

# Slapstick and Self-Reflexivity in George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*

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## 1

Between 1912 and 1944, a 'meteoric burlesk drama' unfolds in the comic strip section of the newspapers belonging to Randolph Hearst's King Features Syndicate.<sup>1</sup> It is enacted over four panels on weekdays and an entire page on Sundays. The cast is made up of an androgynous and racially ambiguous cat named Krazy, an unsentimental mouse named Ignatz, and a well-meaning yet misguided bulldog named Offissa Pupp. Together, they form a love triangle, around which is generated a plot that remains ostensibly the same over the years. Ignatz throws a brick at Krazy, seeking to punish 'that fool kat' for her naïveté.<sup>2</sup> Krazy misinterprets the brick as a token of affection, and eagerly awaits the 'messidge of love' from 'dahlink' Ignatz, her 'li'l ainjil'.<sup>3</sup> Offissa Pupp, jealous of the relationship between Krazy and Ignatz, pursues and jails Ignatz for his brick-throwing misdemeanours. Innovative Ignatz persists, devising ways to elude Pupp and deliver the brick to Krazy's head. He drops it from hot air balloons, flings it through peepholes and takes refuge inside prams, sombreros, pelican's mouths and boxes. Coconino County provides the backdrop for this espionage, shifting from panel to panel in a 'perpetual

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<sup>1</sup> e.e. cummings, 'Introduction', in George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*, ed. Joseph Greene and Rex Chessman (New York: Madison Square Press, 1977), p.10. cummings intentionally misspells 'burlesk', in keeping with Herriman's idiosyncratic spelling.

<sup>2</sup> 25/8/18. Although Krazy is androgynous, I will refer to her as feminine for the sake of consistency, and to differentiate her from Ignatz and Offissa Pupp, who are both male. Dates for strips reproduced in the following pages are as follows: p. 24: 28/11/37; p. 30: 18/1/42; p. 33: 6/10/35; p. 37: 22/6/35; p. 42: 12/3/44; p. 45: 21/12/41; p. 48: 2/8/42; p. 50: 11/9/38.

<sup>3</sup> 6/10/23.

metamorphosis' of mesas, cacti and other abstract landforms derived from the Arizona Desert.<sup>4</sup>

George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat* never enjoyed the popularity of its contemporaries like Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff*, George McManus' *Bringing Up Father* or Elzie Segar's *Popeye*. The indeterminacies of its heroine, her apparent masochism, the inverted food chain of the dog-cat-mouse love triangle and the scratchy, childlike way in which it was all rendered alienated most readers. And whereas other strips generally treated language and dialogue as incidental to the visual narrative, Herriman augmented the surreality of his premise with an extensive vocabulary and mastery of imagistic, if confounding, wordplay. The theatrical way in which his characters interact points to the tradition of the love triangle in Shakespeare and the commedia dell'arte. 'Wretch, I see you bear no brick', says Pupp to Ignatz, 'can it be that you are innocent of evil intent today? Tell me!!!' 'Brick, have I none—my dear kop', replies Ignatz, 'but may I with humility pray that you lay your pretty eye upon my new hat?'<sup>5</sup> And when Krazy talks, her multiethnic accent and phonetic and onomatopoeic reinterpretation of language prefigures Joyce's portmanteau words.<sup>6</sup> 'Hokk', says Krazy, sighting water gushing from the ground, 'jetz wot I tott—a bebblin' spring—an' me, so Thursday. Now will I skwench my thirtz—wed my witzil—mersin my poached lips'.<sup>7</sup>

Hearst admired *Krazy Kat* and kept it in print until Herriman's death on April 25, 1944. In spite of its small audience, the strip's reputation amongst intellectuals, literary figures and artists grew to attract the likes of Gilbert Seldes, e.e. cummings, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Walt Disney, Frank Capra, Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, H.L. Mencken, Deems Taylor, Jack Kerouac, William de Kooning and Umberto Eco. Seldes' 1924 book *The Seven Lively Arts* includes the first literary analysis of the strip, 'The Krazy Kat that Walks by Himself', in which he states, 'with those who hold that a comic strip cannot be a work of art I shall not traffic.'<sup>8</sup> Then in 1946, shortly after Herriman's death, cummings wrote an

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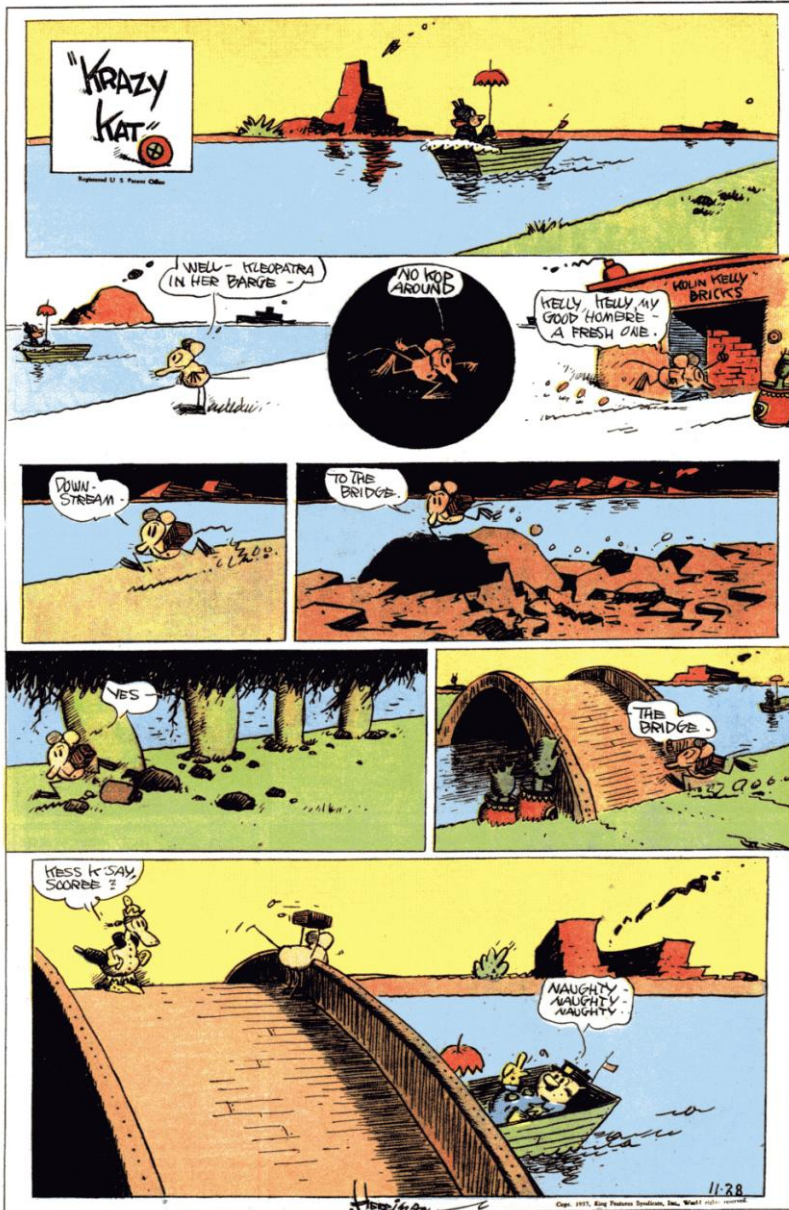
<sup>4</sup> cummings, 'Introduction', *Krazy Kat*, p.10.

