

**ANALYSIS ON LGBTI+ REPRESENTATION IN SUPERHERO COMICS: ON THE REPRESENTATION OF THE CHARACTER ROBIN IN BATMAN: URBAN LEGENDS # 6**

***ANÁLISE SOBRE REPRESENTAÇÕES LGBTI+ EM QUADRINHOS DE SUPERHERÓIS: SOBRE A PERSONAGEM ROBIN EM BATMAN: URBAN LEGENDS NÚMERO 6***

***REPRESENTACIONES LGBTI+ EN CÓMICS DE SUPERHÉROES: SOBRE ROBIN EN BATMAN: URBAN LEGENDS # 6***

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**ABSTRACT:** The article aims to carry out an analysis of a certain issue which had an impact on the world of comic books; we refer to the fact that Robin, an important character in DC Comics, came out as bisexual in recent history. In this research we will use qualitative methodology, to approach this point in the light of the history of American comics, something that involves historical and socio-anthropological elements. In terms of bibliography, we will rely on authors such as Guilherme Miorando, Dandara Cruz, Lucas Dalbeto, Darieck Scott, Ramzi Fawaz, Rob Lendrum, Mário Paiva, Irene Caravaca etc. Our conclusion will look at how this new representation of Robin approaches his LGBTI+ issue in a frontal way, soon moving away from categories more prone to critic such as *queerbaiting*, *queer coding* or *a conservative representation of the issue*.

**KEYWORDS:** LGBTI+. Comics. Robin. Queer. DC.

**RESUMO:** O artigo visa realizar uma análise de certa questão conjuntural, que obteve impacto no mundo das histórias em quadrinhos; referimo-nos ao fato de Robin, uma personagem importante da DC Comics, ter se mostrado membro da comunidade LGBTI+ em história recente. Nesta pesquisa usaremos metodologia qualitativa, para abordar tal ponto pela luz da história dos quadrinhos americanos, algo que envolve elementos históricos e socioantropológicos. Nos termos de bibliografia, nos fiaremos em autores como Guilherme Miorando, Dandara Cruz, Lucas Dalbeto, Darieck Scott, Ramzi Fawaz, Rob Lendrum, Mário Paiva, Irene Caravaca etc. Nossa conclusão irá observar como esta nova representação de Robin aborda sua questão LGBTI+ de modo frontal, logo se afasta de categorias mais criticáveis como *queerbaiting*, *queer coding* ou uma representação conservadora da questão.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** LGBTI+. Comics. Robin. Queer.

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**RESUMEN:** *El artículo tiene como objetivo hablar de cierto tema coyuntural, que tuvo repercusión en el mundo de las historietas; nos referimos a que Robin, un personaje importante de DC Comics, ha demostrado ser miembro de la comunidad LGBTI+. En esta investigación utilizaremos metodología cualitativa, para abordar este punto a la luz de la historia del cómic americano, algo que involucra elementos históricos y socio-antropológicos. Nos apoyaremos en autores como Guilherme Miorando, Dandara Cruz, Lucas Dalbeto, Darieck Scott, Ramzi Fawaz, Rob Lendrum, Mário Paiva, Irene Caravaca, etc. Nuestra conclusión analizará cómo esta nueva representación de Robin aborda su tema LGBTI+ de manera frontal, alejándose pronto de categorías más criticables como el queerbaiting, le queer coding, o una representación conservadora del tema.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *LGBTI+. Comics. Robin. Queer.*

## Introduction

As discussed in Sarene Alexandrian (1993), Michel Foucault (2010) etc., there are representations of non-heterosexual love from ancient times, even with their own rules. If some of the foundations of our knowledge of the Greek world involve Homer, Plato, lyric poetry etc.<sup>2</sup>, this issue, of non-heterosexual relationships, was already widespread in all these works.

With such a starting point, that the representation of non-heterosexual love is something very old, in addition to being historically and socially shaped, we would like in this text to focus on contemporary pop culture, more specifically to discuss elements of American comics, having in mind greater focus a recent publication by the publisher DC Comics, which featured an LGBTI+ representation of a famous character from the brand, we make reference to the character Robin, in the story Batman: Urban Legends number 6, of 2021.

Why the study of pop? Because in agreement with Dandara Cruz (2017) or Slavoj Žižek (2017; 2018), we believe that there are forms of symbolic, ideological legitimation in the contents consumed<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, what is produced, as popular culture, presents elements of what is accepted or rejected, being material for historical, sociological and anthropological analysis. Here, in other words, we are dealing with elements that are not neutral. The way a comic is colored, drawn, written, can tell us something about its historical period; it helps us to see what he tells us in terms of entertainment or estrangement in the face of some issue, such as the way that certain artists worked with their female characters or with ethnic minorities, in the United States, or with such characters, possibly LGBTI+.

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<sup>2</sup> See Otto Maria Carpeaux (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Something that Foucault himself could point out, when talking about the existence of a productive power and the relationship between powers, knowledge and subjectivities themselves.

