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Can Superhero Comics Studies Develop a Method? And What Does American Studies Have to Do with It?

Studying Superhero Comics, Writing Risky Accounts

One of the questions posed frequently to researchers of American superhero comics at academic as well as non-academic outings addresses the impossible odds of studying this serial genre in anything like a comprehensive fashion. More often than not, the question comes across as a concern with methodology, probing whether those who study superhero comics have a clue about how to solve the riddle of dealing with a corpus so stunningly immense that it would take many lifetimes to read it in its entirety, let alone analyze it with any kind of depth. Having struggled with this question myself, I have come to believe that the only way out of this fix is to develop an approach flexible enough to accommodate the vast scale of the sprawling serial corpus, the complexities of individual texts, and the limits of one's critical faculties. This essay will outline the contours of such an approach, treating superhero comics as a paradigmatic example of popular serial storytelling and connecting methodological inquiry with a potentially risky account of superhero comics as an essential part of tomorrow's American Studies and vice versa.

Why would the assertion that accounting for superhero comics as an integral part of American Studies and for Superhero Studies as a contributor to, and beneficiary of, this project be a risky move? Well, at least in the field of German American Studies, comics remain a neglected realm of analysis, bypassed or mentioned only in passing in accounts of American visual culture¹ and seldom allotted more than a cursory glance in studies of popular culture.² This situation can be traced back to what Christoph Ribbat has aptly

¹ See Haselstein, Ostendorf, and Schneck; Böger and Decker; Decker, *Visuelle Kulturen*; Hebel and Wagner; Decker, "American Studies."

² Recent exceptions are Etter 2014; Meier 2015. An early exception is Kühnel's proposal from 1974 to include comics as an object of popular culture research in American Studies. This proposal was, however, rarely taken up by German Americanists until the 2010s, when special issues of *Amerikastudien / American Studies* (see Stein, Meyer, and Edlich) and *ZAA: Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* (see Lanzendörfer and Köhler) appeared. Even today, most publications on American comics by German scholars do not emerge from the field of American

characterized as an “ambivalent history of the relationship between popular culture and German Americanists” (161). True, DFG-funded research projects such as “Popular Seriality – Aesthetics and Practice” (2010-2016) and interdisciplinary research collectives like the Forschungsstelle Populäre Kulturen at my home institution in Siegen (to mention, quite shamelessly, two outings in which I have the pleasure of participating) suggest that we are finally moving beyond disparaging attitudes toward the popular materials we study. Regardless of our attitudes, however, my sense is that the “systematic documentation and exploration” of US visual cultures advocated by Christoph Decker (*Visuelle Kulturen* 10) must entail the study of American comics. Moreover, American Studies as a “joint, interdisciplinary academic endeavor to gain systematic knowledge about American society and culture in order to understand the historical and present-day meaning and significance of the United States” (Fluck and Claviez ix) must include a massively popular and near-ubiquitous cultural phenomenon such as comic book superheroes if it wants to fulfil its own mission statement.³

It may, however, be exactly this near-ubiquity, fostered and facilitated through the nature of superhero comics as a popular type of vast serial storytelling (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin; Kelleter, *Populäre Serialität*), that makes any systematic documentation, exploration, and quest for understanding fraught with problems. This includes problems of availability: many of the old comic books are either rare and thus excessively expensive or have been lost due to decay or disposal. An additional problem concerns accessibility: much of the superhero backlog is confined to the vaults of commercial publishers, which reprint only a limited number of old stories, or sitting in archives waiting for researchers with the time and resources to look beyond the genre’s most famous series and characters.⁴ We further grapple with questions of reputation: many scholars continue to glance at these narratives with more or less obvious disdain, conceiving of them as a formulaic, trivial, and aesthetically gregarious form of escapist

Studies, which is surprising considering the current ubiquity of the comic book superhero and the fact that superhero comics constitute a specifically American genre of graphic narrative.

³ For examples of what this endeavor may look like, see Stein, Meyer, and Edlich; Denson, Meyer, and Stein; Stein and Thon.

⁴ More and more of this backlog is being digitized, either by research initiatives such as Open Culture’s Digital Comics Museum (see “Download”) or by private individuals who scan and post samples from their collections. But we have yet to see the kind of systematic large corpus analysis that has become an established method in the digital humanities applied to comics, probably because the visual-verbal nature of comics prevents any simple collocation of data. A first foray into this direction is the Research Network “Hybride Narrativität: Digitale und kognitive Methoden zur Erforschung Graphischer Literatur,” funded by the German Ministry for Education and Research and directed by Alexander Dunst. On recent attempts to come to terms with the superhero archive, or vaults, see Stein, “Mummified Objects.”

entertainment. Finally, we confront the conundrum of manageability: the corpus spans almost 80 years, several generations worth of collaboratively produced series, thousands of characters, hundreds of thousands of stories, and countless transformations ranging from close and loose adaptations into other media to new ways of production and distribution in the digital age.

