ghost World*, *Road to Perdition*, *American Splendor*, *The Ring*, *Sin City*, and most recently *A History of Violence*, critics, teachers, and students are increasingly viewing comics as a legitimate literary form. Like the novel, the poem, and the short story, these works do crafty culture work, revealing things deeply ingrained in our social psyches and structures. They resonate with intimate personal struggles and broader ideological ones, simultaneously visualizing the schemes of minutiae in our daily lives and providing various symbolic constellations of ideological structures. And yet, the disdain for comics as a form worthy of critical respect has its precedents. In Coventry Patmore's 1889 work, *Principle in Art*, he discusses William Blake (arguably the father of modern comics) and offers this backhanded compliment:

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> Blake, as an artist, is a more important figure than Blake the poet...[y]et even as a painter his reputation has until lately been much exaggerated...here and there was the gleam of such pure and simple genius as is often revealed in the speech of a finely natured child amid its ordinary chatter. (102)

Patmore captures a pervasive sentiment where uninformed critical appraisals of comics are concerned: more often than not comics offer us little more than a brief relief from the dim din of mediocrity characteristic of the form. While we might chalk this perspective up to Patmore's Victorian sensibilities, I think its refusal to acknowledge the formal complexity and cultural value of Blake's work resonates with more contemporary views of comics. To the extent that the illuminated works of Blake were once scorned, or to the extent to which modern day readers of Blake are content to read his text alone and dismiss the visual content, comics find a kindred spirit. Sympathetically, Scott McCloud has suggested that anyone working in a medium that uses both pictures and words will inevitably hit a glass ceiling on their way to 'greatness' (150). The problem as McCloud sees it is in "being judged by the standards of the old"; for comics this means being seen as a "genre of writing or a style of graphic art" (151).

And while comics have long been discussed under enlightening rubrics such as McCloud's oft-cited *Understanding Comics* or have been the subject of engaging historical analyses, much work remains to be done on the cultural work of comics and the varied form's dynamic place in cultural studies. The work of comics remains a massively underdeveloped field of study, at once hemmed in by both a history of critical avoidance and the considerable task of productively applying critical tools to these texts. In the fledgling field of comics study, mainstream comics hold an increasingly tenuous minority status. *Tenuous* in light of new essays, like those included in this issue which seek to examine the comic form as something not simply designed to entertain, but something to indoctrinate, to undermine, to enlighten, to question. These essays address the flexible and at times contradictory nature of comics, taking into account the form's ability to synthesize and reiterate large ideological initiatives and to subvert, complicate, or render wholly absurd such projects. *Minority* by dint of their mass production, whether as daily newspaper strips or pulp superhero books, suggesting they belong outside the sphere of serious critical analysis and ought to be regarded as newsprint productions that leave their readers with darkened fingers and little else. Yet, those newsprint traces on a reader's fingertips embody an exquisite tactility – they serve as a metonym for comics' everydayness, illustrating the extent to which the form remains in touch with our lives.

As mass-produced and mass-consumed artefacts of culture, comics have been ideally positioned to synthesize and comment upon the daily ideologies circulating throughout their respective societies and to facilitate or frustrate the dissemination of those ideologies. The redress of comics criticism in the sphere of cultural studies requires that attention be paid to the content of the form, not simply the form's structuring of that content. It is all very well to remark upon the metaphysics of the comic panel, the infinity of the gutter, and the imaginative work required of the reader of comics. But when those observations, valid as they may be, become

exercises in abstract formalist thought, cultural studies returns us to the grounded social import of the text. We need look no further than the Mexican government's recent publication of a comic book guide to crossing the Mexican-American border for an example of this cultural and social content of the form. Comics possess the delightfully insidious potential to slip social comment past the uncritical eye, and in so doing create an engaging record of the ideological struggles and cultural shifts taking place within or across societies.

Sean Carney regards this record as an ongoing construction of history. His essay, "The Function of the Superhero in the Present Time," calls attention to contemporary depictions of the superhero in the wake of Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen*, finding there darker and more socially aware constructions of the superhero and the problems of self-knowledge. For Carney the superhero's social function operates in two registers. The first complicates the role of the superhero within the text, regarding him as a morally ambivalent figure. The second dissolves the mythological status of the superhero for readers, replacing an ideological blueprint with a problem of ideology. Carney examines the degradation of the superhero mythos in the post-Silver Age era not as a lament for morality but a renaissance for the superhero as a historical marker of social consciousness. For Carney, comics construct history as a hybridization of the past and present, not a bleak look back but a tangible mediation of space.