<sup>5</sup> 28/7/35.

<sup>6</sup> Miles Orvell, *After the Machine: Visual Arts and the Erasing of Cultural Boundaries* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), p.131-132.

<sup>7</sup> 17/4/38.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Seldes, 'The Krazy Kat That Walks by Himself', in *The Comic Art of George Herriman*, ed. Patrick McDonnell, Karen O'Connell and Georgia Riley de Havenon (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004), p.15.



essay portraying the strip as political and psychoanalytical allegory, wherein Krazy, Ignatz and Offissa Pupp become embodiments of democracy, anarchy and fascism, and ego, superego and id, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequent analyses have been coloured by sociologist Arthur Asa Bergman's discovery in 1971 that Herriman was himself 'coloured', according to his 1880 birth certificate. Bergman's finding instigated a trend toward reading *Krazy Kat* as racial allegory, beginning with Ishmael Reed, who dedicated his 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* to 'George Herriman, Afro-American'. Further biographical research by journalist and comics commentator Jeet Heer has revealed that Herriman was born into the Louisiana Creole community known as 'gens de couleur libres', or free persons of colour, before his family moved from New Orleans to Los Angeles when he was six to avoid growing persecution in the South.<sup>10</sup>

Many critics have cited this information, along with certain episodes in which Krazy and Ignatz invert their relationship by changing their complexion, to surmise *Krazy Kat* as Herriman's externalised and satirical narrative of passing. Other readings of the strip have seen it in terms of its 'postmodern anticipations', utopianism, conservatism, and even Biblical parallels. All interpretations are applicable. Yet none of them do justice to *Krazy Kat* as a whole, nor do they examine in detail how the strip belongs to the tradition of slapstick, and how, in demonstrating the mechanics of that tradition, it is arranged in such a way as to simultaneously invite and resist comprehension.

## 2

Krazy contemplates cheese and crackers. 'Chizz & kreckers, wot a iffinity, Ignatz, oy, wot a iffinity'—drawing an 'iffinity' between affinity and infinity—'it has come down immong the ages like thunda—if I can be so bowl, I'd like to tell you about a iffinity wot is nice, nobil & moril.' 'I had no idea such an affinity existed —,' says Ignatz, 'tell me, what is it?' 'Me & you', answers Krazy, 'and the brick, switt hot, dun't forget the brick.'

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<sup>9</sup> Cummings, 'Introduction', *Krazy Kat*, p.14.

<sup>10</sup> Jeet Heer, 'The Kolours of Krazy Kat', in *Krazy & Ignatz 1935-1936*, ed. Bill Blackbeard (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2005), p.9-10; M. Lynn Weiss, introduction to *Creole Echoes: The Francophone Poetry of Nineteenth-Century Louisiana*, ed. and trans. Norman Shapiro (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p.xxiii.

Ignatz prepares to throw the brick accordingly, when Offissa Pupp intervenes. 'And then, there's me, Mouse—gosh, yes, there's me...and the jail.' The episode concludes with Ignatz behind bars, Offissa Pupp satisfied, and Krazy perplexed: 'It commenced so simpl—and finished so intriggit.'<sup>11</sup>

Self-reflexivity of this kind punctuates *Krazy Kat*, intimating at dual 'simpl-icity' and 'itrigginess.' As Mrs Kwak Wakk remarks at the end of one 1939 Sunday strip, 'It all smacks a trifle Confucian to me, Krazy.' The blurred line between 'Confucian' and 'Konfusion,' as Krazy insightfully mishears it, is perpetuated by the compromises of the love triangle. Krazy welcomes violence in lieu of affection. Ignatz seeks only 'good hunting', in spite of Krazy's fondness for being hunted and the inevitable pursuit and imprisonment by Offissa Pupp, who disregards the complexities of Krazy and Ignatz's relationship, jailing Ignatz and convincing himself 'all's well.'<sup>12</sup>

The brick stands neutrally at the centre of this 'frank frenzy', where the agendas of each protagonist intersect.<sup>13</sup> It is the medium of compromise, a symbol set in perpetual motion by continuously lending itself to each character's illusion. To Krazy, it is a valentine. 'Brick—ah—br-r-rick—the *rhapsody of thee—the extissy of thou—the fentissy of you*—and yet—there is but dust, brick—dust—*dream dust—moon dust—soul dust* —.' Ignatz dotes on the brick as the culmination of his art: 'My pet—my beautiful!!! My sweet.' And Offissa Pupp rues it as the vessel of wrongdoing, the 'baleful brick', the 'irk of irks', 'sin's most sinister symbol.'<sup>14</sup>

The profound neutrality of the brick is betokened in the cream pie, the 'democratic tool' of slapstick. The pie crosses class boundaries, 'an equalizing force' dignifying its victims through paradoxically undignified means, its horizontal and diagonal trajectory prefiguring its impact, which demolishes vertical hierarchies and notions of pride. The metonymic multifariousness of the brick and the pie follows in the tradition of slapstick's allegorisation—or animation—of the inanimate. Jean Baudrillard says that the object

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<sup>11</sup> 8/7/28.

<sup>12</sup> 7/5/39; 8/9/40.

<sup>13</sup> Cummings, 'Introduction', *Krazy Kat*, p.10.

<sup>14</sup> 20/4/30; 19/9/37; 17/12/39; 17/10/37.

can fascinate and seduce the subject...because [they] radiate no sustenance or meaning of [their] own. The pure object is sovereign because it is what breaks up the sovereignty of the other and catches it in its own trap.<sup>15</sup>

The sovereignty of the object becomes apparent in modernity because of the proliferation of commodities, and their subsequent fetishism.<sup>16</sup> Esther Leslie points out that in modernity, the object or commodity 'acts according to its own laws as an actor on a shadow stage. It attains 'ghostly objectivity' and leads its own life'.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, when Krazy confronts a telephone for the first time, she presumes sovereignty over it. 'At last I have a telefoam at my mercy and I will talk among it for the first time in the history of my life.' Having already confused its function and its character in wishing to talk 'among' it, she is soon confounded by its intricacies. She addresses 'Mrs Telefoam' directly, and mistakes the 'resivva' and the handle for bodily parts that must be arranged according to the telephone's preference. In doing so, she refigures the telephone as a sovereign object, instead of an object-medium. By contrast, she perceives the most unlikely object, the brick, as a medium through which an emotional exchange between subjects can occur. This is typical of the way the object's seduction of the subject is played out in the comedic struggle between the slapstick protagonist and their inanimate surroundings. Telephones are well equipped for this struggle because their rebellion interrupts communication, isolating the subject. As sovereign objects, their seductive quality allows them to assume innumerable guises. Chaplin plays a telephone receiver like a trumpet and peers through it as though it were a telescope in *Easy Street* (1917). Groucho Marx cracks walnuts between the receiver and handle of a telephone, and Harpo Marx hits the jackpot by inserting a button into a telephone in *Horse Feathers* (1932).

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<sup>15</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, quoted by Lisa Trahair, 'Fool's Gold: Metamorphosis in Buster Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.*', in *Falling For You: Essays on Cinema and Performance*, ed. Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros (Sydney: Power Publications, 1999), p.218-219.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press, 1999), p.195.

<sup>17</sup> Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London; New York: Verso, 2004, first published 2002), p.6.