Pierre Bourdieu (2011) presents them, comics, as medium arts in the process of being legitimized, do not have full acceptance by the holders of greater capital within the social fabric, so there is a marginal element. Darieck Scott e Ramzi Fawaz (2018, p. 197), for example, remember how there is something queer about them, with abundant social or aesthetic markers. Being a popular medium among such queer subjectivities, even if comics studies and queer theory could dialogue more.

Mark Best (2005, p. 86), in turn, when analyzing hero comics from the 1950s, says that they represent a predominantly male world, the woman appears as an intruder, being at best an inconvenience; at worst a threat to male freedom. And the camaraderie between the hero and his sidekick is represented more strongly than any heterosexual relationship.

From horror stories or comic magazines, from the 1950s, we see a social critique of the post-war American way of life, and certain elements can be read in allegorical ways, such as the look and empowerment of Wonder Woman, or the Legacy virus in X-men<sup>4</sup>, which has a parallel with the HIV crisis of the 1980s (FAWAZ; SCOTT, 2018). With a whole question of fear, prejudice, violence, opportunistic politicians, etc.

The present investigation is qualitative. And in terms of methodology, it was divided as follows: first, there was a literature review on this relationship between LGBTI+ studies and comics; second, our work was directed to a reading and analysis of an element still little seen in the *state of the art* of such field of studies, the mentioned edition of DC Comics; third, then we put ideal typologies, for the delimitation of the question, and classify the collected material; in a typology that, in our understanding, can be useful for other similar studies that seek an analysis of comics, or other relatively similar fields of pop.

The guiding question of the investigation was: was the representation of the LGBTI+ element of the character Robin a sufficient element or did it end up bumping into common problems in the relationship between such media and queer? In other words, is there *queer coding*, *queerbaiting*<sup>5</sup> or *what we call conservative representation*?

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<sup>4</sup> To think about the question of mutants, from the X-men universe, Guilherme Miorando (2020) and Lucas Dalbeto (2015) prove to be useful; Miorando shows, for example, that such stories can be read as a dialogue with social struggles, see the manifestations of activists for the rights of black people in the United States. In the 1980s, with AIDS, and a whole discussion of *deviant* sexualities, the question of comparison involving ethnic minorities turned more towards the universe of *deviant* sexualities. Dalbeto (2015) says that at Marvel there was room for feminist and ethnic discussions (even during the Cold War) etc. (DALBETO, 2015, p. 12, our translation).

<sup>5</sup> Following the reading of Caravaca (2017), we can point out that this concept is recent and involves the construction of a homoerotic subtext, which would not culminate in a romance, as would be analogous in the case of a heterosexual couple. It's difficult to trace the origin of the term queerbaiting, but it involves sites like Tumblr and LiveJournal, circa 2010.

It is also important to mention how queer is a complex concept to work with, at certain times, due to its breadth<sup>6</sup>. However, we will use the work *Queerbaiting: the unfulfilled promise of queer representation*, by Irene Caravaca (2017), as a major contribution to the concept.

When studying this history of American comics, Anglophiles in broader terms, as there was a whole influence and action by authors from Great Britain as well, it is worth noting: we proposed a research clipping, which thus leaves out, or just briefly comments, a lot of interesting stuff. Be it the eroticism of Belgian Éric Losfeld's or Guido Crepax's editions; be it the Italian punk of the 70s, from the character RanXerox, for example; or even the entire world of comics, manga, Japanese.

Our article is divided into four parts. It started with this introduction. Then move on to the section called *LGBTI+ representations in American comics*, in which, as the name explains, we are going to analyze a little of the LGBTI+ issue in comics. In the third part, we will make a more targeted and specific analysis to the theme of the character Robin, this part is called *Analysis of Batman: Urban Legends number 6*. We end with the final considerations, which will close the present investigation.

It is worth mentioning that the sociology of comics, and related topics, is still relatively inappropriate material in Brazilian academic debates. Therefore, this article aims to be an introductory work to the universe of discussions.

### **LGBTI+ representations in American comics**

It is commonplace to show how certain sexual issues, historically, were treated with violence and repression<sup>7</sup>, in a power that commonly met with individuals to punish them, whether by legal, medical, religious power etc. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a moral and religious condemnation, which involved the heinous sin and the figure of sodomites, as well as a whole medical attempt to contain this type of difference, with greater classification specifications over time. In this sense, the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century

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<sup>6</sup> As Caravaca (2017, p. 2) points out, queer, in simple terms, is what is not straight. The word carried a sense of otherness, separating heterosexuals from the perverse, gays, lesbians, among other terms. However, in the 1980s, the LGBTI+ community fought and claimed the term, as an umbrella concept to break the binarism, heterosexual vs homosexual. Therefore, it involves everything that is foreign to the *normal*, legitimized, dominant pattern. This dominance involves neglecting these other representations or, worse, performing prejudiced representations. The term queer theory, in turn, was only created in the 1990s. On the other hand, Miorando (2021, p. 117), on the term queer, recalls how it refers, following a reading by Judith Butler, not to a question of identity, but alliances. What reaffirms how queer is an umbrella concept, which encompasses different positions, different minorities.

