

## COMIC BOOKS AND AMERICAN CULTURAL HISTORY: AN ANTHOLOGY

Matthew Pustz, ed.

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155

Year after year, the mass market leaves behind a trail of trendy and catchy products that never caught the audience's affection. Old vinyl records, not so-old CDs, obsolete cassettes, dusty psychothriller paperbacks, and tons and tons of comic books become the prey of avid and nostalgic hunters at night flea markets. When it comes to the academic consideration and analysis of comic books and graphic novels, this flea market nostalgia percolates through the words of many of the critics (Carrier 2000, Conget 2004). Many of them apologetically refer to their childhood as the main force behind their academic interest —concealed as distressing infantile obsessions— instead of presenting these texts as relevant primary sources.

Matthew Pustz, editor of *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology*, is no exception. He introduces his book by recounting how, as a kid, he was first acquainted with the old concept of history through the pages of *Marvel Team-Up* #42. Spider-Man, not a school teacher, taught him what history really is. In his introduction, Pustz labels this process “casual learning” (drawing on the concept of “collateral learning”, Johnson 2005) and explains that “there is a potential for the comics medium to teach serious topics in a way that might reach students differently and [...] more effectively than more traditional texts” (4). His aim in this book is to offer an account of comic books and graphic novels that could help in the teaching of US cultural history. To do so, the editor briefly

introduces the book, compiles fifteen chapters and adds a further essay to the volume.

In general terms, this edited volume (which, despite its title, is not an anthology in the purest sense of the word, but a collection of brand-new essays) is a helpful companion for understanding US mainstream superhero comic books. My reservations are few and can be shortly enumerated here. For instance, the terms “comic book” and “graphic novel” are indiscriminately used throughout the book. Only one short statement is made to differentiate between these two subgenres. As the editor affirms, comic books “become respectable when they’re called ‘graphic novels’” (5). In the last five years, the debate on this topic has been huge and many proposals for distinguishing between comic books and graphic novels have been discussed (to name a few: Altarriba 1984; Eisner 2001; Gravett 2005; and Gómez 2013). The book could have benefitted from the many insights that these analyses have elicited, as they have offered a deeper understanding of the narrative iconical subgenres.

156

The use of comics as historical artefacts in Pustz’s volume follows the cultural materialist path of Cultural Studies heralded by Raymond Williams. In Williams’ words, it could be stated that this volume, “after analysis of particular works, seek[s] to relate them to the particular traditions and societies in which they appeared” (1998: 48). Although the anthology is titled *American Cultural History*, it only centres on North-American production, and more specifically, on US works. Works from countries like Canada, Argentina, or Mexico, American though they are, are neither considered nor mentioned in this collection. Although it may seem obvious to some readers, perhaps it could have been useful to make a small remark on the fact that only US works are analysed, and when they mention America, they refer only to the United States.

The corpus of texts analysed in the anthology comes mostly from mainstream comic books that have been published by the two biggest multinational mass media corporations in the world: Marvel Comics (currently owned by The Walt Disney Company) and DC Comics (currently owned by Time Warner Inc.). Unfortunately, in the book there is no real analysis of Underground Comix, or of the “alternative comics” movement of the 1990s (Hatfield 2005; Lopes 2009). The book provides a selective survey of the history of comic books and the cultural history of the United States, while it unwittingly supports the hegemonic and reactionary discourse of mass media corporations and their mainstream superhero narratives. In this fashion, throughout the volume, the authors employ a terminology that has been promoted by the marketing machinery of these two companies. They label the early superhero comic-book production the “Golden Age of Comics”, referring to the period from 1938 to the 1950s. Other ages follow: the Silver Age,

the Bronze Age, and the Modern Age of Comics. It is important to highlight the fact that these ages only include superhero productions, and they overgeneralise and consider superhero themes as the sole representatives of comic books and graphic novels. This terminology has found its way into academic discussions in books like *The Power of Comics*, by Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith (2009), or the very recent works by Paul Levitz (2013a and 2013b).

Nonetheless, many other non-market oriented terminologies have been proposed. Paul Lopes, in *Demanding Respect*, analyses the history of comic-book production and distinguishes three periods: Early Industrial Age, the Late Industrial Age, the Heroic Age (2009). This terminology keeps in sight the cultural and historical moments when these works were created, without idealising the superhero fantasy of Marvel and DC comics. I believe that the articles included in Pustz's volume could have been greatly improved had they taken into account these other existing works.

Formally, the anthology is divided into four parts. Part I, "Doing Cultural History through Comic Books", opens with Jessamyn Neuhaus' chapter, which describes how comic books can be used as tools in the history classroom. Neuhaus, a historian, popular culture analyst and pedagogy expert, begins her article with a very unfortunate statement: "I don't find comic books—from any era— especially entertaining or enjoyable to read" (11). Fair enough, she does not enjoy reading comic books, but then I fail to understand her need to write about them. I think it is highly unlikely that a critique of a literary work or a film might start with a statement of that kind. Moreover, her claim to be familiar with all comic books, "from any era", sounds like an overstatement to say the least, especially since in her analysis she proceeds to focus only on a few US superhero comic books. Quite possibly, her opening words have been included as *captatio benevolentiae*, the oldest of rhetorical devices, to provoke a response in the reader. Besides, the author is obviously referring to those different ages of superhero comic books previously mentioned. In her text, Neuhaus offers a chapter centred on teaching practices, although she does not offer a deep analysis of the teaching value of comic books. The article proves tautological throughout, as it begins and ends with the statement that comics are "significant cultural artifacts" (20), but does not support it with any relevant empirical data.