Leslie attributes this animation of the inanimate in slapstick to commodity fetishism, the way the protagonist 'empathizes with the manufacturing machines, with its 'fetishistically driven objects', so much as to supplant its own self as their 'soul'.<sup>18</sup> The brick, with its featureless, unassuming guise hiding its multifaceted symbolism, represents commodity fetishism taken to a satirical extreme. Indeed, bricks are apparently the only commodity produced in Coconino. Kolin Kelly's brickyard is the only example of industry. Each protagonist fetishises the brick in a different way. Pupp abhors the brick as a weapon and an indicator of evil intent. Krazy appreciates the brick for the devotion implied by its continual delivery to the back of her head. Ignatz dotes on the brick itself and the ritualism involved in the act of acquiring and delivering it, for he is a connoisseur of bricks and the artistry they represent:

It's a pretty thing, Kolin, it sparkles with the virtuous value of valor, but—uh-h—still—mmm-m—yet—you have baked better, blither, bolder, buxomer, and more brilliant bricks—you know that—the bouquet so usual in your previous efforts is not in this one—isn't that so —? Its appeal, Kolin, is to the bourgeoisie, the hoi, the polloi—the this, the that.<sup>19</sup>

Ignatz—and more abstractly, Herriman—behave in a way that Benjamin identifies as characteristic of the 'collector,' someone who detaches the object 'from all its original functions' in 'an attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand.'<sup>20</sup> In this respect, Herriman—as he is represented through his protagonists—resembles an imagist poet, separating words and pictures from their context so as to reveal their essence. 'For the collector,' says Benjamin, 'the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects'.<sup>21</sup> At first glance, *Krazy Kat* seems to be an arrangement of non-sequiturs, with an ambiguous heroine, inverted food-chain, angular appearance and amorphous setting. Like Ignatz, faced with the 'wholly irrational character' of Krazy, the reader desires clarification. Yet upon further inspection, it is through the suitably stoic brick and how the brick reflects whomever it comes into contact with, that order is reinstated.

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>19</sup> 18/12/32.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p.204-205.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p.207.

Benjamin states that 'the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion.'<sup>22</sup> In this respect, Krazy and Ignatz resemble another collector in the slapstick tradition, Harpo Marx. On one hand, Harpo disperses meaning inasmuch as his muteness prohibits conventional means of communication, in the same way that Krazy reinterprets language and metaphor phonetically. Like the refigured telephone, Krazy and Harpo rupture interaction between subjects, between the signifier and the signified. On the other hand, Harpo, like Ignatz, 'takes up the struggle against dispersion,' through objects. He compensates for his inability to speak by utilising a vocabulary of 'spirited things'—trumpets, gag horns, scissors, alarm clocks, blowtorches, axes, ropes, playing cards, pinup posters, coffee, cigars, mousetraps, flypaper, flowers, muzzles and bananas inside zipped-up banana-shaped leather wallets—that augment his gestures, creating an aural and visual sign language, and initiating a dialogue throughout the inanimate.

Similarly, Ignatz cannot express his attachment to Krazy by any means other than the brick. Like Harpo, he is mute, in an emotional rather than literal sense. The brick, as an archetype of the object in slapstick, articulates that which cannot be articulated, becoming its physical manifestation, its individuation (in psychoanalytical terms), enacting what Trahair refers to as the

short circuiting of representation by presentation. The object, like a gift which cannot be reciprocated, is inserted into the system of exchange, but cannot itself be exchanged. Rather, its power precipitates an excess of emotion, an overwhelming.<sup>23</sup>

The brick also precipitates Krazy's 'mimetic convulsion,' the point at which subject and object fuse, and the protagonists and the brick unite.<sup>24</sup> Objects then perpetrate a synaesthetic 'overwhelming,' in which emotions, senses and physicality intermingle. Objects come to represent pure, palpable thought, for as Krazy points out to Ignatz, 'Ideas come hard to me, especially your ideas, your ideas come to me in the shape of bricks.' 'Have another idea with me', replies Ignatz, tossing the brick. Even when hit with

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p.211.

<sup>23</sup> Trahair, 'Fool's Gold', *Falling for You*, p.221.

<sup>24</sup> Jayamanne, 'A Slapstick Time', *ibid.*, p.126.





an iron brick, Krazy maintains that 'the ida was gloria, dough.'<sup>25</sup>

Krazy's interpretation of the brick as an idea and valentine can be attributed to her childlike imagination, which is an aspect of the collector apparent in Harpo, but not Ignatz. Children are inclined to the 'world of new manifestations' produced by the 'dissolution' of forms by the imagination, says Benjamin. These new manifestations can be found in the banal and everyday, 'a bit of wood, a pinecone, a small stone—however unified and unambiguous the material is, the more it seems to embrace the possibility of a multitude of figures of the most varied sort.'<sup>26</sup> Just as Harpo demolishes a piano with childish glee, unearthing an elegant harp from its rubble, so Krazy imaginatively dismantles and reshapes the brick, the most unambiguous of materials, to reveal a 'missil of love, and affection.' She becomes the 'child-clown who stumbles into modernity [and] has to convert ritual objects into toys,' inasmuch as progress, and therefore modernity, can be denoted by the brick.<sup>27</sup>

### 3

The brick exists in perpetual motion, literally and symbolically. It therefore mirrors the amorphous character of Krazy, as well as the surrounding landscape. Alchemising the brick into a valentine points to the sublime character of Krazy, in attempting to reconcile contradictory emotions of love and contempt. The sublimation makes an expansion and rearrangement of perception necessary, in order to accommodate this paradox. Since the pursuits involved in the love triangle are endlessly re-enacted, sublimation becomes a continuous process, requiring constant rearrangement. Krazy, like the brick and the setting, achieves a state of infinite non-identity, in which aspects of her personality, such as gender and race, that would otherwise be definitive, are subsumed into a cycle of renewal and reinvention. Moments in which these aspects appear to be

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<sup>25</sup> 12/11/18; 22/4/34.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, 'Imagination', in *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Michael Jennings et al., trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press, 1997), p.280; Benjamin, 'The Cultural History of Toys', in *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings et al., trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press, 1999), p.115.

<sup>27</sup> Jayamanne, 'A Slapstick Time', *Falling For You*, p.106.

defined are brief, but not untrue, for 'all non-identity is infinite,' says Benjamin, 'but this does not imply that all identity is finite.'<sup>28</sup>

The reader must then concede to 'nonchalant uncertainty' regarding assertions of finite identity, especially where Krazy's gender is concerned.<sup>29</sup> Just as Chaplin and Buster Keaton are positioned against gargantuan villains and overbearing father figures, so Krazy is fought over by rival masculinities—the rambling, vagrant Ignatz and the omnipresent, patronising Offissa Pupp. Like Chaplin and Keaton, Krazy is infantilised, and therefore pre-sexualised, allowing her to seek sexual gratification in unusual places, such as a brick thrown by a mouse. Chaplin pacifies his own 'gamy' masculinity by flirting with a man in *The Immigrant* (1917) and affecting feminine modesty when posing in his bathing suit in *The Cure* (1917). Both Keaton and Harold Lloyd play characters named 'Lamb'.<sup>30</sup> In *Go West* (1925), Keaton falls in love with a cow named 'Brown Eyes', and in the Marx Brothers feature *Animal Crackers* (1930), Harpo claims he is five years old and in love with a horse.

