

## RESEARCH

# The Cult of *Krazy Kat*: Memory and Recollection in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

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George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat* has been discussed in mythic terms for more than half a century. This article argues that much of this 'mythology' has not been founded on the material itself, but rather on memories and recollections of readers and critics. Using Walter Benjamin's notions of cult value and exhibition value, this article investigates the historical circumstances that shaped the most prominent of these recollections to show how writers like Gilbert Seldes and E. E. Cummings shaped the myth of *Krazy Kat* to create an 'aura' of genius around a work that was largely inaccessible to most readers.

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## Introduction

George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat* has been discussed in mythic terms (e.g. Sommer 1973) for more than half a century. Fans and critics has tended to frame the strip's central relationship between Ignatz Mouse and *Krazy Kat* as a kind of modern allegorical myth that illuminates the complexities of love, democracy, madness, civilization, god... take your pick. To Umberto Eco (1985), *Krazy Kat* reproduces 'the myth of Scheherazade', while for Gary Engle (1984: 32) the strip's central relationship is 'something Oedipal'; Arthur Asa Berger sees Ignatz as representing a spirit of antiauthoritarianism and anarchy (Berger 2008), while Leo Zanderer Herriman's calls Herriman's characters parallel to 'Beckett's trapped comictragic figures in *Waiting for Godot*' (Zanderer 1987: 9). In E. E. Cummings' frequently reprinted 1946 foreword to

the first collected edition of *Krazy Kat*, the poet goes so far as to call Krazy ‘the only original and authentic revolutionary protagonist’ (Cummings 2005: 34).

Through the process of describing the strip as a mythology or allegory, critics cast *Krazy Kat*, a corpus that spans three decades and includes thousands of individual strips, as a monolithic whole. This has generally come at the expense of more nuanced critical approaches, such as examining individual strips or panels or exploring the cultural and historical dimensions of Herriman’s work, investigating the ways the strip was published or how it was understood by contemporary readers.

While different critics have found different mythologies in the world of *Krazy Kat*, they are all in agreement on about a secondary mythology: the unparalleled brilliance of the strip itself, which was published in William Randolph Hearst’s newspapers starting in 1913 until Herriman’s death in 1944. This is not to say that *Krazy Kat* is not ‘brilliant’, but that its reputation within fan communities has been based largely on received wisdom and previous critical assessments. Although *Krazy Kat* has been celebrated as one of the greatest achievements in 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture, large portions of the strip have been inaccessible to almost all readers since the comic began. *Krazy Kat* strips were never collected into a book or reprinted in a permanent way during Herriman’s lifetime, and most contemporaneous readers disposed of them with the daily paper. While a handful of books posthumously reprinted selections from *Krazy Kat* and preserved some of Herriman’s legacy, they only amounted to a small percentage of the strip’s total run (e.g. Herriman 1946, Herriman 1969 and Herriman, McDonnell & O’Connell 1986). A Herculean effort to systematically republish the full-page Sunday editions of *Krazy Kat* began in 1988 and was only completed in 2008 (Herriman 2008), but even today only a fraction of the “daily” strips that ran Monday through Friday are publically available (Herriman 1973; Herriman 2003; Herriman 2007; Herriman 2010; Herriman 2016).

### ***Krazy Kat* in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction**

In 1935, well into *Krazy Kat*’s run, Walter Benjamin published the first, German version of his seminal essay, *The Work of Art on the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. An expanded version of the essay was published posthumously in English in 1968

(Benjamin 2007), around the same time that *Krazy Kat* strips were collected into a book for the second time (Herriman 1969). Benjamin discussed how the ability to reproduce art on a massive scale changes the function of art in society, which provides a useful framework for examining the way society has valued comic strips in general and *Krazy Kat* more specifically. Benjamin noted that 'even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be' (Benjamin 2007: 220). Benjamin argued that this process of reproduction separated art from its 'aura', or the uniqueness of its presence. This unique 'aura' that furnished a work of art with its cult value dissipates in mechanically reproduced art. In the place of this receding cult value, reproduction creates exhibition value, the ability of a work of art to be collectively discussed and analysed. Cult value and exhibition value should not be understood as a binary system; a work of art does not have either one or the other, but may possess both in varying qualities.

Under Benjamin's definitions, the comic strip as a mass medium designed around reproduction, lacked the 'aura' and cult value of art before the age of mechanical reproduction. However, comics' exhibition value was also constrained by the disposable qualities of newspapers, and the way that newspapers derived their importance from the place and time of their publication.

*Krazy Kat* comic strips were printed daily, almost never repeated, and regularly thrown away by almost everyone who read them. The comics were printed in different formats in different papers, and their context and visual qualities would vary by geographic region. Although today *Krazy Kat* can be discussed on the same grounds as art or literature, when it was printed it was a phenomenon more akin to weather patterns, ubiquitous and ephemeral, like morning dew, or falling leaves. Jeet Heer has remarked how 'the repetition of the plot, day in and day out' calls to mind themes of reincarnation (Heer 2011a), and just as the sun rises every day, so too, for 31 years, was Krazy daily beamed by a brick.