It is impossible for any single researcher, and even for larger research collectives, to study the history of all superhero comics in anything approaching an all-encompassing manner. There is simply too much material, and much of it difficult to allocate, let alone easy to analyze. What Winfried Fluck describes as a key problem of cultural studies, namely “developments of cultural dehierarchization that challenge established ways of assigning meaning and significance to cultural material” beyond “the authority of an (explicit) master narrative” (42, 38), is all the more problematic when it comes to comics as an intermedial form of narrative that notoriously complicates established parameters of literary and visual analysis (Stein, “Comics and Graphic Novels”). In addition, if Americanists struggle to answer “the question of the representativeness of [their] material” (Fluck 39) in their attempts to make sense of American culture and society beyond convenient text-context distinctions, the massive corpus of superhero comics—a multi-decade, multi-authored, transnational, transmedial and highly malleable yet surprisingly durable form of popular serial storytelling—becomes a particularly hard nut to crack even for the most ambitious researcher.

To study superhero comics thus means to focus on a selection of sources beyond which lies a sprawling mass of unknown and unstudied materials, including many new publications, as well as reception practices whose empirical and/or ethnographic study would overtax an NSA-size, information-gobbling agency, not to speak of a DFG research unit or even *Sonderforschungsbereich* (collaborative research center). A selection, one might add, that we cannot approach with anything remotely resembling an objective stance because the size and scope of the material force us to rely on pre-selections made by others, often with vastly different interests in specifically influential creators, particularly relevant characters, and especially pertinent series. We can, of course, challenge the validity of this information and offer corrections to existing selections, just as the canon wars of recent decades have changed our sense of American literary and literary history. But superhero comics come with a ready-made (though obviously not uncontroversial) canon that is difficult to challenge because it tends to privilege the two most powerful publishers, DC Comics and Marvel Comics. It also revolves around a few dozen iconic characters, relies on a neat periodization (Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age, Modern Age), and thus provides a deceptively convenient solution to the methodological problem of delineating a workable research corpus. This canon, however, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, generating research that often

(surprise!) reaffirms the pre-packed categorizations and the centrality of certain publishers, series, characters, storylines, and storyworlds.

In my own work on the significance of seriality for the genre evolution of superhero comics,⁵ I have often encountered objects that cast doubt at this validity. These objects tend to undermine any handy heuristic and all too rigid classificatory systems and serve as reminders that superhero comics may be much too diverse and unruly to be subsumed under any single regime of sense-making, such as a straight-forward periodization or the type of tidy classificatory systems we sometimes find in narratological studies.⁶ This is why I decided a while ago to move from the systematic setup of the collaborative DFG grant proposal that launched my ongoing encounters with the superhero genre toward an attempt to tackle less obvious topics that are nonetheless of particular relevance for understanding processes of serial genre evolution.⁷ These topics include manga adaptations of Batman and Spider-Man that tell us much about the transnational spread of the comic book superhero, its reformulation across cultures, and its reimportation into an American sphere of sense-making. They also include comic book parodies and online video spoofs, which indicate a persistent strain of self-awareness and meta-commentary beginning very early in the genre's history. In addition, paratextual negotiations of authorization conflicts in letter columns and fanzines reveal how comic book readers, letter writers, and fanzine contributors "interact . . . with the series' production aesthetics in a larger network—or better still: in a 'work-net' of interlocking agencies—that is busy defining itself at different levels of cultural reproduction, setting in motion different actors, and deploying different, often conflicting textual practices" (Kelleter, "Response" 395).⁸ Thus, instead of enabling me to write *the* definitive account of superhero genre evolution, the material has taught me to shift gears by scaling back rather than charging forward: to be more humble and, at the same time, more adventurous in my account of the genre's history.⁹ The risky nature of such an account stems from the proliferating number and variance of actors that make their way into—and essentially co-produce—this account as well as the expansive and always instable—

⁵ See Stein, "Spoofin' Spidey," "Of Transcreations," "Superhero Comics," "Popular Seriality," "Mummified Objects."

⁶ Hatfield sees comics as an "antidisciplinary . . . phenomenon, nudging us usefully out of accustomed habits of thought and into productive gray areas where various disciplines . . . overlap and inform one another" ("Defining Comics" 23).