<sup>7</sup> See James Green (2019), James Green & Renan Quinalha (2018), João Trevisan (2018), Adriana Nunan (2003), Bruno Bimbi (2017), Murilo Mota (2019), Luiz Mott etc.

are marked by an ambivalence, if on the one hand there is still a lot in terms of violence and prejudice, there is, on the other hand, a series of legal, symbolic, classificatory victories etc. (See NUNAN, 2003; TREVISAN, 2018; GREEN, 2019; BIMBI, 2017).

In these terms, the history of comics, in its own way, accompanies this journey. It goes from silence and veiled representations to open and positive representations of the issue (See CRUZ, 2017; PAIVA, 2021). Miorando (2021, p. 125) speaks of a silencing, embargo following Judith Butler's contribution, of the media in the face of a negotiation about the lives that should be represented; there is thus a filter, a selection. That's why putting these precarious lives in evidence through art and the media is a way of asking that these people be remembered, considered.

Se Darieck Scott and Ramzi Fawaz (2018) highlight the existing queer and marginal elements in the world of comics. Cruz (2017, p. 18), in turn, highlights the other side of the issue, that these stories, being aimed at a more male audience, would have focused mainly on their fantasies and heteronormative elements. He thus correlates these characters with an exaggerated masculinity and an objectification of the feminine.

The imagery, the aesthetics, emphasizes the elements commonly seen as masculine, and there are the sculptural bodies of a pattern correlated to the classical Greco-Roman aesthetics. Something visible if we analyze Tarzan's artistic standards, in Hal Foster's traits; Flash Gordon, drawn by Alex Raymond; inside others. A high point of the vanguardism of the comics *The Spirit*, created by Will Eisner, did not flee from such orthodoxy, even with a certain air of mockery (CRUZ, 2017). And in terms of a certain classical aesthetic<sup>8</sup>, it is worth mentioning how this one is focused on elements such as the beautiful, the harmonic and the healthy.

In recent decades, the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the LGBTI+ began to occupy more space in the public scene, thus bringing their discussions more explicitly, with a whole question of representation, inclusion, and of course, the quality of such representation and inclusion. At times, as Mário Paiva (2021) points out, there are quarrels between more conservative and more progressive sectors of these fields of consumption. An issue that was already seen in other fields of the market, as Adriana Nunan (2003) demonstrated.

About an entire history of comics, it is not up to us to make its genealogy<sup>9</sup>. However, it is worth mentioning that newspaper strips in the 20th century, initially comic, still close to the

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<sup>8</sup> See Scruton (2013).

<sup>9</sup> As Dalbeto (2015, p. 31-32) points out, some associate the point of origin of comics with cave paintings, due to the narrative character of the images. Even with disagreements, a certain idea of a narrative through the succession of images, with or without the verbal element, seems to be recurrent. Historian Wellington Srbek, on the other hand, associates a first step for the emergence of comics with the modern moment, with Gutenberg's press;

universe of caricatures and cartoons, were very successful, and it is from such a field that the exclusive market for this type of story developed. In the late 1920s, characters such as Tarzan or Buck Rogers, and later Flash Gordon and Prince Valiant, developed adventure stories, moving away from the comic (DALBETO, 2015, p. 35-36).

Heroes are thus linked in this North American media, at the end of the 1920s, to the moment of economic crisis, in characters that represent order and justice (DALBETO, 2015, p. 40). Dalbeto (2015, p. 42) addresses, in a recurring discussion, a certain relationship between the heroes and the dominant interests. At the end of the 1930s, 1938, Superman appears, and with him a whole model of superhero (DALBETO, 2015, p. 43)<sup>10</sup>.

About the LGBTI+ field itself: some characters from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s are considered, by Cruz (2017, p. 48), as allusions to homosexuality, but such issues have their ambiguity<sup>11</sup>. And this involves, we believe, the concept of queer coding, that is, a veiled representation, because these cultural factors could be associated with the sexual element of the characters. In terms of criticism of queer coding, it is worth mentioning how it can be associated with villainous or morally ambiguous characters; before the idealization, strength, righteousness and masculinity of the hero<sup>12</sup>.

In terms of comics, even with ambiguities, an important cutting point is the 1954 book by the German psychiatrist Friderick Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*. This author believed that such stories led young people to delinquency, such as the so-called sexual disorders (CRUZ, 2017, p. 56). With criticism of Wonder Woman, and a crucial importance of the character Robin in such a story, because this would be, along with the character Batman, a veiled representation of a homosexual couple.

On this aspect, Rob Lendrum (2004, p. 70) comments on how this genre of heroes was really criticized, because they would be representations of homoeroticism, with those muscular men in pantyhose. Since this criticism of Dr. Wertham one of the most famous. In this reading, by Wertham, the position of helper is seen as a typical female position, of a damsel constantly

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associating this type of history with the element of technical reproducibility, in which the printing of images already played a role in the 16th century, through woodcuts (DALBETO, 2015, p. 32).