Initially, fans of *Krazy Kat* may have seen little need to collect it for posterity since it would reappear anew each morning. The exhibition value of the original newspaper strips then, was temporary, and critics like Umberto Eco (1985) and

Robert Warshow (1946) have argued that the meaning and value of *Krazy Kat* cannot be separated from the strip's temporal qualities. Less remarked upon have been the geographical qualities of the strip – it was only printed in newspapers published in particular areas, and appeared in slightly different configurations in each newspaper, which meant there was never a 'standardized' format for critics to discuss.

These temporal and geographical factors also constrained discussion and analysis of the strip, and for decades scholarly discussions of *Krazy Kat* generally took the form of 'endorsement rather than of interpretation' (Gopnik 1986). Sarah Boxer has argued that 'Krazy Criticism' has hardly developed since early glowing reviews of Herriman's work a century ago, noting that the recurring theme of writing about *Krazy Kat* basically this:

*Krazy Kat* is perfect and Herriman is a genius – linguistically, graphically, poetically, onomatopoeically, every which way. Confronted with such perfection, most of Herriman's critics, once they finish reciting plot, affecting accents, and making comparisons to classics, have always thrown up their hands and said, "Behold!" (Boxer 2012).

The lack of insightful analysis about *Krazy Kat* is not related to the content or quality of Herriman's work, but to the way it has been published, reproduced, collected and recollected. In the face of *Krazy Kat*'s limited exhibition value, critics and fans of the strip have worked to establish an aura of cult value around the strip. Because large portions of Herriman's *Krazy Kat* remain unavailable to almost all readers, and because it is no longer possible to read the strip in its original newspaper format outside of archives, this article argues that the aura and cult value of the strip is largely based around the recollections of earlier readers. Principally, it is the interpretative work of Gilbert Seldes, and later of E. E. Cummings, that was responsible for successfully establishing the cult value of *Krazy Kat*, while also constraining the critical discussion of Herriman's work.

Through investigating the circumstances which shaped these early readings of *Krazy Kat*, and tracing them back to particular strips and publishing initiatives, it is

possible to gain a better understanding of the historical forces which shaped *Krazy Kat*, and the conversation that established its reputation as a masterpiece of comic art despite its restricted exhibition value. This case study is an example of how media texts that are ephemeral or otherwise unfixed can become cultural objects on the basis of cult value that is established through remembered recollections from critics, in addition to the exhibition value created by fixed 'collections' that represent the text. This discussion shows that both these processes are problematic, as recollection and collection must necessarily eliminate various qualities of the original text, reducing its meanings and constraining potential discussion.

### **Relying on Recollection**

What can be said about comics is largely dependent on the availability of reprint collections, and these collections are, in turn, most often motivated by fond memories and recollections of previous readers. For example, Qiana Whitted lamented that while her research on the much-celebrated EC Comics line 'greatly benefits from the initiatives of fans that have worked hard to keep reprints in circulation,' other comics which remain uncollected except in research library archives, are generally unstudied and largely forgotten (Whitted 2014).

The rarer a comic is, the less it can be reliably discussed. Glyn White argues that literary criticism can only exist where an accepted, fixed version of a text is widely available:

It is only while dealing with a printed text (and one that has not become a rarity) that a literary critic can reasonably expect to share knowledge of that text with readers. The mechanical reproduction of the text allows you to check your own copy, and for us to discuss the novel. Without print the usefulness of that which the scholar discovers in the manuscript, and indeed that which creates an environment in which there is interest in the manuscript, would disappear (White 2005: 26).

Like all newspaper strips, *Krazy Kat* was mechanically reproduced in large quantities, and made widely available, but it was not designed for collection or

preservation. Furthermore, as each strip was printed in many different formats in different places, there was initially no singular, fixed version of *Krazy Kat* which could be studied at the exclusion of all others. The problems of evaluating the daily, disposable *Krazy Kat* appeared as early as 1917 in Summerfield Baldwin's article 'A Genius of the Comic Page' for *Cartoons Magazine*. Published the year after the Sunday version of the strip began, this was one of the first lengthy critical assessments of the strip (Tisserand 2016: 278). However, Baldwin admitted that aside from referring to a strip that he had on his desk while writing, his analysis was 'unfortunately altogether dependent on my memory' (Baldwin 1917: 806).

The same problems plagued the writer who most shaped the discourse around *Krazy Kat*, critic Gilbert Seldes, 'Herriman's most perceptive (and persistent) fan' (Tisserand 2016: 296) who wrote a review of the strip in a 1922 issue of *Vanity Fair*. Seldes provided a more thorough history than Baldwin and situated Herriman's work with larger historical development of the comic strip form, tracing the development of *Krazy Kat* from *The Family Upstairs*. However, when it came to analysing specific strips, like Baldwin he was limited to comics that had been recently published.

In the *Vanity Fair* article, Seldes recapped several recent installments and singled out, as the pinnacle of Herriman's genius, the 21 January, 1922 episode featuring a dormouse who carries around a literal door (**Figure 1**) (Seldes 1922: 108). Further critical analysis of this particular strip has been slight, although as its influence likely expanded after a *Wikipedia* user, possibly inspired by Seldes' endorsement, made it one of the primary illustrations on that site's article about *Krazy Kat* on 9 December 2005.

