

Title Page

Comic Artist and herstorian Trina Robbins exploring gender bias and underrepresentation in the art practice of comics

Research and critically evaluate the role of the artist/designer/maker in the context of one of the following themes introduced and explored in the lecture/seminar series. Employ critical analysis and relevant theoretical perspectives to evaluate the examples that you choose.

De/constructing the Human: Self, Identity and Other

Lecture 2: Feminism

Essay Abstract

In this essay, I will critically evaluate how feminism, as a social and political movement within a contemporary perspective, has directly influenced the work of comic artist and self-appointed herstorian, Trina Robbins.

I will focus specifically on her book 'Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists 1896-2013', which highlights female comic artists from the 1920s to the present era. The book sheds light on how gender has historically influenced the publishing world and the outlook of comic art in mainstream society. There is particular emphasis to the number of female artists who chose to adopt gender-neutral or masculine-sounding pseudonyms to 'sign off' their work as a way to navigate any gender bias they may have faced.

By examining Trina Robbins' book and its connection to feminism, this essay aims to unearth the ever-evolving landscape of gender, identity, and art, and the impact these perspectives have on contemporary art. It will aim to provide an exploration into the complexities and challenges caused by gender bias and offer a deeper understanding to the transformative power art has in shaping societal perceptions through the deconstruction of gender roles and of one's own identity.

Trina Robbins was the first female comic artist to draw wonder woman and later co-founded the underground comix series Wimmens Comix which ran from 1972 to 1992 in North America. She continued to rally for the feminist and non binary community and since then and more recently has become a self described 'her'storian to shed light on female comic artists who have gone largely unknown in comparison to their male counterparts. Previously recognizing the theorist Rosi Braidotti, whose feminist standpoint compliment the ways in which Trina has pursued her practice and navigated the creative field, from founding Wimmens comix to trying to bridge the gender gap prevalent within her field of expertise. By her doing this, it is evident that she has applied at least one of the 3 stages of development of women's studies in her active work. As conceptualized by Rosi Braidotti in her book 'Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory', there are 3 stages to the development of women studies, with the 2nd stage being '*aimed at reconstructing knowledge on the basis of women experience*' (R.Braidotti).

Feminism within art has confronted many varying experiences, values and interpretations as depicted as 'waves' and as explained by art critic Katy Deepwell in her 2023 article 'The Politics and Aesthetic Choices of Feminist Art Criticism', that '*it is not the case that each standpoint necessarily builds on the critiques of the others in an evolutionary chain, superseding the other through rational argument. These approaches co-exist in the present amongst different women, even when the theories with which they engage may have developed at different times or have different routes or affiliations to other bodies of knowledge. However, this approach (waves) does bring clarity to political differences in how feminisms operate*' (pg5).

Trina Robbins method of advocating for feminism is in the same vein as that contextualized by theorist Donna Haraway who, as highlighted in article 'Comics, Feminism, and the future: Feminist figuration in parable of the Sower & Shuri', wrote that 'speculative fiction is one of the areas where post-human feminist theory often meets popular culture and is therefore a powerful vehicle for thinking about feminist futures and their visual and textual manifestations' (Scherr 2023). Further, through Haraways 'informatics of domination' chart as visualized in her book 'A Cyborg Manifesto' she encourages the forming of ones own politics as a tool of navigation (Informatics of Domination: A lecture series organized and introduced by Zach Blas. January 2017). To link such theory to the art practice relating to this essay, the critiquing of humanism from post-humanist

proposition presents itself quite regularly in many comics, evidencing comic art as a strong arts practice for foregrounding identity formation and post-feminist figuration.