<sup>10</sup> There was also a relationship, in that decade, to the fight against Nazi proposals, such as Superman helping the weak, being a pacifist, in which the character was banned in Germany. There is even a story, from 1940, in which Superman captures Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin and takes them to trial at the League of Nations (DALBETO, 2015, p. 45-46). Captain America, created in 1941, places the political element even more explicitly, because on the cover of its first issue we already see him knocking out Hitler (DALBETO, 2015, p. 48-49).

<sup>11</sup> Here we can mention, for example, the character Papa Pyzon – with her earrings and colors, which indicate that she is possibly wearing makeup – from the strips *Terry and the pirates* (CRUZ, 2017, p. 52).

<sup>12</sup> In these terms, we can also think of the murderers in *Rope*, a 1948 film directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

in distress, he also comments on Robin's bare legs and green underwear (LENDRUM, 2004)<sup>13</sup>. Robin's own name, Dick, was commented by that author (CRUZ, 2017, p. 57).

Parallels between certain issues of the heroes and queer topics really can be made, if we think, for example, of Guilherme Miorando (2020, p. 224), who shows how both work with a double life<sup>14</sup>. A masquerade, to pretend to be *normal*. In which certain differences are more maskable than others, both in the field of sexuality and in the stories of heroes with great powers (MIORANDO, 2020, p. 232).

There followed, in the American case, a period of concern with comics and a possible government intervention led the producers themselves to create a code of restrictions, which guaranteed a quality seal for the stories that followed these norms. This was the Comics Code Authority, CCA, established by the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1954. Among the stipulated norms, it was mentioned that *sexual abnormalities* were unacceptable in such stories (CRUZ, 2017, p. 61-62).

Even with the CCA in force, however, there were characters who seemed to represent sexual minorities, but it could not go much further, so one can still classify such proposals within the domain of queer coding. However, Lendrum (2004, p.70) says that this element, veiled, may have allowed for polysemous readings of the issue, which went against the objective of the regulatory body itself. He points out that the Batman character's 1960s series used, in this reading, the element of gay ambiguity to its advantage. Marcelo Niel (2004), in an apparent agreement, recalls how Bob Kane himself, creator of the character, knew that the series appealed to the queer audience and, when asked about this element, spoke of tight clothes and a usual joy of the community<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> For Wertham, as Cruz (2017, p. 57) demonstrates, there would be a kind of idyllic dream of a homosexual couple living together, with their sumptuous rooms, beautiful flowers in large vases, and their butler. Soon the psychiatrist believed that such a pair could influence children with homosexual fantasies, even of an unconscious nature. Some excerpts that may have influenced Wertham's ideas: at one moment we see such a duo portrayed sharing a bed; in another moment both are naked in a tanning room.

<sup>14</sup> Queer appears as something that does not fit. And this duality can confuse the character and the reader about what role the character plays in society, a theme that has already been extensively explored in comics. The question of identity itself, as Miorando also shows, is not a fixed element, but involves a range of options and ways to fit in and identify with certain parameters. In which this revealing of the queer perhaps resembles, even more, the revealing of a villain, if we take as a basis how the LGBTI+ field is still shown to be quite stigmatized. The queer would thus ask and request authorization, in addition to having to notify its existence.

<sup>15</sup> But this series annoyed certain fans, there was also an attempt to bring back the *dignity* of the Batman character in certain comics, making him *heterosexual* again, and thus taking the large gay element off the radar. The character Dick leaves home for college, eventually retiring his Robin costume; with a more mature look, the character Darkwing emerged. In the sequel, the second Robin dies thanks to the villainous Joker. While the third Robin would go through some modifications, to avoid this interpretation of love between a mature man and a boy, this third one did not live with Batman and had green pants. It's also worth remembering how author Frank Miller chose to cast Robin as a teenage girl. (LENDRUM, 2004).

With greater political representation in the 60s, 70s and 80s, such issues seemed to be bubbling up even with the CCA. But a point for greater freedom of representation in comics, perhaps it came first in stories aimed at a more adult audience and more marginal stamps. Soon Frank Miller, Neil Gaiman<sup>16</sup>, Alan Moore<sup>17</sup> etc., seem to have had greater freedom.

The story *Arkham Asylum*, from 1989, that is, the end of the 1980s, also deserves mention, as Paiva (2021, p. 8) points out, by showing a different version of the character Joker. With long painted nails, heels and sex jokes<sup>18</sup>. There is even a joke involving Robin, asking if such a character had already reached the age of shaving<sup>19</sup>.