Alongside this immediacy of history and continual mutation of the superhero stands Kieran Cashell and John Scaggs' "Transvestite Logic." A deft interweaving of Barthes' carnivalesque and a self-described autopsy of "the superhero genre in its present cadaverous state," the essay focuses on Pat Mills and Kevin O'Neill's *Marshall Law*. Cashell and Scaggs attend to the comic's determination to subvert traditional conceptions of the superhero along explicitly sartorial lines calling into question the "vestimentary codes" employed by superhero genre and the subjection of those codes by Mills and O'Neill.

For Matt Yockey, the *Fantastic Four* series illustrates and synthesizes a focus on rote nationalism – the advancement of American will and power in the Space Race, but also in the metropolitan zone – as evidenced in the surging modern architecture of Manhattan and urban centers in general. Yockey causes us to re-evaluate the ideological function of superheroes not only as markers of a particular strain of nationalist discourse, but as mechanisms of stifling assertion, objects that anticipate and counter objections to the determined national enterprise. With no apologies for Lee and Kirby's work, the essay refuses to pass judgment on these artefacts of comic history. Instead it investigates their social and historical value as rhetorical vehicles for nationalist discourse in a time of sublime anxiety by pointing out the ways in which the Fantastic Four reflect an ideology of modern success in their financial and racial security.

Turning from issues of large-scale nationalism, Mark Best's "Domesticity, Homosociality, and Male Power in Superhero Comics of the 1950s" focuses on male bonding among superheroes and the liminality of the female in 1950s. Best figures the drudgery of the domestic and the eroticization of the secret identity as illustrating the ambivalence of homosexual/heterosexual readings in three Fifties comics:

Captain Marvel, Superman, and *Batman*. Best nicely illustrates the slippage of definition and the complication of the ideological landscape as a more dynamic, if not always explicitly articulate, portrayal of the shifting nature of Fifties masculinity. Here, the cultural work of the comic reflects upon of the collision between postwar domesticity and super heroism. Concurrently, Best examines the development of the superhero family as a corrective to any perceived homosexual themes within the evident homosocialism of superhero interactions – articulating a resonant theme that Yockey explores. Here too, Best examines the place of superheroines and their development both in and out of the shadow of domesticity along particularly familial lines.

If Best sees a decisively gender-biased world within superhero narratives of the 1950s, Edward Brunner provides us with a far more democratizing image of a 1940s era comic strip. In Oliver Harrington's African-American strip "Jive Gray" Brunner points out Harrington's attention to issues not only of fascism but racism as well, and the implicit relationship between Axis powers and American racists. Brunner acknowledges not only the valuable social commentary offered by the strip, but its rich and attentive visual and social detail – both the look of American military aircraft and the cadences of jive. Brunner dwells on Harrington's realistic narratives in contrast to Yockey's ruminations on the hyperbolic nature of the Fantastic Four and the excesses of white right. Harrington's triumphs of African-Americans in realistic racial and nationalistic scenarios, as opposed to the inevitable victories of white American superheroes, capture the import of race in comics history. Brunner usefully addresses the structures of shading in Harrington's comics and the modernized look of the deminstrelized black figure, also noting the complications of race and its connections to verbal discourse (both linguistic structures and named lineages). The modernity of jive as a lingua franca among not only black figures, but other minority figures and youth in general in the strip, helps articulate a kind of solidarity across race at times in the strip and calls forth issues of modernity in language alongside the modernity detailed by Yockey. The essay also addresses the depiction of women in comics, as Brunner touches upon the presence of strong women in Harrington's strips and their further contribution to the strip's enlightened social and – in light of the strip's myriad settings – global outlook.

Together, these essays usefully integrate critical theory and comics, helping us to acknowledge the valuable cultural relevance of these newsprint pages, these mass-produced literatures. And as cultural studies turns its eyes to the newsprint page I hope the critical masses will stop to ponder a line from Chris Fuhrman's novel, *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys*. A young protagonist, and aspiring comic book artist, looks to his friends and says of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Blake wrote the poetry, drew all the pictures, and even printed it himself. If he was alive now, I figure he'd be working for the comic books" (Fuhrman 43). He very well might and what a remarkable notion – at the edge of literary evolution comics arrive as the inheritors of Romanticism – not the bastards of the lowbrow but the angels of progress.

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