Herriman follows in this tradition, portraying Krazy as the archetype of the infantilised, sexually ambiguous slapstick comedian who avoids definition. In an early poster from 1916 advertising the animated *Krazy Kat* cartoons (with which Herriman had little involvement other than illustrating the poster), Krazy is accompanied by the caption, 'leadink ladyman.' A daily strip from the same period sees Krazy claiming simultaneously to be married, with both a husband and a wife, as well as being a bachelor and a spinster. She voices masculine sentiments, as in, 'think of the time when a fella could spend ten nights in a bar-room—now he's lucky if he can afford to spend ten minutes in one,' and proves capable of misogyny when Ignatz asks, 'don't a lady look her best in the gloaming, fool', to which Krazy responds, 'that's just it—if only she looked the same in the bright morning time.' Yet Krazy can also appear maternal. When Ignatz's children want to adopt her into their family, they are unsure of whether to call her 'aunt' or 'uncle'. They call 'Uncle Krazy' and are met with silence, whereas 'Aunt Krazy' prompts a friendly, 'collin' me, dollins?'<sup>31</sup>

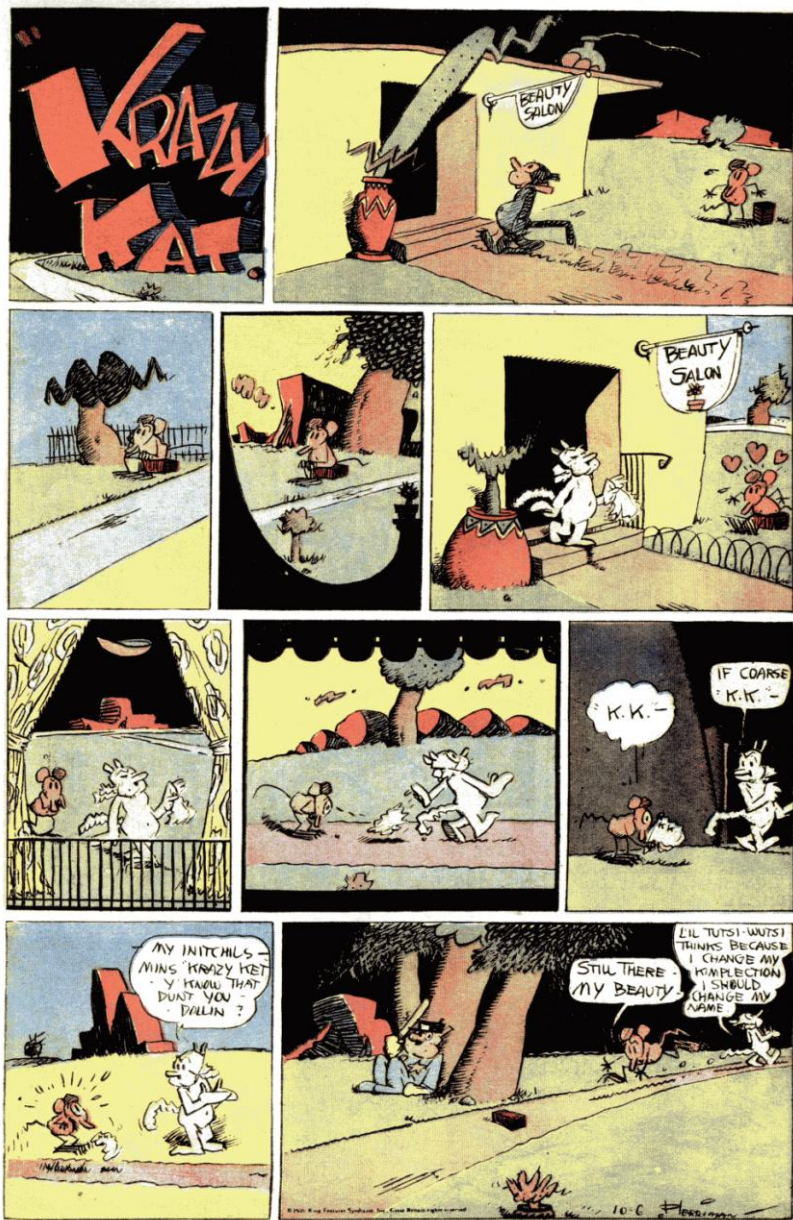
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<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, 'Theses on the Problem of Identity', in *Selected Writings Vol.1*, p.75.

<sup>29</sup> Orvell, *After the Machine*, p.131-132.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.60.

<sup>31</sup> In *The Comic Art of George Herriman*, p.66; unknown date, c.1915; 11/11/18; 7/12/18; 1/2/36.



Krazy's gender is impressionistic and impressionable, shifting in contrast to how she is perceived in any given situation. Feminisation makes her rebel. When chivalrous Offissa Pupp offers to carry her luggage, she puts up a struggle, and when Pupp asks if he might sit with Krazy under her umbrella—'Do you mind if I share in this delight?'—she shrugs, 'Delights dunt care who shares them—help y'self.' Yet when Ignatz yearns to punish *male* Krazy—'Oh, that Krazy Kat were here, that I might smite him with this brick!'—Krazy thinks she is being romanced, and remarks, 'A loose thought ippon a wagrant brizz, how fency!'<sup>32</sup>

Krazy's understanding of gender is reflexively subversive. Women's suffrage becomes a celebration of masochism, as when Ignatz shouts, 'three cheers for Woman Suffrage, hooray—hooray—hooray!!!', and Krazy remarks, 'li'l dahlink, he's in fava of woman's suffering, bless his soft blue eye.'<sup>33</sup> Misinterpretation perpetuates her sexual and racial ambiguity, her infinite non-identity. When Herriman was asked by Frank Capra to define Krazy's gender, he responded:

I get dozens of letters asking me the same question. I don't know. I fooled around with it once; began to think the Kat is a girl—even drew up some strips with her being pregnant. It wasn't the Kat any longer; too much concerned with her own problems—like a soap opera. Know what I mean? Then I realised Krazy was something like a sprite, an elf. They have no sex. So the Kat can't be a he or a she. The Kat's a sprite—a pixie—free to butt into anything. Don't you think so?<sup>34</sup>

#### 4

Krazy's racial identity follows similar logic, allowing her to 'butt into anything.' Her phonetic speech, though indefinable, contains Brooklyn Yiddish inflections:

A soff ensa will offin toin away a rat. Music hat a chomm to suit any sevenge bress. Two heads is betta than one, for a hebba desha. Dun't lay all your eggs in one beskit. A wolf in

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<sup>32</sup> 11/10/31; 1/8/27; 29/9/29.

<sup>33</sup> 25/4/20.

<sup>34</sup> In *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman*, p.54.

cheap kloting is jessa sap. A boid in the hend is woit two in  
the bushes, but he ain't so choipy about it.<sup>35</sup>

She can also speak and understand Spanish, yet is baffled by Mexican accents. In one strip, she sings in Herriman's approximation of Chinese. Like her gender, her race—as signified by her accent—shifts in and out of focus.