Meanwhile, also in the 1980s, we see certain veiled representations, such as Mago Extraño, from DC Comics, which, due to its stereotypes, managed to displease the LGBTI+ public, as well as the most conservative readers (CRUZ, 2017). The character falls into the idea of a comic gay man, more concerned with his own hair than with more serious issues. It is also worth mentioning the case studied by Dalbeto (2015, p. 70) of the character Northstar, from Marvel, which John Byrne wanted to portray as openly homosexual, in 1983, but was unable to do so. He thus left clues that such a character was not attracted to women (See DALBETO, 2015).

About the 90s, we saw artists less restricted to the elements of the CCA and a new generation emerged that could deal, in a more open way, with the sexual elements of their characters, see certain productions of the *Image* publishing house, but there was the other side of the coin, that could be done in an appealing way, as shown by Cruz (2017).

It was in 1992 that the character Northstar revealed to be homosexual. Soon Dalbeto says that Northstar was the first openly homosexual superhero published by a mainstream publisher (DALBETO, 2015, p. 12). Even if later, it did not gain due developments and highlights. It was only in 2012 that he drew great attention, after 20 years of declaring himself gay, with his marriage proposal to his boyfriend (DALBETO, 2015, p. 88). The publisher's marketing team explored the event well, because it seems they wanted to make this wedding the publisher's event of the year (DALBETO, 2015, p. 89).

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<sup>16</sup> See Neil Gaiman (2019).

<sup>17</sup> See Alan Moore (2005).

<sup>18</sup> See Grant Morrison (2012).

<sup>19</sup> It's also worth mentioning how this isn't the only story to insinuate some queer sexual element into the Joker character. Frank Miller (2011), for example, with his classic *The Dark Knight* of 1986, already provided certain indications, by revealing the Joker applying lipstick at a certain moment, something typically associated with the feminine. Already the animation *Batman of the Future: Return of the Joker*, from 2000, presents the character wearing black agender clothes, of some tight material, like vinyl.



From the 2000s onwards, Cruz (2017) points to more positive and open representations of the issue. The number of lesbian, gay or bisexual characters increased in the 21st century, something that also gained space in animation, as Paiva (2021) pointed out, so today there are cartoons with LGBT+ representation, such as *Adventure Time* or *Star vs the forces of evil* or *She-ha*. It is also worth highlighting a trans character in DC (See CRUZ, 2019, p. 119) and how certain characters more explicitly deviated from gender rules, see the character, from the Marvel publisher, Tong (See CRUZ, 2019, p. 123).

And the number of openly queer characters continues to increase, so it's also worth mentioning the character of Ken Shiga, or Koi Boi, the character is a trans hero from the publisher Marvel, and Shade, Marvel's first drag queen superhero.

### ***Batman: Urban Legends #6*** **Review**

If the closest you can get to an openly *LGBTI+* Robin, for a while, were in fanarts, fanfics etc., a topic that is still little addressed and discussed in the academic field, now that has changed. Because if the open discussions were on smaller labels and more adult characters, as in the case of the character Constantine (PAIVA, 2021); now we see major American publishers betting on inclusion, with strong characters from their main labels. Be it Robin, Superman, Green Lantern; passing, in the Marvel publishing house, for an alternative version of Wolverine, that kisses the character Hercules, or Iceman<sup>20</sup>. Even the film *Eternals*, 2021, deserves to be highlighted, as a work that presented one of the heroes as a member of the *LGBTI+* community.

Mas, eis o ponto, o qual nós voltamos sobre a personagem Robin: essa representação é, dentro de certos padrões, uma boa representação? Ou esbarra nos conceitos de *queer coding*, *queerbaiting* ou em uma representação conservadora?

Ideally, here we work with a continuum, which goes from queer coding and queerbaiting, through *conservative or moderate representations*, until we reach the *central representations*. Let us explain these concepts better, before moving on to the analysis of the material.

Queer coding, as we have seen, is veiled representation. The character presents elements that can be associated with a queer identity, but this is never open. The biggest criticism of queer coding, perhaps, involves a common relationship between these possibly queer characters

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<sup>20</sup> As we know there is a lot of this, alternate versions, in the comics..

and an implicit moral critique; something pointed out, for example, by Caravaca (2017). Some representation, in certain cases, we can assume, is better than none, and certain characters who enter queer coding are really appreciated by fans, but that element of criticism is very relevant<sup>21</sup>.

Queerbaiting, on the other hand, proves to be a concept close to the one mentioned above, in the sense that it is also, possibly, a veiled representation of an LGBTI+ entity, but with a more positive marketing intent, it wants to capture the queer public, already in the internet age, already at a time when representations are more possible and desired. That is, it seems less associated with *stricto sensu* antagonists, but it could also just be a strong friendship between two heterosexual characters etc., something pointed out by Caravaca (2017, p. 9).

Queerbaiting is not exclusively about the comic or the show or the movie itself. But as producers, directors, illustrators, they can, in interviews, conferences, online profiles etc., stir up the curiosity of the LGBTI+ community, for the possibility of the existence of a certain representation<sup>22</sup>.