⁷ The grant proposal is Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein, "Autorisierungspraktiken seriellen Erzählens am Beispiel der Gattungsgenese von Batman- und Spider-Man-Comics."

⁸ Kelleter focuses on *The Wire*, but his approach applies to superhero comics. See also Kelleter and Stein, as well as Latour (2005/2007) as a major frame of reference.

⁹ I derive the phrase "shift gears" from Christ et al.

because provisional and fleeting—character of the network of practices this account seeks to write down without curbing too many of its complexities.¹⁰

Commenting on the New Historicism, Winfried Fluck once identified doubts about the representativeness of the chosen source material as a crucial methodological challenge and “the key problem of authorization in Cultural Studies” (39). In superhero comics, however, the problem of authorization is not confined to the scholar’s attempt to justify his or her selection of suitable texts by proposing that they are “telling us something significant about the culture from which [they are] taken” (Fluck 39), but it actually suffuses the material itself. That is, we are dealing with a serial genre in which each installment, each series, and indeed each narrative and aesthetic choice has to authorize itself vis-à-vis the series’ past and its imagined future as well as vis-à-vis all of the actors involved in the collaborative process of producing these series.¹¹ How such authorization works, and how it becomes active in the authorial and readerly practices that produce these texts and their meanings, are questions that reside at the center of my engagement with the genre.

Of course, studying superhero comics in the way I am proposing here inevitably means operating on slippery ground, producing tenuous and thus risky assessments whose validity is always in question and up for challenge by those whose reading experiences have gained them access to a different slice of the superhero pie. There will always be a text, practice, and actor that my account of, say, the agency of the parodic mode in the development of the genre (one of the finished chapters of a book that has been in the making for quite a while now) will have overlooked, simply because it was not mentioned in the secondary sources (digital and analog, academic and non-academic) I consulted or had not made it into the archives I visited (the Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University and the Edwin and Terry Murray Fanzine Collection at Duke University).¹² But this does not automatically mean that my account must be flawed (I hope) or that it must be rewritten every time somebody unearths a previously overlooked creator, series, or story. For one, the search for “firsts”—the first superhero, the first genre parody, the first authorial intrusion into the storyworld, the first crossover story, etc.—all too often proves futile, not because such “firsts” cannot be identified (they can, although not very reliably), but because this

¹⁰ See Latour 22. The scholar’s task, according to Latour, is one of “assembling, collecting, and composing” material, of “‘follow[ing] the actors themselves’, when the actors to be followed swarm in all directions” (121, 122).

¹¹ See Kelleter and Stein.

¹² “[T]he number of scholarly books on the genre has exploded,” Heer, Hatfield, and Worcester maintain (xv), offering *The Superhero Reader* as a mere “sampling of the most sophisticated or influential commentary on superheroes” (xvii). Such readers, along with anthologies (see Starre), are one way of making manageable (or creating a sense of manageability of) the superhero genre.

kind of information in itself tells us very little about the interlocking agencies that set these and other practices into motion. Moreover, if it makes sense to conceive of superhero comics as a constantly shifting network of actors and their agencies, then we may learn rather little from the discovery that Bob Kane did not “invent” Batman on his own but was supported in his work by other writers and artists, unless we connect this discovery with an overarching theory concerning the relationship between popular culture, serial storytelling, and comic book genre evolution¹³—unless, that is, we move from the vexing question of methodology to the more accessible realm of theories that are formulated, more or less explicitly, in and by the practices of the actors driving the evolution of the genre. If we assume that superhero comics engage in acts of self-theorizing, then we may identify and make sense of the ways such self-theorization is put into practice, for instance through processes of serialization, adaptation, transmediation, transnationalization, and parody.

In the same way, studying superhero comics must not be a purely idiosyncratic endeavor, and those most familiar with the genre’s past and present are not necessarily the most qualified and authoritative agents of superhero knowledge production. After all, dedicating one’s (life)time to the voracious reading of comics will obviously result in an extensive familiarity with the material (and read a lot you must, at any rate), and it frequently culminates in a form of quasi-academic, semi-academic, or academic fandom that publicly displays a broad knowledge of, and personal investment in, the genre. But such knowledge and investment do not per se involve a deeper understanding of this material within the network or system (choose your metaphor) of American culture. This is why it can be studied more productively as part of this network (my choice) in the same way in which we can “track how American (Media) Studies and American (media) practices act as interdependent forces within a larger cultural system that still successfully calls itself American culture” (Kelleter, “Response” 395). Henry Nash Smith, whose “Can American Studies Develop a Method?” (1957) has been described as an early “theoretical manifesto of American Studies” (Fluck 16), already gestured toward this approach, noting that “the same culture which has produced the soap opera has also produced the sociological journals” (Smith 9).