On the other hand, the racial aspect of Krazy's personality is the one area in which Herriman appears to have made conscious and consistent—if sporadic—socio-political commentary. The introduction of Krazy's relative, the tellingly named 'Uncle Tomm Katt,' is an instance of such commentary. Uncle Tom appears early on as a white cat with stripes. When he reappears in 1932, he has been transformed into a black, bearded cat with stereotypical, African-American traits and mannerisms, after the protagonist of Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel from 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The allusion is blatant, for as Herriman narrates, 'nestling in the fleecy fluff of the only cotton field within the canny confines of Coconino is Uncle Tomm Katt's cabin.' Uncle Tomm communicates almost entirely through the kind of early country-blues made popular at the time by musicians like Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bukka White and Son House: 'Bugs is in the taties—weevils in the kottin—weasels in the hen koop—honey, time is rottin'.' Just as the brick reflects and articulates the personalities of those who observe it, so Uncle Tomm—who is neither a stereotype nor a parody of a stereotype, so much as an imagistic phenomenon, like the brick, removed from its context—makes Offissa Pupp and Ignatz 'white' by comparison, where before their race was irrelevant. Uncle Tomm hates white Offissa Pupp for patronising him—'a big, strong person like you, in the flush of kophood—shedding tears—many foowies'—and hates Ignatz, yet is attracted to Ignatz's wife, parodying the common perception of black hypersexuality.<sup>36</sup> Uncle Tomm sheds light on Krazy in the same way. As Heer points out, 'with the introduction of Uncle Tom, some features of Krazy look slightly different: we can see for example that his/her banjo is part of the minstrel tradition'. Whether Herriman knew it or not, the banjo is originally an African instrument. According to Heer, Uncle Tom then signifies Krazy as 'not just a cat with black fur but also, in a profound way, an African-American cat.'<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> 8/5/32.

<sup>36</sup> 26/8/32; 11/9/32.

<sup>37</sup> Heer, 'The Kolors of Krazy Kat', *Krazy & Ignatz 1935-1936*, p.12.

Episodes in which Krazy or Ignatz change their complexion then gain new significance. After lying in the sun, a deeply tanned Ignatz spots Krazy and throws the brick at her, and Krazy, unable to recognise black Ignatz, throws it back: 'Dagnabya!!! Dunt think I'm no 'Desdemonia,' you 'Otello.' Ignatz falls into a stovepipe and is covered head to toe in soot. Krazy, who is pining for white Ignatz, 'so blondish beautiful—so pink—so fair', ridicules black Ignatz: 'Haa—a li'l Eetiopium mice, bleck like a month from midnights.' Ignatz conks Krazy with the brick. 'Ooy, sotch a noive,' she exclaims, kicking Ignatz into a pond, 'I got a great care who I issociate wit'—y-y-y'sunboint koffa kake—this will titch soitin pippils to keep in their own social spears.' White Ignatz emerges from the pond, having washed off the soot, and Krazy is overjoyed. Likewise, when Krazy lightens her complexion, Ignatz is enchanted. 'White as a lily, pure as the driven snow,' he muses after Krazy, covered in white paint, dives into a river to wash the paint off, 'ah, cold river, you shall let die the ripples her lovely form hath made upon your bosom—but in my warm heart they shall undulate forever.'<sup>38</sup>

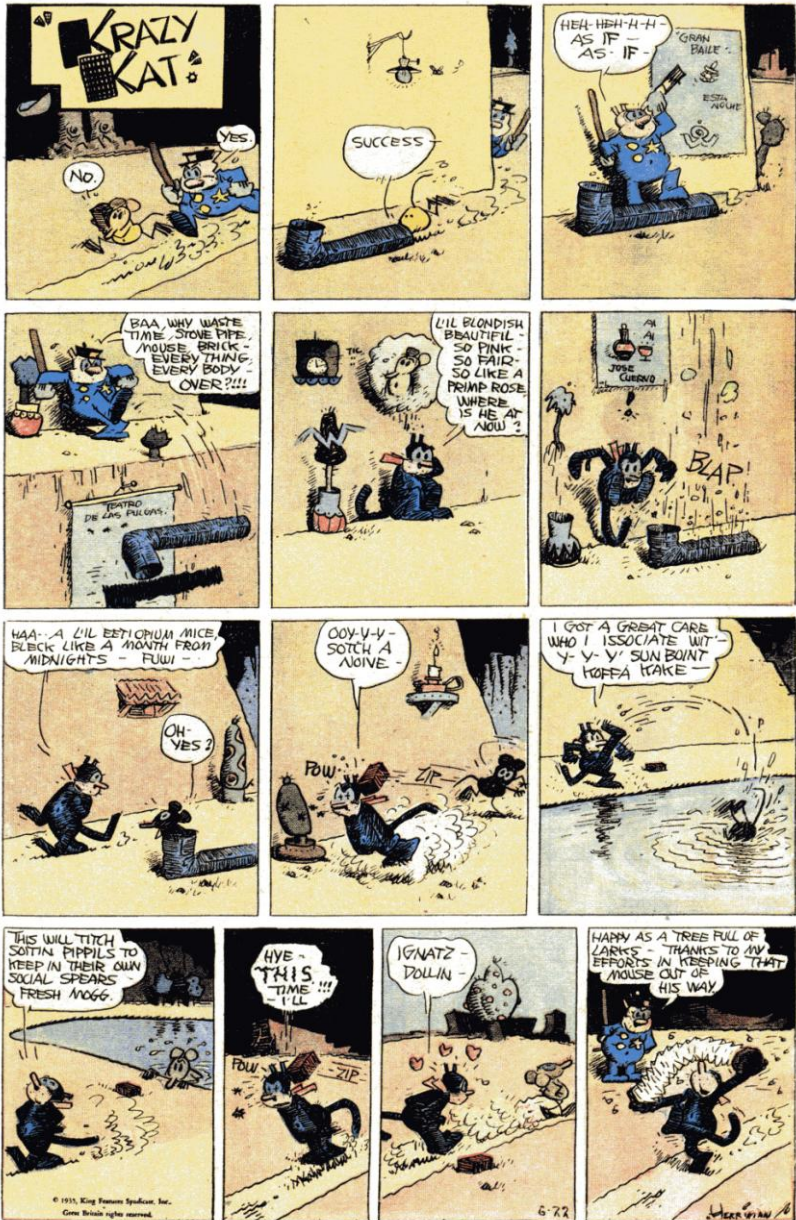
In light of Bergman's discovery of Herriman's coloured ancestry in 1971, critics have argued that at least in these instances, Herriman is using *Krazy Kat* to portray the incongruities of race relations in American culture at the time, and in particular, of passing. Krazy, hostile to black Ignatz yet, in many ways, black herself, becomes Herriman's self-portrait, especially when one considers that Herriman never publicly admitted his ethnicity, even going so far as to partake in the pervasive racial stereotyping of the time in his earlier comic strip, *Musical Mose*. Yet even in *Mose*, Herriman demonstrated self-awareness, conveying the sadness and irony inherent in passing. Mose, a pitch-black, thick-lipped caricature, angers two Scottish women by playing bagpipes and 'impussanating' a Scotsman. As they beat him and kick him, he laments, 'I wish mah color would fade.' 'Why didn't yo impussanate a cannibal,' asks his wife.<sup>39</sup>

Some critics, using these instances of racial and socio-political commentary as examples, have implied that there is a ubiquitous 'black aesthetic' governing *Krazy Kat*. As mentioned earlier, Ishmael Reed dedicated his 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* to 'George Herriman, Afro-American', and David Dault portrays the strip as an externalised narrative

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<sup>38</sup> 26/7/21; 22/6/35; 6/10/35.