Caravaca (2017, p. 10), in this sense, addresses that this type of category is toxic, because it would end up reinforcing a current heteronormativity, in which the characters are heterosexual, and the possibility of bisexuality, for example, is not considered, according to the conservative reading of part of the audience<sup>23</sup>.

As a concept, queerbaiting seems like a generic label, a nuisance or noise between content producers and consumers. As a vague name, there are many discussions that still need to be done, to become something rigorous, but with the sum of circumstantial and hermeneutical elements, it becomes a useful label, when pointing out the displeasure of the LGBTI+ community with promises that seem not to be fulfilled.

The apparent queerbaiting may not lead to displeasure and frustration, it is also worth saying that the subtextual element can be satisfying, the series has even the last chapter to turn the tables, break this element that would possibly lead to discomfort. Caravaca (2017, p. 6) speaks of the 2013 series *Hannibal* as an example of a story with a perfectly executed homoerotic subtext. The ending, even implied, satisfies, there is no kiss or sex, but there is a hug from the characters covered in blood, before a somersault off a cliff. It is worth

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth remembering at least one more positive example, the animation *Luca* from 2021, which, due to a series of elements, can be read as the story of a young person discovering to be LGBTI+.

<sup>22</sup> On this issue, Wunderlich Moraes (2018, p. 40) also points out a surprise that there is no LGBTI+ relationship between the characters, as they would have been led to believe that there would be something there..

<sup>23</sup> As the article is not specifically about queerbaiting, we will not delve into the representations that received such a label on television, however it is worth pointing out how Caravaca (2017) speaks of a triad in his corpus of analyzes, of male cases, referring to the series *Supernatural* (2005), *Sherlock* (2010) and *Teen Wolf* (2011). Caravaca speaks of tropes of long looks between male characters or even how the scenes are filmed, demonstrating a whole physical proximity between such characters.

remembering how Paiva (2021) points out the case of *Adventure time*, which also leaves the kiss for its last episode.

What we are calling conservative representations are representations close to queerbaiting, they can even mix, we believe, but with an ideal difference: while the previous concept involves a veiled representation, the conservative representation is not veiled, it exists, but it is very fast or discreet; which can also make members of the LGBTI+ community uncomfortable, because in the end, as in the previous concept, it involves a concern not to irritate conservative or reactionary portions of consumers.

Now, what do we call *moderate representations*? These are stories that feature openly LGBTI+ characters, even if this is not the central point of the plot. That is, the queer character appears as a normal element, which makes up the story. A good recent example is the horror series *Chucky*, 2021, the main character is gay, everyone around knows it, and this is an element of the plot, while fighting the villain of the series, which is Chucky<sup>24</sup>.

About the *central representation*, here we can think of comics or series or films that place the queer element as the core of the existing plot. Obvious examples are manga that work specifically with such a romantic universe, here we refer to the universe of *BL*, *Yaoi* products etc.<sup>25</sup> There is no lack of cases in this Japanese market, with a series of subdivisions within this universe, with aesthetic variations, etc. To stay with just one example, it is worth mentioning *Junjo Romantica*<sup>26</sup>.

Now that we understand the concepts ideally traced; What ideal type does Robin's story in *Batman: Urban Legends* #6 fit into?

The plot already begins in the middle of the action, as this is the second issue of a larger story arc, in which the character Robin, Tim Drake, is going to save his friend Bernard from a group of bandits, and there is a fight. The character's revelation, as LGBTI+, is something that happens at the end of the story. When later, after the physical combat, the character Tim goes to Bernard's house and he ends up asking him out, which Robin accepts and the edition ends.

In terms of representation, it is a simple representation, and as in the analysis made by Paiva (2021), of the relationship between the characters Constantine and King Shark, there is no kiss or other great sign of affection of the gender. Tim Drake, when this happens, is not

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<sup>24</sup> The killer toy himself in certain scenes says he has no problems with the character's sexuality, he still remembers how he had a queer descendant in the franchise, referring to the 2004 film *Chucky's son*, in which there was a discussion about whether such a character would be Glen or Glenda; in a reference to the film, by Ed Wood, titled *Glen or Glenda* de 1954.

<sup>25</sup> See Marcos Teixeira (2017), Zsila *et al.* (2018) e Tanko (2009, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> See Shungiku Nakamura (2006).

dressed as Robin either, so he ends up referring less to the classic and more easily recognizable elements of the character.

On the aesthetic issue, a first element that can be noted is how the directors work with young and beautiful characters, so there is still a possible parallel with a classic aesthetic ideal of the healthy, beautiful and harmonious. In that now, in turn, such a queer issue has been inserted in the field of harmonic and healthy, this would have been more difficult in other times, as already seen.

The choice for young bodies, not very muscular or hairy, is also not indifferent, it is easy to assume that it would have a greater impact on conservative readers if they opted for an art closer to a *Bara aesthetic*<sup>27</sup>. Or if there was a greater challenge to the standards of what is socially seen as masculine or feminine; that is, it would certainly cause more *uproar* in conservative plots if, for example, the character Robin appeared with feminine clothes and makeup.