¹³ See Stein, “Superhero.” Part of my theoretical frame for the question of authorship negotiations in superhero comics are concepts such as paratext (Genette) or author function (Foucault), which in and of themselves are neither new nor particularly central in American Studies but that unfold an innovative potential when they are brought into conversation with superhero comics.

A Priori Assumptions, Tacit Premises

Recent efforts to establish Comics Studies as a field of academic inquiry have echoed some of Smith's rhetoric in the search for an interdisciplinary method. Charles Hatfield, for instance, speaks of Comics Studies as a "nascent academic field of great productivity and promise" that may be marred by a "weak . . . institutional footing" ("Indiscipline" 2). Hatfield's assessment evokes Smith's reference to the "nascent movement toward American Studies" (Smith 10), as do formulations such as "the study of comics has become a lively field of inquiry" and "[t]he burgeoning of comics studies" in Heer and Worcester's *Comics Studies Reader* (xi). Yet as Sabine Sielke reminds us, "[a]ny work that theorizes American Studies will have to rest on the assumption that there is a field that goes by the name of 'American Studies,' a field delineated by more or less clear-cut boundaries. This, of course, is where problems begin" (60), as we can witness in Hatfield's instructive take on the possibility of Superhero Studies as an academic discipline. Hatfield notes the absence of a "clear, cohesive, self-centered identity" and "a lack of dialogue regarding the disciplinary status of the field," i.e., a disconnected multidisciplinary that must be overcome by an "intentional interdisciplinarity," including a self-aware stance toward knowledge production in the involved fields of academic inquiry ("Indiscipline" 2, 3, 4).¹⁴ However self-aware this kind of ideal interdisciplinarity may be, we should still be wary of tooting the Comics Studies horn too loudly because, as Henry Jenkins puts it succinctly, "Make no mistake about it, a discipline disciplines" (5). This is why a publication like the *International Journal of Comic Art* (founded by John Lent in 1999), which features all imaginable kinds of scholarship and any conceivable comics-related topic, is perhaps more fascinating and instructive about the cultural work of comics than the more streamlined, editorially and commercially more tightly controlled, type of comics scholarship that has appeared elsewhere in recent years.

Writing in the 1950s, Henry Nash Smith was, of course, aware that his urge to find a single method for American Studies would exceed the capabilities of a single researcher. American Studies, as he envisioned it, should "widen . . . the boundaries imposed by conventional methods of inquiry" and recognize that "method in scholarship grows out of practice." And if it ideally encompassed the analysis of American culture as a whole, then "[n]o one man [sic] will be able to redesign the whole enterprise. What will count is the image in our minds of the structure we believe we are helping to build" (Smith 11). If we understand Smith's reference to practice in the way I have outlined it above, and if we acknowledge that scholarship

¹⁴ For Smith, popular culture was characterized by a lack of originality, "stereotyped fantasies," "a systematic simplification," and a "relative homogeneity [. . . that] lends itself to the quantitative methods of content analysis" (8, 10).

in any field, but especially in superhero comics, must be collaborative scholarship, then we might also grasp the importance of connecting our American Studies expertise with this form of popular serial storytelling. Smith's definition of American Studies as "the study of American culture, past and present, as a whole" (11) is worth repeating here because it provides a fitting description of what an Americanist interest in superhero comics may look like. First, it may take the form of sustained inquiry into superhero comics as part of what Matthew Pustz has called "comic book culture" and what Frank Kelleter ("Response") has theorized as its network or work-net. This includes not merely the comic books as self-contained artifacts but their production and reception histories as well as the multifaceted ways in which production and reception interact. Second, it asks us to consider this comic book culture as part of American culture at large, or, in my appropriation of Fluck's definition of American Studies, to engage in the analysis of superhero comics as part of the United States of America and its place in the world (13).

This analysis attains a particular twist when we consider the work of the "comics scholars of North America" that Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester identify as the target audience of *The Superhero Reader* at the expense of non-American researchers (xv). Here, American Studies approaches, and in particular approaches developed outside of the US, can serve as useful reminders that scholarship on superhero comics from within a US context "are also always acts of cultural self-description and can be analyzed as such, to trace dependencies between a culture's knowledge and performance of itself" (Kelleter, "Response" 395). We can analyze American scholarship on superhero comics, but also on American comics fandom as well as non-academic commentary, as "communicative practices rather than collections of ideas or strategically designed ideologies." In other words, we can read them as practices that "do not simply legitimize or disguise conditions already in existence but help create and reproduce these conditions and their options of legitimacy and denial in the first place" (Kelleter, "Response" 394). In addition, we can examine our own positions and develop our own perspectives as German Americanists.¹⁵ This would mean to acknowledge our position as outside observers of American culture who are compelled, hailed, or interpellated to "analyze the allure of America . . . via the study of popular culture" and obligated to "understand and acknowledge our own position in the circuits of power and knowledge" in order to come "to know what binds us to America" (Kennedy 2, 6).