However, it was Seldes' description of the strip dated Saturday, March 11, 1922 (**Figure 2**) that most prominently affected the course of 'Krazy Criticism.' This strip was published only shortly before Seldes began his article, and he reminded his readers how 'last week one beheld Krazy smoking an elegant Hawana (sic) cigar and sighing for Ignatz', before going on to recap the episode in considerable detail (Seldes 1922: 108). Seldes' recollection of that particular strip would play a hugely

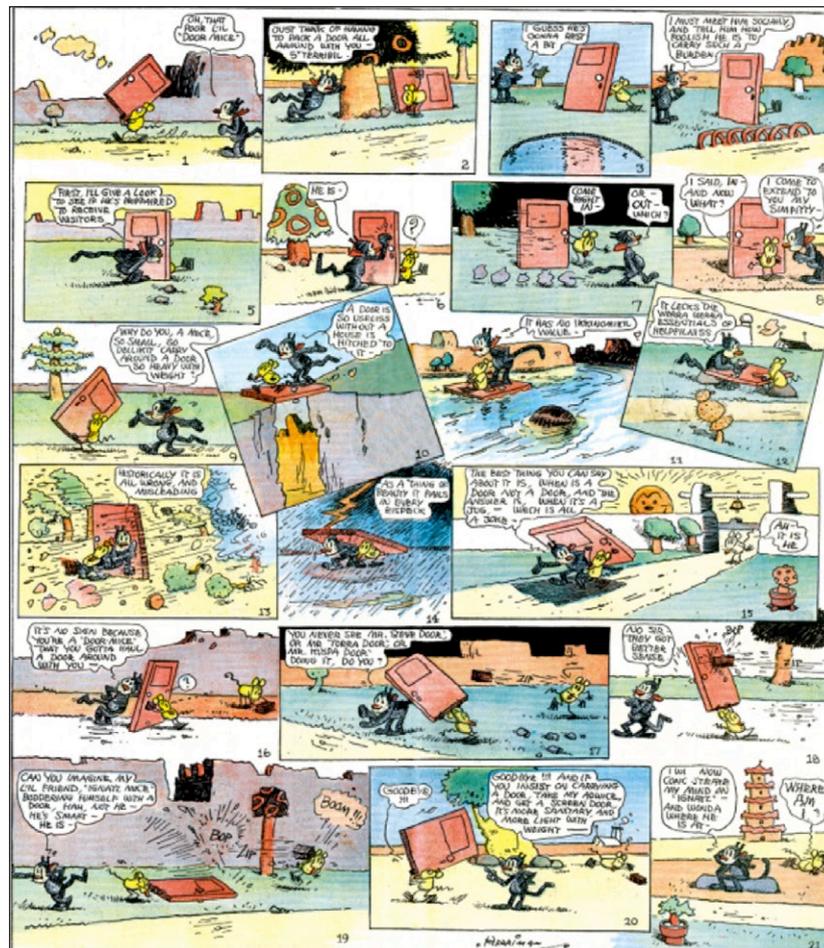


Figure 1: *Krazy Kat* strip for January 21, 1922.

important role in the discourse about *Krazy Kat* for the next half century, so it is worth examining its context more closely.

### Establishing Cult Value: *Krazy Kat* in *Vanity Fair*

The 'Hawana cigar' strip marked the apex of a brief 1922 campaign to expand the *Krazy Kat* franchise and increase its cultural capital. *Krazy Kat* had previously been the subject of children's merchandise and two extremely short-lived series of theatrical animated shorts, but this 1922 campaign seems designed to appeal to more sophisticated audiences.