So maybe it's okay for a portion of the audience for Robin, a central character of the publisher, to kiss another boy, but would it be okay if Robin appeared in a miniskirt or lipstick? To what extent does the character's *respectability* still involve, even queer, being associated with the masculine? Because the first characters that we remember, from major publishers and major labels, who could more clearly challenge certain gender issues, were exactly characters with some comic vein, this is the case of Deadpool or Joker or even Extraño.

With the strengthening of *agender, genderless fashion*<sup>28</sup>, as seen in certain recent *Balenciaga* collections, the idea of a cross between certain aesthetic trends and the look of the great heroes of the publishers is a point of interest for future investigations. When will we have Superman in miniskirts and mini tops that show off his abs? In the last episode of the first season of *Sandman*, Desire appeared with tight black pieces, in addition to lipstick, earrings and a furry accessory, a tiara with *cat ears*. Would that be a conceivable look today to put on the character of Robin?

An equally interesting aesthetic element of DC's annotated edition is how it works with colors and contrast. If in the conflict with the villains the tones are darker, charged, nocturnal. The character's later visit, to her friend Bernard, takes place amid lighter tones and more *natural* elements, here we refer to the green of the garden, the blue of the sky, sunlight. Another element

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<sup>27</sup> Here we are referring, within the universe of manga, to an aesthetic that works with very strong and hairy men..

<sup>28</sup> Here we are referring to what, in general terms, could be seen as pieces created to serve both male and female models, on purpose. So-called masculine pieces being worn by female bodies, for example, is not unprecedented in the world of fashion, but here's the point, it's not unprecedented, but a strengthening, as said before.

of naturalness are the common clothes, which also contrast with the menacing looks of the villains and Robin's own uniform; that while not very threatening or dark, it is, inevitably, his combat uniform. Every moment seems constructed to demonstrate that evil is not there, in the LGBTI+ relationship, thus highlighting the element of explicit acceptance, with which the creators work. Serious and worried features exist at the beginning of the magazine, not at the end. The end of the story involves smiles and happiness.

In terms of narrative, therefore, this story of Robin even distances itself from a whole universe of stories in manga, in which the character takes some time to accept himself as LGBTI+, and much of the plot involves the questioning of the character, if they really want it, if they're really queer, etc., etc.

In terms of representation there is a double in such a Robin story. If on the one hand, there are these elements of classic aesthetics and a not very controversial story. On the other hand, it is not as mitigated a representation as the elements that we point out as being, ideally, of a conservative representation; that is, even if we could have imagined more, it was not bad and did not irritate part of the queer universe, as in the case of Dumbledore, in *Fantastic Beasts 2*.

In terms of ideal typology, we believe this is a story that presents a moderate representation of the issue, not a thinly veiled representation, and also not a branded title that will revolve entirely around the character's bisexuality. Because being a title of a story of heroes, the core continues to involve chasing villains, fighting evil, unraveling crimes.

As a marketing case, we believe that there was a hit, this edition sold out in the United States and the United Kingdom, which demonstrates, as Paiva (2021) said, that there is still a whole interest of readers in the sexuality of the characters. And this success is configured in how the publishing house continued to explore this issue; as we see in 2022, in Pride Month, they released a special commemorative edition for the character Robin, in addition to also existing in the annual edition *DC Pride 2022*, equally, a story of the character Robin.

We could also say that the story that revealed the new Superman as queer sounds even less conservative to us, for a number of reasons<sup>29</sup>. Firstly, because Superman is a bigger character than Robin; second, because Superman is classically portrayed as an example of moral rectitude in many of his stories; thirdly, in the plot of Superman there is a kiss between the two men, and Superman kisses the other character in his hero uniform, so it is much more associated with the character's label.

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<sup>29</sup> See T. Taylor (2021), *Superman: Son of Kal-El* #5.

In terms of aesthetics, it is easy to see how there is a similar direction, with such a story of Robin, in the sense that the Superman character in question, who took over his father's mantle, is also quite young and skier, in relation to the design of other artists, when approaching the character Superman, as in the case of Frank Miller (2011); and how, equally, there is a whole premeditation on the part of the filmmakers not to show doubt or fear in the face of the queer element, on the part of the characters.

They, the characters, accept themselves as queer beings. It's not without reason that both Superman and Robin, in their respective stories, from the *DC Pride 2022* issue, are heading to the LGBTI+ Pride Parade, with mentions of the Stonewall event etc. The publisher's direction is clearly towards such a matter of pride.

As cultural products, pop culture, there is no room for naivety. As Nunan (2003) shows, in many cases we are talking about important brands, so we believe we can say: this adherence to *LGBTI+* is currently well planned. There are vested interests, in the sense that if, for example, the *Absolut* vodka brand has been advertising for homosexuals since 1979, this involves how the community was, or is, associated with a large network of bars and parties. And what drives, then, this comic book market to a greater, and far more open, interest in queerness? Obviously, society has changed since the 1950s, but perhaps sales declines due to digital piracy, or the saturation of certain clichés etc., also lead certain brands to fewer conservative strategies when trying to increase revenue<sup>30</sup>.