Gender and identity is an ever evolving landscape, and more so today is it becoming more unique to an individual. This heavily impacts the art world, as exploring our identities is an expressive tool which we can easily tap into. However, there have been challenges caused by gender bias, which artists have continually battled. As highlighted in the book '*history of women cartoonists*' written by author and historian, Mira Falardeau, female cartoonists have tried to challenge the sexism they faced and embrace freedom of expression through their contributions to the comic art world, source-fully using oppression to fuel their creative work whilst finding ways to navigate through the male-dominated field (Falardeau 2020). Through the channeling of feminist theory, many artists have challenged and deconstructed their normative gender role and the restrictions placed upon them, curbing the need for more masculine sounding pseudonyms, which records show many female authors/creators would resort to to avoid such gender bias being placed upon their work.

Case Study: Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists 1896-2013 (Trina Robbins)

In Robbins' feminist bid to hold herself accountable for the representation of female artists who have been overlooked due to gender bias, her book "Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists 1896-2013" presents and details the works of female comic artists who have contributed to the comic art scene from the 1920s to the present era, covering all four waves of feminism. Robbins addresses issues leading to the common misconceptions about this art form and argues that women have been reading and enjoying comic art for as long as the art form has existed, with women also pursuing comic art as a career since its establishment.

In an online interview promoting her book, Robbins expresses that many publishers and editors, who still believe the misconception that girls do not read comics, should remember that comics were very popular with both genders and that numerous women drew comics during the Second World War. Robbins examined these aspects of comics history in her earlier written article 'Women in Comics: An Introductory Guide. National Association of Comic Art Educators' (Robbins 1996).

In "Gender and the Superhero Narrative," Goodrum, Prescott, and Smith (2018) recognise the importance of books like 'Pretty in Ink' to accurately record the number of female contributors to

the art form and to help resist gender bias within it. They further argue that 'Even during the Golden and Silver ages of comics, when issues of gender and sexuality were hardly at the forefront of superhero stories, comic book readers created their own narratives within the texts that were available. Non-normative readings coexisted through fan discourse' (Goodrum, Prescott, & Smith, 2018, p. 26).

Male pseudonyms to female liberation and inclusivity

Trina emphasizes many times in her interviews and written work about women in the cartoon and comic industry that women are now coming back into comics scene, as opposed to just entering it and that 'there was a time when girl comic readers actually outnumbered the boys' (Trina, 1996). In recent recognition to the lack of representation of female comic artists, an online article, 'Comics collectives as feminist practice' (Haworth 2023), notes that *'despite significant accomplishments of individual female creators both inside and outside this system (the comics industry) women remain largely excluded even today'*. The author further recognizes a data analysis site aimed at monitoring the progression of credited female creators within the industry as subsequently highlighted (BleedingCool, 2017), as a bid to exploit inadequacies and highlight gender representation within this field.

The lack of representation of female comic artist eluded the notion that females lacked interest in the art form. However, inaccurate archives would have been a further culprit leading to this determination. Trina admits that in one of her earlier books there were many mistakes due to the research sources just being an incorrect record of what actually happened. It may be argued that this was down to the use of misleading pseudonyms being used by the female creators.

The practice of masculine pseudonyms used by female creators at one point was quite common with the comic art world. It was a navigation system also used by authors and creators of other practices and of different time periods. It is noted that other female writers such as the Bronte sisters, like many of their female contemporaries, used masculine pseudonyms in their writing, all owing apparently to fear of prejudice and their work being taken less seriously (CultureTrip, 2018).

There were not many records of women in comics, therefore the general perception was that women did not involve themselves in this art form. As a comic artist practitioner whose work dates back to the 1960s, Trina was spurred on to thoroughly research this, knowing that many facts regarding women involvement in history have gone largely unrecorded or misrecorded. She states

that even things she has written in her publications to support women's involvement in comics were wrong, due to misleading and incorrect historical records and lack of representation and information just not being recorded correctly. One of the most leading examples of this, is the earlier research Trina had done into comic artist and illustration Nell Brinkley, who, although crowned with the title of 'Queen of comics', goes largely unknown in modern times speculatively due to inadequate records. In one of Trina's video interviews access on Youtube, she informs how someone forwarded an email to her about saved work of Nell Brinkley's, archived by her late mother. It is these type of sources that have enabled Trina's more accurate insights.