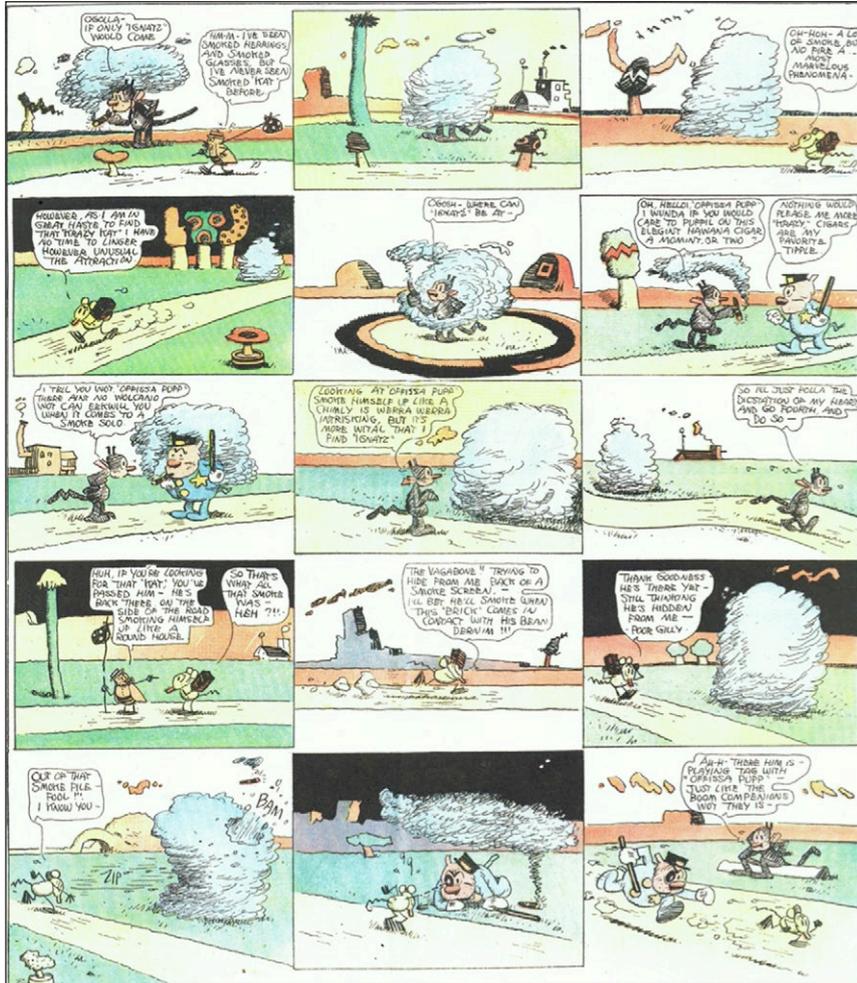


Figure 2: *Krazy Kat* strip for Saturday, March 11, 1922.

There were two components to the campaign. One was the staging of a '*Krazy Kat*' jazz ballet by John Murray Carpenter on January 20 at the New York Town Hall, to which Herriman contributed the story (previewed in the July 31, 1921 Sunday strip) consumes and set designs (Tisserand 2016: 304) and a lavishly illustrated program (Herriman 2007). Secondly, coinciding with this production, Hearst commissioned a second weekly full-page *Krazy Kat* strip from Herriman, to grace the front page of the *New York Journal's* inaugural Saturday comics section beginning on January 7. This meant New Yorkers got two new full-page *Krazy Kats* every week, with

the Saturday strips featuring, for the first time, Coconino County in full colour. On Sundays the *New York Journal* ran *Krazy Kat* in its more serious-minded commentary section, but now on Saturdays it served as the front page for an entire section dedicated to full-colour comics.

The first Saturday comics section debuted on January 7, featuring a *Krazy Kat* strip where Krazy helps put on a musical theatre production. Hearst's papers had 'opened veins of ink' on Carpenter's pending performance, so *Journal-American* readers would have certainly clued in to Herriman's allusion to the upcoming ballet (Blackbeard 1991). The timing of these two debuts was clearly orchestrated.

However, the expansion of the *Krazy Kat* empire was short-lived. Carpenter's ballet received 'highly favourable, if brief' reviews, and then was largely forgotten (Blackbeard 1991). Meanwhile, the Saturday strips were cancelled once Hearst looked at the circulation numbers and saw that the addition of the Saturday comics section had considerably boosted the performances of his papers outside of New York, which did not carry the colour *Krazy Kat*, while the *Krazy*-fronted *New York Journal* was lagging (Blackbeard 1991). The Saturday strip lasted just ten weeks. Later that year, Herriman would leave New York for an extended vacation in Arizona, the pinnacle of *Krazy Kat*'s time as a serious cultural force seemingly behind him (Tisserand 2016: 312). Herriman commented on this brief time in the spotlight in the April 16, 1922 Sunday strip, which sees Krazy become the unintended recipient of a newspaper where he appears on the front page of the comics section, only to have the paper snatched away from him in the penultimate panel (**Figure 3**).

The strip continued for twenty-two years, almost entirely on the basis of Hearst's respect for Herriman and acclaim from select critics. *Krazy* had been never tremendously popular with general newspaper readers (Tisserand 2016: 349), and local editors often tried to ditch the strip, only for Hearst force them to reinstate it (Clark 2013; Nasaw 2013). Eventually many editors won this particular battle: while 'most of King Features' strips appeared in hundreds of outlets; the *Kat* fanciers diminished until only 35 papers remained' (Kanfer 2013).

Papers were not the only place that Herriman's influence diminished. *Krazy Kat* merchandise published past 1922 increasingly departed from his designs and