<sup>39</sup> Unknown date, c.1902.





of passing and blackness. None of these arguments have articulated what the traits of such an aesthetic should be. Yet *Krazy Kat* does fit snugly into black folklorist Zora Neale Hurston's contemporaneous 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', from 1934. Drama and adornment typifies black speech, writes Hurston, 'his very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile ... the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.'<sup>40</sup> The same thing can be said of Krazy, who turns 'restaurants' in 'retsa runts,' 'horse' into 'horts,' 'people' into 'pippils' and 'reading' into 'riddin.'<sup>41</sup>

All black arts are angular, continues Hurston, 'Everything that he touches becomes angular. In all African sculpture and doctrine of any sort we find the same thing.'<sup>42</sup> *Krazy Kat* is angular in more ways than one. The narrative, landscape and dialogue are punctuated by sharp twists and turns, and Herriman's drawing style has more in common with cubism and primitivism than with the styles of other comic strips from the time. One episode sees Krazy on roller skates, striking one angular pose after another, while white, round Offissa Pupp flails. 'Anyone watching Negro dancers will be struck by the same phenomenon,' says Hurston. 'Every posture is another angle. Pleasing, yes. But an effect achieved by the very means which an European strives to avoid.'<sup>43</sup> Thus, Pupp staggers and fumbles while Krazy, the 'Negro dancer', conveys angularity with grace and poise. It is telling that F. Scott Fitzgerald, Pablo Picasso and Ernest Hemingway, who were all admirers of *Krazy Kat*, also adopted Josephine Baker as their muse.

*Krazy Kat* can therefore be read, in certain instances, as racial allegory, and as an example of 'Negro art', as defined by Hurston. Reading the strip in its epic entirety in this way is problematic, since Krazy's character, echoing the character of the strip as a whole, is indeterminate. To depict passing through comic-strip characters is itself a re-enactment of passing, creating another degree of separation through caricature. The examples in which Herriman comments on the incongruity of race relations can just as easily be interpreted as Herriman observing the superficiality of

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<sup>40</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2001). p.1146.

<sup>41</sup> 20/11/38.

<sup>42</sup> Hurston, 'Characteristics', *Norton*, p.1149.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p.1149.

race, comparing it to ink on paper, as when an ostrich steals all the ink in Coconino and paints himself black with it, leaving all the other characters colourless and pale. As Benjamin notes, 'complication becomes simplicity, fate freedom. For the character of the comic figure is not the scarecrow of the determinist; it is the beacon in whose beams the freedom of his actions becomes visible.'<sup>44</sup> In other words, any interpretation is bound to resonate. Logic, or the desire for logic—like the brick, or the unsuspecting victim of slapstick—are invited in by the apparent clumsiness of the slapstick comedian and the improvisational nature of the larger text that he represents, only to be sent reeling. In this way, what appears to be an inverted food chain in *Krazy Kat*, with mouse pursuing cat, is actually perfectly natural. Krazy invites Ignatz in by desiring the brick, yet comes out on top, having accumulated more meaning with each brick, while remaining consistent in her inconsistency.

## 5

Coconino County mirrors these changes in Krazy's character, as well as the sublimations and subterfuges involved in the love triangle. Mesas, mountains, rivers, huts, chimneys, trees, cacti, shrubs, flags, towns, canyons, ziggurats, pyramids, bungalows and archways appear and disappear in an arbitrary, disjunctive, juxtaposed fashion. Angular motifs on the surfaces of landforms and in the foliage accentuate the vibrancy of these transitions. Trees turn into houses, houses into moons, clear skies burgeon into psychedelic patchworks. Rocks shaped like rattlesnakes become colossal, skewed sunflowers. Bushes grow pots, their curvature turns angular, one bush becomes many that merge into a lampshade, which in turn becomes another pot-plant perched atop an archway.<sup>45</sup>

The undulating milieu of Coconino is made conspicuous by its lack of interaction with the foreground narrative, which it reflects, but does not interfere with. The two enjoy a paratactic relationship. The protagonists continue their pursuits, unaffected by their surroundings, un-agitated by its 'continual agitation.'<sup>46</sup> Only outsiders notice, as when an exhausted chameleon complains of 'this krazy kwilt country of yours that has so fatigued me—my travels through it have been a series of one violent

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<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, 'Fate and Character', in *Selected Writings Vol. 1*, p.205.

<sup>45</sup> 5/12/26; 30/8/31; 23/9/28.

<sup>46</sup> Seldes, 'The Krazy Kat That Walks by Himself', *The Comic Art of George Herriman*, p.17.

change of color after another' (this chameleon could potentially be analogous to the majority of readers who were dumbfounded by *Krazy Kat's* surrealism).<sup>47</sup>

Like Keaton chasing his train and his girl across the American South in *The General* (1926), the protagonists of *Krazy Kat* stage motile domestic conflict against an equally transitive frontier-land.<sup>48</sup> Ignatz doesn't notice a tree becoming a raddish and growing a moustache, or a pair of bushes wearing a top hat and a vest. The only constant is the log on which he sits, his soliloquising unperturbed by the locale shifting around him. One instance sees him and Krazy sitting on a wall, behind a tree, peeping out of two potholes, inside wooden boxes, all within four panels. Another sees Krazy waiting for Ignatz, unmoved by a cactus that changes into a rock, a wall that materialises, a clock on a cliff face, or a couch transforming into a miniature house. Like the paradoxes of the love triangle, or the multifaceted brick, Coconino presents itself as an imagistic continuum, as though it were comprised of mirages that have been cemented, by the sheer tenacity with which they reappear, into truth-illusions.

As in Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), there is no 'realistic motivation' of the 'uppity', expressionist setting by the events taking place in the foreground. Instead, Coconino's perpetual motion resembles the process put forward by Freud by which 'dream-thoughts' are rearranged and enciphered by 'dream-work.' Dream-thoughts, says Freud, are comprised of the unresolved accumulation of a day's events, which resurface at night when one is on the verge of sleep:

A tissue of thoughts, usually a very complicated one, which has been built up during the day and has not been completely dealt with—'a day's residue'—continues during the night to retain the quota of energy—the 'interest'—claimed by it, and threatens to disturb sleep. This 'day's residue' is transformed

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<sup>47</sup> 1/1/28.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel Moews, *Keaton: The Silent Features Close Up* (Los Angeles, CA; London: University of California Press, 1977), p.218. Moews' description of *The General* bears striking resemblance to the love triangle comprising Ignatz, Krazy, Offissa Pupp and between them, the brick: 'Boy, girl, and machine have been structured into an amiable and slightly fantastic triangle, one in which differences between the human and the mechanical...have been visually erased'.

by the dream-work into a dream and made innocuous to sleep.<sup>49</sup>

Ruskin, prefiguring Freud, portrays the imagination hovering 'over the unindexed and immeasurable mass of treasure [of remembrances]...broody and wandering, but dream-gifted, so as to summon at any moment exactly such groups of ideas as shall justly fit each other.'<sup>50</sup> Moreover, says Freud, that which resides on the periphery of the dream-thought can be displaced from isolation and centrally transposed by the dream-work, 'appearing with great sensory intensity in the manifest dream.'<sup>51</sup>

Coconino County can then be read as the dream-work pertaining to the 'manifest dream' of *Krazy Kat* as a whole. The ripples caused by the sublime, paradoxical love triangle accumulate on the periphery of the setting, like dream-thoughts, whereupon dream-work subjects them to perpetual rearrangement, for they are perpetual paradoxes, unresolved by one or an infinite number of daily or Sunday pages. So they reappear 'with great sensory intensity in the manifest dream,' undulating behind the foreground in a regulated sequence of enciphered forms. According to Ruskin,

If we insist on perfect intelligibility and complete declaration in every moral subject, we shall instantly fall into misery and disbelief. Our whole happiness and power of energetic action depend upon our being able to breathe and live in the cloud.<sup>52</sup>