The previously mentioned article written by Kevin Haworth, goes on to highlight previous workplace practice of underrepresentation within the publishing field, informing that *'Marvel not only followed this system but promoted it in its self-mythologizing Marvel Bullpen Bulletin... the Bulletin ignored the work of freelancers who contributed much of the labor, and fostered a vision of a male-oriented workplace in which each person in the assembly line knew their place'* it goes on that *'DC Comics, typically the second most popular publisher, followed a similar model ... As a result, most aspiring comics artists would have envisioned a comics career as part of a mostly male (and white) world'* (Haworth, 2023).

Workplace practices like this, reinforced gender bias in this field, leading to such contributors not being in a position to have their input publicized. With the co-founding of Wimmen's Comix and going on to publish multiple books about female comic artists, it could be said that Trina has stood accountable and channeled her feminist viewpoint through both her art and her position amongst her contemporaries. This gives further evidence to Katy Deepwell's explanation that *'feminism has sought to overcome this figure/mythic stereotype by attention to real, historical women and the details of their lives and a deconstruction of the patriarchal bias in the mythic Woman...(however) women are still seeking representation by and on behalf of other women.'* pg 6 (Deepwell 2023).

Wimmins comix was a direct result of the confines of mainstream society's perception of female literature, serving as a self-publishing method that allowed for the liberation and expression of life from the creators' perspectives. Although Trina argues that this publishing method was still largely for male liberation (Robbins 2013) its a method which emerged during the time of second-wave feminism and became a popular tool of expression for feminists. Wimmins comix emphasized

mentorship and highlighted the struggles and triumphs of a suppressed gender, serving as a powerful tool for empowerment and social change amongst other underrepresented voices.

As further acknowledged in Haworth's (2023) article, it often went beyond a need for gender representation, to include other factors of identity suffering oppression. Haworth highlights that *'pioneering cartoonist Hilda Terry....the first woman admitted to the National Cartoonists League, self-published Does God Eat Us? (1989), long after her cartooning career was over, in order to explore questions of Jewish identity that could never have been part of her comic strip success of the 1940s, 50s and 60s.'*

On a different tangent, it has also been acknowledged that there's been an overall underrepresentation and absence of comics within art history in regards to cultural development and progression. This is discussed in Zullo's (2020) PhD dissertation notes on 'Freudian strips'. Zullo (2020) who discusses how popular psychology had a significant influence over culture during World War II. Although comics explored this at the time, mentions of this input remain absent from this history. As Zullo (2020) expresses, comics were seen as *'crude and not a place for meaningful insight into cultural shifts'*(pg33).

Deepwell interestingly brings into question that *'Liberal (not neo-liberal) feminism places its focus on the individual woman artist and seeks to recover their life and work by identifying achievements...naming achievements has become the replacement for countering the rhetoric of biologically endowed or male-centred notions of genius, as it puts the emphasis back on women as "inventors with imagination", "pioneers" and women who have contributed to culture. As a tactic, this often dodges the question of why a special case has to be made for this woman, in particular, or what their legacy might be in other artists' works.'* (pg.7)

A continuation of this essay could explore this questioning further, but in conclusion of this essay, it's evident how an art practitioner can use their position within contemporary fields to confront contemporary views on topics such as gender and societal expectations. By doing so, Trina has opened up a "third space" where women have felt more comfortable to shape their own narratives through this art form, whether a consumer, artist or both. Whether Robbins work to distinguish female cartoonists encourages women in comics or causes problematic divide - her participation had played an important role in both the second and third wave of feminism. Through research such as this, intersectionality of gender, race, and sexuality in comics is also

unearthed and offers new perspectives and insights into how feminist theories, along with many other theories, inform a creative practitioners work.

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