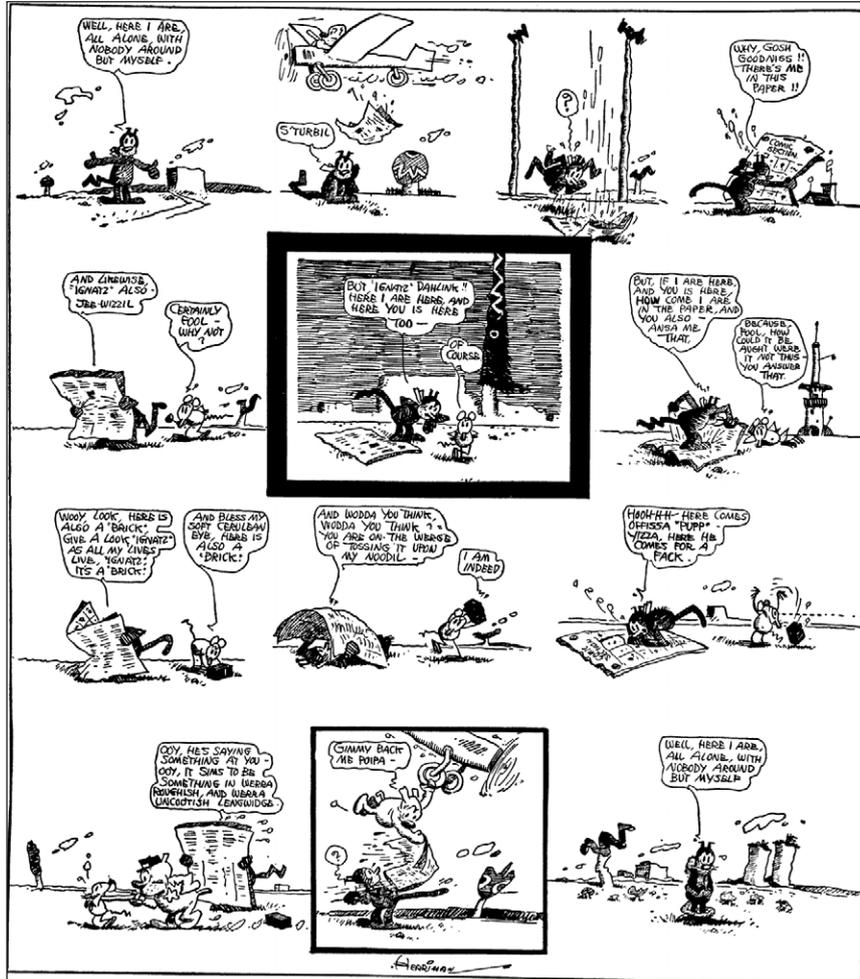


Figure 3: *Krazy Kat* strip for April 16, 1922.

from the practice of crediting him. The longest running series of *Krazy Kat* theatrical shorts began in 1925, but these new cartoons simply plastered the *Krazy Kat* name over an off-brand Felix the Cat knockoff. This series was more successful than its more Herriman-faithful predecessors, which had each lasted less than two weeks. The 1925 *Krazy-as-Felix* series continued until 1940, deviating farther and farther from its source material as time wore on, as can be seen in this title card (Figure 4) from a 1929 production (Dodgers 2007).



**Figure 4:** Columbia Pictures *Krazy Kat* animation title screen circa 1929 (source: <http://cartoonresearch.com/index.php/krazy-kat-storytime/>).

In the short term, then, the ballet and Saturday strips had failed to raise the commercial value of *Krazy Kat*. However, *Krazy Kat*'s cultural profile was elevated in their immediate aftermath, as for several months 'the popularity of *Krazy Kat* preoccupied New York magazines to a remarkable extent,' especially *Vanity Fair*, which published a review of the ballet by Deems Taylor in April, and included Herriman in that month's 'Hall of Fame' (Tisserant 2016: 309–310). In May, *Vanity Fair* ran Seldes' article that discussed Carpenter's ballet and lauded Herriman's dormouse strip that had been published the day after the ballet's premiere. Seldes also re-capped the 'Hawana cigar' strip for *Vanity Fair*, perhaps not realizing that this tenth Saturday *Krazy Kat* was also the final edition, and Herriman's last colour *Krazy Kat* for thirteen years. In describing this strip, Seldes had captured the peak of *Krazy Kat*'s cultural cache during Herriman's lifetime.

Carpenter's ballet had attracted the notice of Seldes and other writers in 1922 in part because the performance was limited to two days in one theatre. Benjamin argues that theatre performances create an irreproducible bond between actor and audience in time and space, which holds a great potential for cult value in a way that contrasts greatly with mechanically reproduced art like film or comics (Benjamin 2007: 228). The ballet then, created a newsworthy cultural moment for *Krazy Kat* that did not otherwise exist for the predictable publication of each strip. The limited number of

performances constrained the exhibition value of the ballet and presented an opportunity for critics to demonstrate their expertise, since after it was staged, their published opinions were all that remained of the performance (aside from Carpenter's published score and Herriman's printed playbill). Seldes' article addressed the ballet only briefly, but it provided an aura of contemporary cult value to *Krazy Kat* that gave the critic a reason to discuss the constantly reproduced, but rarely reprinted form of the comic strip. As he would later write, 'in the year of grace 1922 a ballet brought [*Krazy Kat*] a tardy and grudging acclaim' (Seldes 1924: 231).

The *Vanity Fair* article marked a significant event in both men's careers (trivially, but tellingly, Seldes commissioned Herriman to design his Christmas cards that year (Yoe 2011: 34)). Seldes' words provided important critical acclaim for Herriman, while for his part Seldes was so inspired from writing about Herriman that he began work on a collection of essays that would include a revised and expanded version of his 1922 article. This book, 1924's *The Seven Lively Arts* (Seldes 1924), became his most celebrated work, and a landmark of popular culture criticism in America. *Krazy Kat*'s prominent place in *The Seven Lively Arts* helped to preserve critical opinion of the strip, providing an exhibition value that Herriman's actual strips lacked. Seldes' critical opinion of *Krazy Kat* became a fixed text that could be easily accessed and discussed in a way eluded the newspaper comics.

