

Objectifying the Male: Early Superhero Comics as Fantasies of Masculinity

Ranthild Salzer (University of Vienna)

My paper argues that early superhero comics first published in the 1930s were influenced by ideas on masculinity entering US popular cultures around the 1890s, ideas tying successful masculinity to having both a highly developed mind and body thus turning male bodies into objects to be molded in a certain fashion. At the time masculinity concepts incorporated notions from evolutionary, eugenic and civilization theories leading to racist and sexist definitions of gender. Victorian-American gender-ideology fraught with fears of the overcivilization and feminization of men promoted a masculinity where men display both a strong mind-set and strong body in order to stay dominant. Simultaneously magazines promoting physical exercise were published and “strong-man act” performers like Eugen Sandow rose to fame as segments of vaudeville shows. While gender discourses of the time excluded non-white ethnicities they also defined masculinity as something to be actively achieved not passively given.

1930s superhero comics promote similar ideas as they center around performances of masculinity while depicting male bodies. Their protagonists are WASP males, referred to as perfect specimen of their kind. The thematic focus of my presentation are the first Batman comics published in Detective Comics in 1939.

Batman exemplifies 1890s idealized masculinity: sporting a muscular body “trained to perfection” and a scientifically schooled mind engaged in vigilante justice. Superhero comics affirm masculinity as something to be gained and codify a specific body type to go with it as they produce numerous images of muscular male bodies clad in skintight leotards turning them into objects to admire and to emulate.

As my paper exemplifies “Golden Age” superhero comics continue ideas of masculinity originating in the 1890s and in the process tie ideas of successful masculinity to specific body images.

Kurzbiographie

Since 2011 Ranthild Salzer is an assistant lecturer for cultural studies at the department of English and American studies at Vienna university where she is currently writing her PhD on the constructions and negotiations of masculinities in North-American comics. Her focus is on the earliest superhero comics publications starting in 1938 as her dissertation traces the pop-cultural, political and historic origins of „super manhood“. Current research interests include psychoanalysis, comic studies, film and television studies, popular cultures, gender studies and body studies. She has published anthology-articles on the comics of Joe Sacco dealing with constructions of masculinities and post-colonial strategies in his comics. Ranthild has held seminars on comics, sequential art, film noir and the constructions of masculinities in film and television and in public forums has talked about the superhero story as success story, fantasies of masculinity, and the question ‚what is masculinity?‘.