All of this, we may note, must happen before we can seriously address the question of methodology, before we try to solve the riddle of how to make inroads into the overwhelming vastness of the material. Consider Fluck's reminder that

¹⁵ See Ickstadt; Kelleter, "Transnationalism"; Fluck.

interpretation is not primarily determined by the methods it uses. On the contrary, the choice of method is already a manifestation of underlying assumptions about the nature and value of the interpretive object. . . . These prior assumptions guide the interpretive practice and pre-determine the results. They dictate and limit the direction of our critical interest and constitute the very object the critic sees. (16)

Accounting for the “a priori assumptions” and “tacit premises” that shape particular interpretations, usually without being made explicit (Fluck 17), can help us deal with the daunting vastness of superhero comics. If our choice of method is not only predetermined by our implicit assumptions about what we want to study and how we want to study it, and if Smith’s call for a single interdisciplinary method has given way to a much more flexible approach where we may choose from a large “toolbox” of methods (Kukkonen and Haberkorn) depending on our research goals and conceive of Comics Studies “as a workspace” (Hatfield, “Indiscipline” 2) in which different methodologies speak to each other, then we already have a variety of research imperatives apart from the question of how to solve the problem of vast story backlog, expansive storyworlds, and sprawling forms of serial storytelling (Kelleter and Stein).

First, we have to clarify our own motivations as German Americanists to turn to superhero comics as an object of critical attention and make ourselves (or allow others to make ourselves) aware of any implicit a priori assumptions and tacit premises we may have of this object and its status within and without academia. This includes strategic concerns relating to how we see ourselves and our futures within the profession of American Studies and within American Studies as a research project (Fluck et al. ix), and it demands of us the ability to view ourselves (and not just US Americanists) as part of a larger system of cultural production, for we are produced, or at least enlisted, in what we do by America. Second, we have to train a metacritical eye toward existing research we may consult to study the self-described field and the objects which it frames in order to recognize American research agendas and theories as part of the self-fulfilling prophecies of American self-descriptions (Kelleter, “Response” 386, 388). To paraphrase Bruno Latour, we should make the time-consuming effort to follow as many of the actors as possible that become active in the ongoing actor-network that is superhero comics (29).¹⁶ Third, we should embrace a notion of American culture as a culture that “developed under conditions of its own” (Fluck 70) and has shaped a popular culture with a particular allure for global audiences.¹⁷ This, then, means that any holistic study of superhero

¹⁶ For a metacritical survey of the field of Comics Studies, see Etter and Stein.

¹⁷ On the self-shaping of American culture, see also Kelleter, “Transnationalism.” On American popular culture and global audiences see Fluck; Kennedy.

comics will have to be an Americanist study and just as much as any holistic study of American culture will have to include superhero comics.

Whether the suggestions I have made in this essay add up to anything like a risky account in the Latourian sense, and whether what I have written about the connections between American Studies and the analysis of superhero comics has added anything to the perpetual and sometimes self-defeating search for new directions in, and (better) futures of, American Studies, is for others to decide. What I do hope to have shown is that the kind of American Studies scholarship I have outlined here has much to offer for the emerging field of Superhero Studies. Future engagements with these issues will warrant a closer look at this field in order to unpack its central assumptions and premises. And if we do this right, we may even change how we practice American Studies, doing good on Charles Hatfield's suggestion that "[i]nspiring scholars to reflect on and seek change in their respective disciplines is part of the potential of comics studies as an interdisciplinary project" and that "comics can potentially force us out of our ossified habits and get us to reconsider some of the fundamental assumptions of our disciplines" ("Indiscipline" 10) in the process. It is the double imperative to direct our scholarly attention to "America as an object of knowledge, to American Studies as a field formation that frames that object, and to the field imaginary that shapes American Studies" (Kennedy 1) and to remain critical of the a priori assumptions and tacit premises underlying this object, field formation, and imaginary as they come into contact with, and potentially clash, with different research agendas and objectives. What does it mean, for instance, for American Studies *and* for Superhero Studies, to suggest that superheroes as a form of literature embody American values and culture (Romagnoli and Pagnucci)? Or to claim, in all sincerity, that there can be any such thing as *A Complete History of American Comic Books* (Rhoades)?

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