The book's offerings improve with Chapter Two in which Bridget M. Marshall brilliantly analyses George O'Connor's adaptation of *Journey into Mohawk Country* (2006), a diary written by the seventeenth century Dutch explorer Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert. Marshall's chapter not only presents the debate about the reliability of the primary sources for someone doing History; it also considers the use of peculiar combinations of words and images to construct

new meanings. Additionally, Marshall points out the problems of re-imagining the past and the difficulties entailed in the depiction of gender, sexuality, and Native American cultures.

This first part of the anthology includes two more chapters: William Grady's analysis of *Preacher* (1995-2000), and Alison Mandaville's summary of the *Alexander Hamilton Trilogy* (2006). Grady describes how *Preacher* fits the generic conventions of the Western, while it relies on the structure of the Campbellian monomyth. A question that the chapter could have raised in the course of the description of the series' plot is why the Western genre is revamped in the form of a comic book at the end of the twentieth century.

Part Two, "Comic Books as Cultural Artifacts", is the most interesting section in the book, beginning with Martin Lund's "American Golem: Reading America through Super-New Dealers and the 'Melting Pot'". Lund discusses the creation of the most famous superhero, Superman, and argues that he stands for the values of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal politics in the late 1930s. As Lund explains, in *Action Comics #1* (1938): "Superman appears almost as a 'cartoonified' FDR [...] a hero that could translate comforting words into deeds" (89). Equally interesting, Chapter Six, by Jeanne Emerson Gardner, analyses the series, *Young Romance* (1947-1977), by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. Simon and Kirby, creators of supercharacters like Captain America, were simultaneously instructing boys on how to be good and rightful patriots and educating girls on how to love and be loved. The works of this creative tandem are further analysed in Chapter Seven, where John Donovan describes how Simon and Kirby created another comic book series, *Fighting American*, so as to provide US society with a new superhero that could take on the fight against Communism. Although the chapter could have used the aforementioned ideas of critics like Lopes (2009), Donovan's text proves interesting to read and illuminating in its presentation of the connection between the creation of superheroes and political ideology.

The eighth chapter of the anthology tackles the issue of Chinese-American identity as depicted in the 1970s Marvel series, *Master of Kung Fu*. Although the historical background of Asiatic characters in superhero comics is thorough, Peter Lee's article superficially presents the plot at the expense of any deeper analysis. This is also the case for Chapter Eleven, where Todd Munson discusses Chinese-American identity through Gene Yang's graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* (2006). By contrast, chapters Nine and Ten convincingly analyse the "Crisis of Confidence" of the 1970s (as president Jimmy Carter described the pessimistic state of his country) and the consumerist agenda of Ronald Reagan's conservative politics of the 1980s. With regard to the latter period, Matthew Costello reflects on how Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg!* relies on a postmodernist aesthetics to depict

the shallow commodification of sex, violence and “physical human drives” (165). Within the third part of the anthology, “Comic Books and Historical Identity”, Ben Bolling’s Chapter Thirteen deserves special mention as it offers a thorough review of the creation of the Marvel character, Northstar, one of the first —if not the very first— superhero to openly declare his homosexuality. This French Canadian mutant strikingly resembles Gaetan Dugas, the “Patient Zero” and “superspreader” of HIV/AIDS in the US. Bolling argues that Northstar, in his superhero universe, is also infected by the virus, so the world of mainstream comic books in effect would be depicting the US HIV/AIDS crisis.

Although titled “Comic Books and Contemporary History”, the last part of the book centres only on September 11, 2001. Depictions of other events that have taken place since then could have been a great contribution to this section, notably Warren Ellis and Juan José Ryp’s *Black Summer* (2007, on terrorism in the US), Kyle Baker’s *Special Forces* (2007, about the invasion of Iraq), or Kevin Greivoux and Geraldo Borges’s *ZMD: Zombies of Mass Destruction* (2008, an interplay between the trendy zombie genre and the “weapons of mass destruction” governmental discourse). From the chapters that make up this last part of the anthology, Yves Davo’s Chapter Fifteen can be highlighted as it convincingly discusses *American Widow* by Alissa Torres and Sungyoon Choi (2008) as an “autobiographical testimony, or *autographics*” (243), a graphic novel employing techniques that are proper to trauma narratives and that, therefore, invites a corresponding critical approach.

All in all, Matthew Pustz’s anthology can help readers discover many new aspects and anecdotes of US culture in relation to the mainstream superhero production. More demanding readers, however, are likely to be dissatisfied with the superficiality of the discussions it seeks to open.

159

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