Seldes was well aware of the problem that this presented. In the *Vanity Fair* article he apologized for his fawning but incomplete descriptions of Herriman's work, lamenting, 'It isn't possible to retell these pictures.' When he revised this article into a chapter for *The Seven Lively Arts*, he added a small plea: 'but that is the only way until they are collected and published' (Seldes 1924: 237). Reprint collections of comics were far from unprecedented; in 1887 a square-bound book reprinted Richard F. Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* strips from the previous year, and it was followed by more books reprinting other popular strips like *Mutt and Jeff* and *Bringing up Father* over the next two decades (Gabilliet 2010). A book-length collection of *Krazy Kat* might have seemed highly likely in early 1922, but by 1924 it was drifting further from possibility. Herriman never lived to see *Krazy Kat* collected in a book, aside from the dormouse strip which was reprinted in some editions of *The Seven Lively Arts*.

### ***Fixing a Text; Affixing a Mythology***

Carpenter's ballet and acclaim for Herriman from critics like Seldes succeeded in boosting *Krazy Kat's* cult value in the early 1920s, but its exhibition value remained limited until 1946, two years after Herriman's death, when Henry Holt & Co. published a book titled simply *Krazy Kat* (Herriman 1946) that gathered together roughly 200 daily and Sunday strips, mostly from *Krazy's* final decade and a half, along with a forward by famed poet E. E. Cummings. This forward played an important role in framing readers' perceptions and expectations of the strip now that it had vanished from the newspaper. In Cummings' own words, his essay was directly inspired by 'the celebration of *Krazy Kat* by Gilbert Seldes' twenty years prior (Cummings 2005: 44). In fact, it is Seldes' recollections of *Krazy Kat* that Cummings seems to have drawn upon, rather than on the strip itself.

Although Cummings never mentioned specific strips or individual moments from *Krazy Kat*, he drew directly from Seldes's description of the March 11, 1922 'Hawana cigar' Strip, which involves Ignatz accidentally hitting Offissa Pupp with a brick, leading to a physical altercation between the two. Seldes noted that up to this point, the action had been basic slapstick, but the grace note was, 'the final picture of *Krazy* beholding the pursuit ... muttering: "Ah, there him is-playing tag with 'Offisa Pupp'-just like the boom compenions wot they is." It is this touch of irony and pity which transforms all of Herriman's work... to something profoundly true and moving' (Seldes 1922: 104).

In Cummings' retelling, the moment is recast in even more mythic terms: '[*Krazy's*] unknowable wisdom blossoms in almost every episode of our meteoric burlesk melodrama; the supreme blossom, perhaps, being a tribute to Offissa Pupp and Ignatz Mouse – who (as she observes) are playing a little game together' (Cummings 2005: 45).

This incident is at the heart of Cummings' essay, in which Herriman's work is interpreted as an allegory about democracy as 'a struggle between society (Offissa Pupp) and the individual (Ignatz Mouse) over an idea (our heroine).' Writing only months after the end of World War II, Cummings made an oblique reference to Nazi Germany, positioning the democracy of *Krazy Kat* in opposition to 'those

red-brown-and-blackshirted Puritans who want us all to scrap democracy and adopt their modernized version of *follow the leader*—a strictly ultraprogressive and super-benevolent affair which begins with the liquidation of Ignatz Mouse by Offissa Pupp' (Cummings 2005: 45–46).

There are parallels between the concern Cummings' expresses here about modern, 'ultraprogressive' (i.e. fascist) forces destroying something human and valuable, and Benjamin's wary regard for the mechanical reproduction of art, which he considered to be 'intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements', both communism and fascism (Benjamin 2007: 221). Mechanically reproduced art, he wrote, 'is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage' (Benjamin 2007: 222).

In fact, this process can be seen in the reproduction of *Krazy Kat* in book form. The republication of the strips in a bound volume served liquidate the strip's original form and purpose as part of a newspaper which obtained its value through its date and place of publication. The original context of the comics needed to be culled in order for its exhibition value to be extended.

In the place of the strip's original ritualistic rhythm in the daily lives of its readers, Cummings presented *Krazy Kat* as a unified whole, and as a great modern American mythology. His foreword concluded that '*Krazy Kat* – who, with every mangled word and murdered gesture, translates a mangling and murdering world into Peace and Good Will – is the only original and authentic revolutionary protagonist' (Cummings 2005: 47).

This heartfelt, although perhaps overwrought, enthusiasm would be mimicked by future *Kat* commentators, although it had a notable detractor in the critic Robert Warshow, who chastised the all-encompassing symbolism that Cummings found in *Krazy Kat*. To Warshow, 'the haphazard and irresponsible fancy of George Herriman was capable of social comment, but it is not to be trusted with any systems ... If Offissa Pup was society of Monday, that placed no restriction on his program for Tuesday' (Warshow 1946: 590). Warshow argued that the meaning of *Krazy Kat* should not be separated from its original form as a newspaper strip. In the way that the strip was repeated daily with 'no beginning and no end, only an eternal

middle,' he saw parallels with the false consciousness of a disinterested, uncultured 'lumpenproletariat' (Warshow 1946: 590). With the publication of *Krazy Kat* as a book, however, these initial rhythms were liquidated. Warshow described the strip as it had existed in the ephemeral world of cult value, but the Henry Holt & Co book had provided it with a new kind of exhibition value, and potentially a new meaning.

