

Comics Studies in Germany: A Look at the John-F.-Kennedy Institute's Comics Collection through the Lens of the Research Unit "Popular Seriality—Aesthetics and Practice"

Daniel Stein (University of Siegen)

The purpose of this short essay is to place the recently launched Comics Collection of the John-F.-Kennedy-Institute for North American Studies within two larger contexts. The first context is the DFG-Research Unit "Popular Seriality – Aesthetics and Practice" which began in 2010 at the University of Göttingen and moved to the FU Berlin in the fall of 2013.¹ The Research Unit has allowed Frank Kelleter and myself to channel our interest in comics into a focused analysis of one major genre – superhero comics – and to consider the role of comics as a modern (American) medium of popular serial storytelling. The second context is an even broader one, extending far beyond the concerns of a single project within a Research Unit. It concerns the place of Comics Studies in our contemporary academic moment, both within Germany, where we may find ourselves on the verge of an emerging discipline of *Comicwissenschaft*, and on an international scale, where scholars from many different countries are studying a growing roster of graphic narratives and where American Studies perspectives may offer important insights.²

Since we are celebrating the official opening of the JFKI Comics

¹ This essay is a slightly revised version of remarks delivered at the official opening of the John-F.-Kennedy Institute for North American Studies' Comics Collection. For more information on the Research Unit, visit www.popularseriality.de; see also Kelleter, ed., *Populäre Serialität: Narration–Evolution–Distinktion. Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012) and Kelleter, ed., *Media of Serial Narrative* (in preparation).

² On Comics Studies in Germany, see Stein, "Comicwissenschaft in Deutschland: Ein Einschätzungsversuch von Daniel Stein": <http://www.comicgesellschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Comicwissenschaft-in-Deut.pdf>; Stein, "Comics Studies in Germany: Where It's at and Where It Might Be Heading": <http://comicsforum.org/2011/11/07/comics-studies-in-germany-where-it%E2%80%99s-at-and-where-it-might-be-heading-by-daniel-stein/>.

Collection today, it makes sense for me to begin my remarks with a special emphasis on the significance of libraries and archives for the project “Authorization Practices of Serial Narration,” a case study of Batman and Spider-Man comics that Frank Kelleter and I have been conducting in the Research Unit. The project traces the serial evolution of the comic book superhero as one of the most vital figures/genres of twentieth-century American popular culture, and for this kind of work, access to the actual comic books is key. That is it possible for us to gain this access – to re-read the development of the genre from issue to issue, month to month of new publications – results from the particular history of comics, especially from their ability to solicit extensive response among their readers as well as from their successful management of meandering storylines and multiple media transpositions. Most significantly, the storing and archiving of comic books, on which our research depends, was not at all part of their original intention and design. Comic books from the late 1930s onwards were meant to get adolescent readers hooked on the repeated and ongoing adventures of their serial protagonists: Superman, Batman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, and many others. Let me note here that the JFKI Comics Collection holds several of the initial but also many current storylines of these and other characters in the form of reprint editions and anthologies. Let me also mention that the collection has reprints of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century newspaper strips, which mark the beginning of comic as a modern popular medium in the United States – as Christina Meyer, one of our collaborators from the University of Hannover, argues in her associated DFG-Project “Series of Multimodal Forms of Narration: The Yellow Kid Newspaper Comics of the Nineteenth Century.”³

For much of their existence, comic books were printed on cheap pulp paper and were held together by flimsy staples because they were conceived as juvenile entertainment, without any understanding that they might eventually be recognized as an important part of American cultural history and popular culture. Instead, comic books were premised on the commercial desire to elicit immediate sensation and reading pleasures that would make readers scramble back to the newsstand for more stories. That at least some of these comic books did not end up on the garbage dumps of history has often been attributed to the activities of readers, who did not merely read them but whose loyalty to a certain character, genre, or favorite writers, artists, and publishers manifested itself in carefully preserved, intricately indexed, and sometimes conspicuously displayed collections. In fact, it didn't take long for a whole collectors' culture to emerge, whose members often self-identified as expert comic book fans and frequently produced written discourse about their hobby as well.

I don't have time here to discuss these practices and their significance in American comic book history in greater detail, so let me sketch one main insight of our work on superhero comics in the Research Unit: Rather than retell the grand narrative of grassroots fandom as a means of liberating audience desires from the strictures of the culture industry, and rather than reiterating the popular (and obviously not entirely false) notion that comic book fandom can be understood as a paradigmatic example of what Henry

³ See also Christina Meyer, "Urban America in the Newspaper Comic Strips of the Nineteenth Century: Introducing the Yellow Kid," *ImageText* 6.2 (2012): www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v6_2/meyer/; Meyer, "George Benjamin Luks and the Comic Weeklies of the 19th Century," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 3.1 (2012): 69-83; Meyer, "Topographien des urbanen Raums in Zeitungcomics der Jahrhundertwende," Simone Sauer-Kretschmer and Christian A. Bachmann, ed., *Sehnsucht suchen? Amerikanische Topographien aus komparatistischer Perspektive* (Berlin: Chr. A. Bachmann, 2014): 169-91.