There is, therefore, a positive side to this – even if many products end up with dubious representations, which are displeasing, queerbaiting etc. – because cultural representations can be of great importance. Nunan (2003, p. 98) talks about how there are authors who think that cinema, for example, can reduce prejudice more than a law or an educational campaign. It is good then that, in many cases, the negative stereotypes of the violent or effeminate homosexual have been removed (NUNAN, 2003, p. 100). And that there are more efficient ways, articulated and disjointed, for the public to reveal its discontent with queer representations, which are not pleasing in the age of the internet.

If prejudice is an element commonly developed in childhood and in heterosexual men (NUNAN, 2003, p. 91), could these publications of comics directed towards stories with positive representations of queer groups, could they not have a relevant positive impact?

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<sup>30</sup> Something similar to Playboy which, after all these decades in the American market, has recently placed its first male playmate, a sensual male model; here we refer to Bretman Rock. Anyway, it is not complex to imagine that Playboy has to rethink itself in our time, when there is so much offer on the internet of free sensual photos.

## Final considerations

The article in question, in an introductory way, aimed to address representations of the LGBTI+ universe in comics. It had as its central element a specific case, which involves the character Robin, Batman's helper, who revealed himself to be queer, in a recent edition of one of the DC Comics titles. And it was part of our objective to show how queer representations do not occur at a timeless level, but how, on the contrary, elements of the conjuncture, society, culture, politics, shape such representations.

As has been pointed out, for a considerable time there was silence and ambivalence, in the face of possibly queer characters, with superficial or negative representations; in the sense that the hero, in many cases, is associated with the masculine, with the heterosexual. With idealizations of strength, the body, its moral uprightness, etc. Soon this veiled element was related to queer coding and more recently to queerbaiting.

The desire to silence such voices created, in the American case of the 1950s, a code of conduct for comics, which said not to represent queer characters. The character Robin was already at the center of this issue, when read as a young homosexual, who had an idyllic relationship with Batman, in a life of luxury and perks.

The idea of Robin being queer reappeared at other times over time, it should also be said, more or less discreetly. As in a joke of villain Joker, as already seen; in the 60's series (See NIEL, 2004); in Frank Miller (2011)<sup>31</sup>; when George Clooney says Batman was his gay movie character (See NIEL, 2004) etc.

Even in the face of the cultural pressures of the 60s, 70s and 80s, significant representations of queer beings in the world of comics continued to be veiled, with smaller and more adult labels having greater freedom in this context.

In the 1990s, with such restrictions weakening considerably, there were queer characters in the most central milieu of magazines, see Northstar. But if we follow Cruz (2017), representations from the 2000s onwards proved to be more interesting and less appealing.

About our edition under analysis, we created a scale of ideal categories to try to measure its level of representativeness. It is also worth mentioning that on this scale, we use some previously existing concepts, such as the case of queerbaiting, which has been widely discussed, in the face of representations that displease fans. It is worth remembering that as ideal types,

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<sup>31</sup> Here we think of *The Dark Knight II*, when Robin says, twice, that he loved him, Bruce, and would have done anything for him, as there is a possibly romantic tone.

certain concepts can mix with others; there is not a totally clear separation, we believe, between where, for example, queerbaiting ends and where conservative representation begins.

In our analysis, the representation of Robin's queer element did not fall into the problems of queerbaiting or queer coding, that is, it is not something implicit. We also do not consider it, ideally, as a conservative representation, in the sense that it is not present, but very discreet, to the point of being ambiguous, or something like that. There is, then, a moderate representation, in which the queer element appears as something normal and accepted, without jokes or an inevitably tragic background; we are also far from the great queer villains.

The good reception of such a Robin story, or other previous examples, such as the marriage of Marvel's Northstar character, even with expected criticism, such as people who think that representation is *lacração*, may even have driven publishers to bet on more queer representation.

Because it's a marketing case that was successful, even while perhaps a one-off sales increase, we can expect a continuity of characters revealing themselves as members of the LGBTI+ community.

If, as already pointed out, prejudice tends to develop in childhood and in heterosexual men; this greater LGBTI+ representation can, we speculate, even lead to a double gain. First, encourage greater acceptance of LGBTI+ entities, even if conservative, reactionary, etc., groups complain; second, the LGBTI+ themselves may, by seeing themselves more represented, feel less oppressed and stressed by anthropological and sociological factors in their environment.

The LGBTI+ entity can even become a loyal consumer of brands that represent them in a good way, Nunan (2003) addresses this, in which, for example, a greater psychological engagement with these fictional characters may arise. What novelty can a bisexual Robin bring more to hero plots?

Could it be that, after all these decades, it is now just a matter of time before some artist fleshes out what was once the moral panic of another age, and presents Batman and Robin as a couple?



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