The Holt collection rewrote the context of *Krazy Kat*, with a scattered selection of strips that spliced up the regular rhythm and steadily shifting motifs which Herriman had rearranged daily. The book inspired many critiques that were similarly mythical and monolithic, less a reflection of Herriman's work than a retelling of Cummings' opening interpretation of the strip, itself a recollection of Seldes' interpretation of that final colour Saturday strip (Mellquist 1947; Politzer 1949).

A typical example is the *Columbia Law Review* article about the Holt collection, where Karl Llewellyn effusively proclaimed that *Krazy Kat's* kop was a symbol of the ideal officer, and that 'never in history, before Herriman's Offissa Pup, has an artist done, for lawyer and for layman, the true essence of our job, for all of us to see together' (Llewellyn 1947: 337). To modern readers, this Cummingseque analysis 'while admirable, remains deeply unsatisfactory' (Dahlman 2012: 37).

Before *Krazy Kat* had been collected into a book, Seldes lamented that the only way to talk about the strips was to attempt to retell them, an impossible task which insufficiently represented the work. Following the Holt book, it became clear that reprinting a work of cult value as large as *Krazy Kat* and transforming it into a work of exhibition value is necessarily also an act of retelling, or recollecting.

### **New Collections; Renewed Recollections**

It would be more than two decades after the Holt book before a different collection appeared, in the form of *Krazy Kat: A Classic from the Golden Age of Comics*, first published in 1969 reprinted in 1975 (Herriman 1969). The new book republished Cummings' forward, continuing its influence in the discourse about *Krazy Kat* for another twenty years. In the late 1970s, when art historian Alan Gowans turned to newspaper comics, his treatment of *Krazy Kat* was distinctly Cummings-esque, calling the strip 'a glorious burlesque on the millennium of Quakers and Shakers and

Fabians and such sects who work to transform life on earth so that lion and lamb may lie down together, and all sins cease' (Gowans 1979: 552). The sheer number of articles about *Krazy Kat* which describe the strip as a 'burlesque' speak to Cummings' influence (c.f. Canaday 1968; McDonnell 1986; Wright 2011).

The next major *Krazy Kat* collection, published in 1986, took a slightly different tact. *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman* was the first book in forty years to not open with Cummings' foreword; instead it reprinted that article's inspiration: Seldes' *The Seven Lively Arts* article from sixty years prior. Edited by Patrick McDonnell (the cartoonist who later created the Herriman-inspired strip *Mutts*), Karen O'Connell and Georgia Riley de Havernon, the book also included biographical essays about Herriman, and a good number of his *Krazy Kat*-themed paintings and sketches. Released in conjunction with a Herriman exhibition at the Graham Gallery in Manhattan curated by de Havernon (Harakas 1986), the book reads like an exhibition catalogue of Herriman's '*Krazy Kat*' work, of which the comic strip was only one extension. Benjamin argues that because paintings have limited exhibition value prior to mechanical reproduction, 'there was no way for the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception' (Benjamin 2007: 235), giving art critics greater authority over the way paintings are understood and interpreted. By contrast for comic strips, like for films, cult value recedes because the public is positioned as critic, but a distracted, 'absent-minded one' (Benjamin 2007: 241). As a result of including Herriman's paintings and private artwork, the 1986 collection was able to further establish the authority of critics who praised Herriman's work, and to imply a greater 'aura' and cult value around his art. This came at the cost of obscuring the facts of *Krazy Kat*'s publication history in favour of extolling Herriman's genius, which in many ways served to mythologise the strip even further.

Indeed, even Adam Gopnik's frequently insightful take on *The Comic Art of George Herriman* for *The New York Book Review* begins with mythology:

By including Ignatz in his Eden, Herriman suggests why God allowed the serpent in Paradise—he wanted to create a world in which evil existed as a source of necessary energy but didn't cause suffering, and then somehow He

let it all get out of hand. Herriman shows us what would have happened had we all been luckier. (Gopnik 1986)

A review by John Canaday was representative of the discourse about *Krazy Kat*: 'He/she was, and remains, invulnerable to reduction, one of the great romantic figures of all time and – I've got to say it – a humanistic symbol of tremendous stature' (Canaday 1968). This reading of *Krazy Kat* as containing great mythic or symbolic value is largely a product of critics responding to the posthumous collections of Herriman's strip which were preceded by Cummings' foreword.

### **Systematically Establishing Exhibition Value**

So far, there have been three ages of mechanical reproduction and criticism of *Krazy Kat*. The first age transpired while Herriman was still alive, when critics like Baldwin and Seldes wrote about recently published newspaper strips, but there was no collected version of *Krazy Kat* to serve as a common reference point. The second age begins with, and is largely defined by the foreword Cummings wrote for the 1946 Holt *Krazy Kat* book; during this age readers and critics generally referred not to the strip as it had originally been published, but to the selection of strips that were republished in a handful of books. The third age, still ongoing, is characterized by systematic efforts beginning in the late 1980s to republish the entirety of Herriman's *Krazy Kat* strips in book format.

The systematic collection and republication of the strip is changing what it means to talk about Herriman's work. As Benjamin notes, precise reproduction enables more nuanced understanding and analysis, but comes at the cost of culling the 'aura' of an object under study (Benjamin 2007). The recent collections of Sunday strips compiled by Fantagraphics, for example, transform what was a ephemeral daily distraction into something more like a series of reference books. Cult value recedes with the establishment of exhibition value.