Jenkins has labeled “participatory culture,” Frank and I argue that we are better advised to locate the impetus for cultural practices such as comic book creation and reception within the productive powers of popular serial storytelling. As serial stories accrue a massive load of information over the duration of their repeated production, and as they have to create new stories that are both plausible as well as palatable against the backdrop of the series’ past, successful open-ended forms of serial narration must develop mechanisms through which their storytelling sprawl can be managed. Retrospective continuity (the retroactive redefinition of already narrated content or the retroactive addition of new content to a series’ past) and canonization processes are two such mechanisms, and these mechanisms generally involve questions of authorization: who is authorized to continue a story in which way, form, and/or medium? And how can any new addition or variant to a series attain authorization, or gain a status of legitimacy?⁴

And indeed, we may think of the JFKI Comics Collections in this way: as a logical consequence of earlier, initially non-institutionalized, forms of serial authorization, for instance by way of amateur (or fan) collections that held a series’ receding past current – that allowed readers and mandated creators to produce and receive each new installment of a series as a successor to a growing backlog of stories that could be checked for plot points, storyworld particulars, and drawing styles. Such amateur collections laid the foundation for the academic study of comics, and it is

⁴ For more extensive versions of this argument, see Stein, “Popular Seriality, Authorship, Superhero Comics: On the Evolution of a Transnational Genre Economy,” Marcel Hartwig, Evelyne Keitel, and Gunter Süß, ed., *Media Economies: Perspectives on American Cultural Practices* (Trier: WVT, 2014): 133-57; Stein, “Superhero Comics and the Authorizing Functions of the Comic Book Paratext,” Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon, ed., *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013): 155-89; Stein and Frank Kelleter, “Autorisierungspraktiken seriellen Erzählens: Zur Gattungsentwicklung von Superheldencomics,” Kelleter, ed, *Populäre Serialität*: 259-90.

this academic study that legitimizes the JFKI library's Comics Collection. What is more, this collection, in turn, further authorizes, by way of its institutional clout, the study of (American) comics.⁵ As such, it enters a network of existing comics collections at American research institutions, such as the Billy Ireland Cartoon Museum at Ohio State University, where Jared Gardner, one of the Research Unit's American collaborators and the author of the magnificent book *Projections: Comics and the History of Twentieth-Century Storytelling* (Stanford UP, 2012), is centrally involved; or the Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University, which is not only the generous donor of many great comic books to the JFKI library but also a good example of how such collections often begin: though an initial donation, in this case by Russell Nye in 1970, that is then nurtured and expanded, sometimes through the efforts of dedicated individuals, many of them routine readers of comics, which includes the mastermind of the Michigan State Comics Art Collection, Randy Scott.

The JFKI library owns reprints of important superhero comics and newspaper comic strips, but at the heart of the collection – at least to my mind – are the 400 original comic books that were donated to the JFKI library by the Comic Art Collection at MSU. It is very rare that comics scholars or students writing terms papers or final theses on this genre can actually take a look at the original comic books – the very material artifacts that historical readers purchased, perused, and either threw away, traded, or collected (including editorials, letters pages, and advertisements). As part

⁵For further discussion of libraries and archives as institutions of knowledge preservation and production (with a focus on U.S. American institutions, see Robert G. Weiner, ed., *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries and Archives: Essays on Readers, Research, History and Cataloguing* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010); for an overview of the German situation, see Matthias Harbeck, "Das Massenmedium Comic als Marginalbestand im Deutschen Bibliothekssystem? Analyse der Sammlungsstrategien und -absprachen in wissenschaftlichen und öffentlichen Bibliotheken," *Berliner Handreichungen zur Bibliotheks- und Informationswissenschaft* 253 (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2009).

of my work in the Research Unit, I had the chance to spend two weeks at the Comic Art Collection in Lansing, and I can truly say that this experience – going through thick binders of comic books, many of them rare and thus too expensive to afford on your own, stacked in rows and rows of shelves – was particularly productive and rewarding.⁶ That the JFKI library has now acquired a critical mass of original comic books that may very well grow into a substantial collection, is a significant moment in German academia, where interest in comics is increasing but where access to the materials is limited on an institutional level. Exceptions include the Comic-Archiv des Instituts für Jugendbuchforschung at the University of Frankfurt and the Arbeitsstelle für Graphische Literatur in Hamburg, as well as the Comics Studies Collection that I am in the process of building up at the University of Siegen.⁷ Of course, these libraries and archives concentrate more or less on German and European comics, and this is why the JFKI library's Comics Collection, with its focus on American comics, is such an important addition that promises to further facilitate the budding conversation between German *Comicwissenschaft* and ongoing research in the interdisciplinary field of American Studies.⁸

But the comics collected at the JFKI library are not confined to superhero stuff, of course. As many critics have recently argued, graphic novels now outsell superhero comics and also garner greater amounts of academic

⁶ For a brief account of my visit to the MSU Comic Art Collection, see Stein, "Die Comic Art Collection der Michigan State University – Ein kurzer Bericht": <http://www.comicgesellschaft.de/2011/08/15/die-comic-art-collection-der-michigan-state-university-ein-kurzer-bericht/>

⁷ The Christian A. Bachmann Verlag is another important force in the development of Comics Studies in Germany. See, for instance, the conference proceedings of the Gesellschaft für Comicforschung (ComFor) that the Bachmann Verlag has published, as well as its growing roster of additional publications devoted to comics: <http://www.christian-bachmann.de/progcom.html>.

⁸ The potentials of such a conversion are outlined in the introduction to Daniel Stein, Christina Meyer, and Micha Edlich, ed., *American Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, Special Issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 56.4 (2011): 501-29; see also the introduction and contributions to Shane Denson, Christina Meyer, and Daniel Stein, ed., *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

valuation. This trend can be traced back to changes in academia but also to developments in the field of comics, where compelling and sophisticated work has appeared in the wake of the underground comix and alternative comics of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. From Robert Crumb's complete works to graphic narratives by such luminaries such as writer-artists Alison Bechdel, Joe Sacco, Gene Luen Yang, Los Bros. Hernandez, and many others, the JFKI Comics Collection offers a growing cross-section of key publications that will be a useful source for scholars working on American comics. I, for one, cannot wait to spend some time browsing through this collection and immersing myself in its exciting contents.