This archival project was achieved through the efforts of historians and collectors, most notably the late Bill Blackbeard. Called 'the man who gave comics its memory' (Heer 2011b), Blackbeard was hugely instrumental in the preservation of

classic comic strips, an effort he began in the 1960s when learned that libraries, including the Library of Congress, were destroying their collections of newspapers and replacing them with microfilm (Harvey 2011). Blackbeard catalogued and stored ultimately 75 tons of comics and other pop cultural ephemera in his basement, operating under the name of the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art (Robb 2009). This collection is now housed in the Ohio State University's Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum. In order to make these recovered comic strip artefacts into something that could be widely discussed, they had to be widely reproduced once again, in a durable, uniform format.

For *Krazy Kat*, Blackbeard's primary publishing project was to collect the entire run of full-page Sunday strips. This project started in 1988, with Eclipse Comics, who published the 1916–1925 strips, and was finally finished by Fantagraphics Books, who published the 1925–1944 strips between 2002 and 2008. Fantagraphics also reprinted the 1916–1924 strips in three volumes published between 2010–2012. Blackbeard passed away the year before the final 2012 volume was published, and it contains a dedication to him which reveals that 'Ninety-eight percent of the close to 1,500 *Krazy Kat* Sunday pages we published in the 13 volumes of this collection came straight from Bill's collection' (Thompson 2012). This structured collection and reproduction seems to have finally turned *Krazy Kat*, at least in its Sunday form, from an object with cult value to one with exhibition value; a text that can be systematically studied, rather than simply praised or mythologised. Projects to collect the daily strips are ongoing, with IDW's Library of American Comics imprint having recently released a volume of the 1934 strips (Herriman 2016), while Fantagraphics have indicated their desire to systematically tackle the dailies as well (Fantagraphics 2012).

## Conclusion

The ways that *Krazy Kat* has been collected and stored over the years changes how we read it, how we remember it, and how we write about it. This is a standardisation that has been called for since Seldes' day, a laying to rest of the multiplicity of editions and temporal sprawl that characterised *Krazy Kat*'s original publication. This re-collection has changed Herriman's work from the way it was originally read,

but it makes it possible for it to be read anew and studied in a way that was not possible, and perhaps not even conceivable when the strip was 'live.' These projects of standardization have required both the advocacy of critics like Baldwin, Seldes and Cummings to establish a significant aura of cult value *Krazy Kat* along with the archival work of collectors like Blackbeard to preserve the strip's exhibition value.

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin compares painters to magicians and photographers to surgeons. When it comes to the work of preserving classic comic strips, the critic may also be considered analogous to the magician, and the archivist to the surgeon:

The magician heals a sick person by laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient's body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself by penetrating into the patient's body, and increases it but little by the caution with which he moves among the organs. (Benjamin 2007: 233).

Critics like Seldes and Cummings created cult value for *Krazy Kat* by using their cultural authority, and while their analysis was necessarily at a distance from the entirety of Herriman's work, they served to mediate the distance between the newspaper strip and the readers of their critiques. Archivists like Blackbeard and the publishers of the various *Krazy Kat* reprint volumes created exhibition value by penetrating the newspapers that the strips were published in, extracting the strips from this context, and placing them systematically on display for new readers to examine with their own eyes.

Similarly to how surgeons have surpassed magicians and photography caused a crisis in painting, the ability to examine *Krazy Kat* in a systematically reproduced way has unmasked the roles of critics like Seldes and Cummings for modern readers of Herriman's work, who can now understand the strip in terms of specifics rather

than generalisations or mythologies. The recent publication of Michael Tisserand's meticulous biography of Herriman is another step in that direction (Tisserand 2016).

It is possible to imagine a fourth age of *Krazy Kat* criticism, which will commence when, and if, the systematic republication of Herriman's daily strips is complete, and the entire corpus of *Krazy Kat* is laid bare for analysis. Of course, even this version will be unable to replicate the context of the strips as they were originally printed, on particular days and in particular parts of the United States. Perhaps a Borgian fifth age will come to pass if the thousands of individual newspapers *Krazy Kat* was printed in are one day archived digitally and made easily searchable; when a page on which *Krazy Kat* was printed in New York can instantly be compared with the versions that were printed in Chicago, Seattle or Peoria and cross-referenced with events in Herriman's life and the King Features Syndicate, the exhibition value of the strip might become more fully realized, and its context more completely understood. The cost of this increasing exhibition value, of course, is the liquidation of *Krazy Kat*'s cult value.

I suspect that even when *Krazy Kat*'s exhibition value has far outweighed its cult value, critics and readers will still find reasons to return to the strip. Benjamin suggests that 'one of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later' (Benjamin 2007: 237). We can see this in the struggle between kat, mouse and kop, where pleasure is derived from anticipating how the next variation of the theme will unfold. We can also see it in the collections republications of *Krazy Kat* strips, where there is seemingly always more left to reprint, and to collect.

### **Editorial Note**

Following Norman Friedman, the editors opted for using 'E. E. Cummings' instead of 'e e cummings' on this article (Friedman 1992: 114–121).

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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