The ability to navigate the 'cloud' of ambiguity is necessary for *Krazy Kat*'s readers as well as its protagonists. The 'happiness' of the former and 'energetic action' of the latter depend on it. Freud says:

Not only does [the dream] not need to set any store by intelligibility, it must actually avoid being understood, for otherwise it would be destroyed; it can only exist in masquerade. For that reason it can without hindrance make

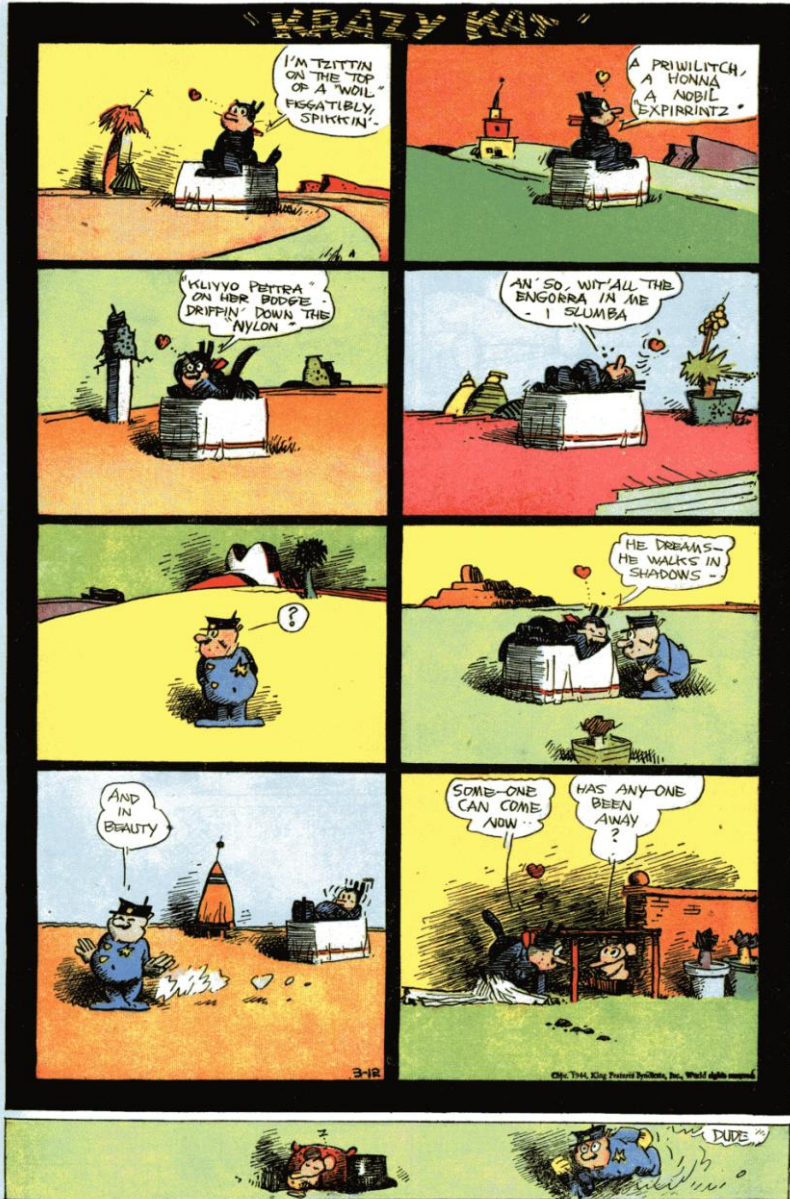
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<sup>49</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), p.160.

<sup>50</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, v.4, pt.5: 'Of Mountain Beauty', London: George Allen, 1904, p.42.

<sup>51</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.164.

<sup>52</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, p.89.



use of the mechanism that dominates unconscious mental processes, to the point of a distortion which can no longer be set straight.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, when Krazy asks Ignatz, 'efta all...what's it all about anyhow?', Ignatz responds, 'only a dream, I'd say.' Krazy persists, 'yes—and what's a drim?', to which Ignatz replies, along with the brick, 'Ahh-shux—you want to know too dern much.'<sup>54</sup> When Krazy tells Ignatz in another instance that, 'It's wot's behind me that I am...it's the idea behind me, 'Ignatz' and that's wot I am,' she is acknowledging the role of the landscape, as Ruskin's 'cloud' and Freud's 'masquerade' and dream-work, in further obscuring the already elusive 'idea' implied by *Krazy Kat's* surrealism. As Seldes points out, 'In an attitude of a contortionist Krazy points to the blank space behind him, and it is there that we must look for the "Idea".'<sup>55</sup>

## 6

Perpetual metamorphosis and indeterminacy govern Krazy's dialogue in the same way that it does her identity and the setting. Just as instances of her racial and sexual identity appear and disappear out of context like the landforms of Coconino, so images swell, subside and circumvent the visual parameters of the speech bubble, as well as the limits of correct syntax and grammar. Hyphens abound, resembling both the diagonal trajectory of the brick between Krazy and Ignatz, and the proclivity of *Krazy Kat* in general towards suspense and suspension—of time, logic and disbelief—in place of conventional punctuation of sentence or story. 'Insupportable nil, plus nul -', says Pupp, watching Ignatz, 'he has in his head, a 'thought'—and I can't see what it is - - - and he knows I can't - - - -g-g-gripes me - -.'<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the excess of quotation marks—as in every time a character's name appears—mirrors the implication, perhaps purposely perpetuated by Herriman, that meanings are 'nested' within every aspect of the strip.

In the case of language, this pervasive, paratactic aesthetic makes each phrase or cluster of words between words of quotation marks appear

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<sup>53</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.179.

<sup>54</sup> 25/2/19.

<sup>55</sup> Seldes, 'The Krazy Kat That Walks by Himself', *The Comic Art of George Herriman*, p.17.

<sup>56</sup> 11/2/41.

contemplative, as though it weighed on syntax itself. This staggering of meaning is accentuated by Herriman's theatrical staging of dialogue and narration. Each of the protagonists are prone to soliloquising. Krazy, noticing Ignatz is not in jail, muses:

Out? And yet, he ain't always out—there is sometimes when he's in—is it fate, I wunda?—is it a hebit —? Is it a game?— Who can ansa me that? It all smex so much of a puzzil—or why is it all so thus?—I can't figga it out—sometimes—ah, yes, sometimes I sispech Offissa Pupp of having a hend in all this.<sup>57</sup>

Krazy's existential wondering puts her in the place of the reader, unsure of the exact meaning of the continuously re-enacted drama, which 'smex' alternatively of 'fate,' a 'game,' 'hebit' and a 'puzzil.' Ignatz, who is incidentally the most well-spoken of the three, sees his purpose in the drama romantically:

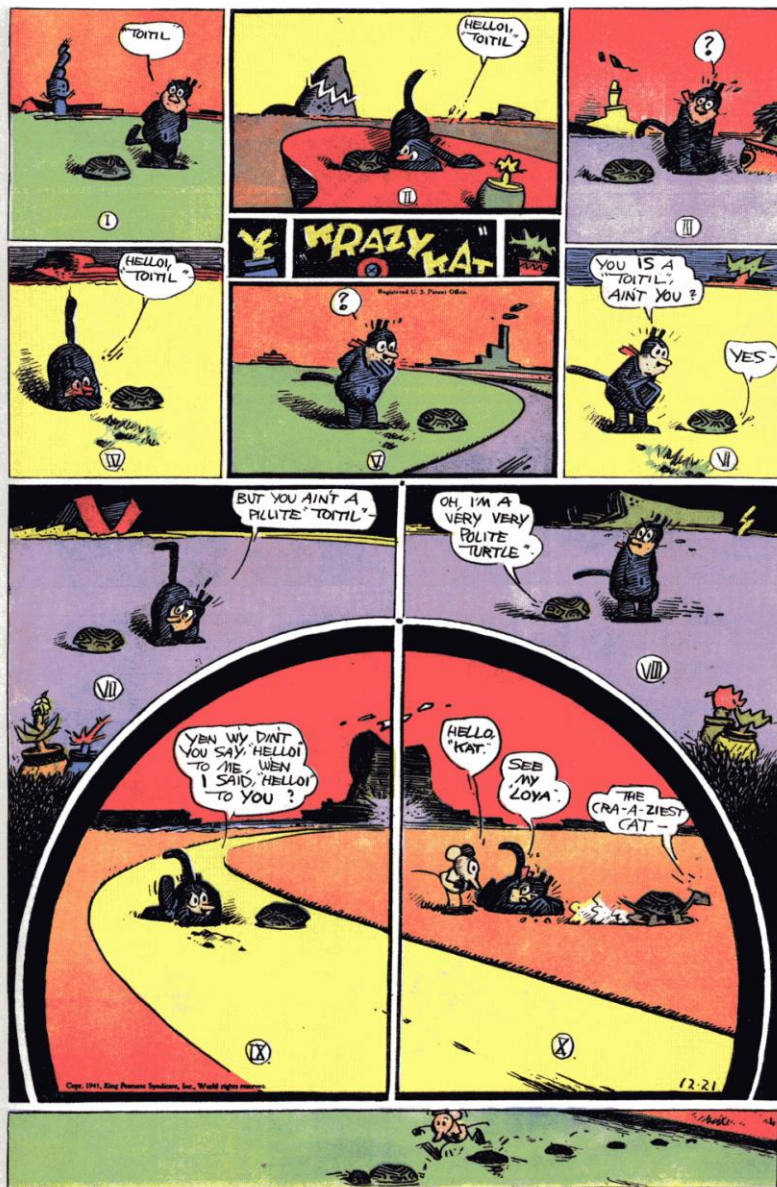
The crescent moon looms upon the horizon of 'Red Lake', it will rise, and wax aflame, so that when Krazy comes to keep his tryst with me I will have clear vision in which to smite him—and while it is in process of arising, I will give way to slumber, and to rest—an added aid to my arm, and aim.<sup>58</sup>

Ignatz's poetic ability contrasts with Krazy's in that it is intentional. Krazy is the archetypal 'fool', in that she is perceived as such by others who, like her, are unaware of her accidental insights. Her hieroglyphic and phonetic perception of words allows her to reinterpret them, making them assume new guises. Sometimes these new guises are non-sequiturs, as when 'whistle' becomes 'witzil'—more often, they comment on the paradox of the love triangle, as when 'violets' become 'violence' and 'weep' becomes 'wipp', or when 'idea' becomes the sublime gap in logic that is 'ida.' Like the brick imbued with new purpose, unassuming words are animated and made multifaceted. 'Palaces, cathedrals and kings' castles have been built of them', says Pupp of bricks, 'great baronial halls, and mansions of mighty mandarins...peoples the world over have fashioned them, and builded with them the humble hut of them the peasant.' Krazy retorts and

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<sup>57</sup> 14/7/29.

<sup>58</sup> 25/3/28.





distorts, 'Pellissis, kiddeedrils, mentions for mendolin, king's kessels—huts for pheasints—golla, I wunda wot else you can build with a brick—if any?'<sup>59</sup> The remark is self-reflexive, for while Krazy is 'wunda-ing' what can be done with a brick, she is showing what can be done with a word.

## 7

Within the elasticity of *Krazy Kat's* aesthetic, language, race, gender, time and setting are stretched to accommodate endless improvisation on Herriman's part, and interpretation on the part of the reader. The kind of violence enacted on these concepts to reveal their malleability is the same as that which is conveyed through the brick and experienced by Krazy, and by all cartoon characters and slapstick comedians in one form or another. In Leslie's words, it is 'painless, dreamlike, as if it were more of a utopian transfiguration of actuality's discord.'<sup>60</sup> In early episodes, when Krazy responds to being hit by the brick by singing, 'there is a heppy land, fur-fur away,' she is echoing this sentiment.<sup>61</sup> The 'fantastic biologies' of Krazy and other slapstick comedians, and the narratives they generate, are utopian in that they sublimate violence into physical 'transformation, or metamorphosis, of the self,' disseminating it throughout their many facets to create a resonant whole.<sup>62</sup>

The influence of this utopian, sublimated violence and of *Krazy Kat* in particular on Walt Disney can be seen in early Disney cartoons. Disney admired Herriman, and wrote to Herriman's daughter when her father died, stating that, 'as one of the pioneers in the cartoon business, his contributions to it were so numerous that they may well never be estimated.'<sup>63</sup> In *Steamboat Willie*, the first Mickey Mouse cartoon in sound, loosely based on Keaton's *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, anthropomorphised animals and objects are stretched, knotted, inflated, lifted, pulled, deformed and violated in an anarchic, inconsequential way. Benjamin observed that, 'here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one's own arm, even one's own body, stolen.'<sup>64</sup> Teeth slide open like windows to spit out

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<sup>59</sup> 6/12/36; 5/7/25; 16/8/25.

<sup>60</sup> Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, p.2.

<sup>61</sup> 1/2/25.

<sup>62</sup> Orvell, *After the Machine*, p.29.

<sup>63</sup> In *The Comic Art of George Herriman*, p.26.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Mickey Mouse', *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, p.545.

chewed tobacco. The backs of boats move like tails. A crane lifts up Minnie's dress so as to grab her by the bloomers and yank her aboard. At the same time, her suitcase falls open on the deck, revealing the sheet music for 'Turkey in the Straw,' a well-known folk song made up of double entendres. A goat eats the music, his mouth is fixed open and his tail is cranked like a gramophone. Mickey plays along with his tail as well as his hands. In a moment that almost breaks the 'painless, dreamlike' quality of cartoon violence, he pushes down on a cat with his leg while pulling its tail, creating rhythmic yelps that are disturbing and comic. He then swings the cat around and throws it headfirst into a pan. The sequence of cruelty continues with Mickey squeezing a goose like a bagpipe, pulling the tails of suckling piglets so they squeal in time, and playing the teeth and tongue of a cow like a xylophone. Like *Krazy*, the animals augment the violence that is being enacted upon them by their indifference to it.

Such turmoil was eerie enough for Benjamin to declare that, 'in these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization...[Mickey] disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind.'<sup>65</sup> Baudrillard adds that Disney was, 'that inspired precursor to a universe where all past or present forms meet in a playful promiscuity, where all cultures recur in a mosaic (including the cultures of the future, which are themselves already recurrent).'<sup>66</sup> Similar rhetoric applies to *Krazy Kat*. In Orvell's words, Coconino is, 'a self-contained aesthetic universe largely impervious to history.'<sup>67</sup> Carrier states that

like an Arcadia, Coconino County...lies outside history and 'civilization'...*Krazy Kat* is infantile or (is this perhaps the same thing ultimately?) posthistorical... History is not over so much as not yet started. Herriman is conservative or, if you will, utopian.<sup>68</sup>

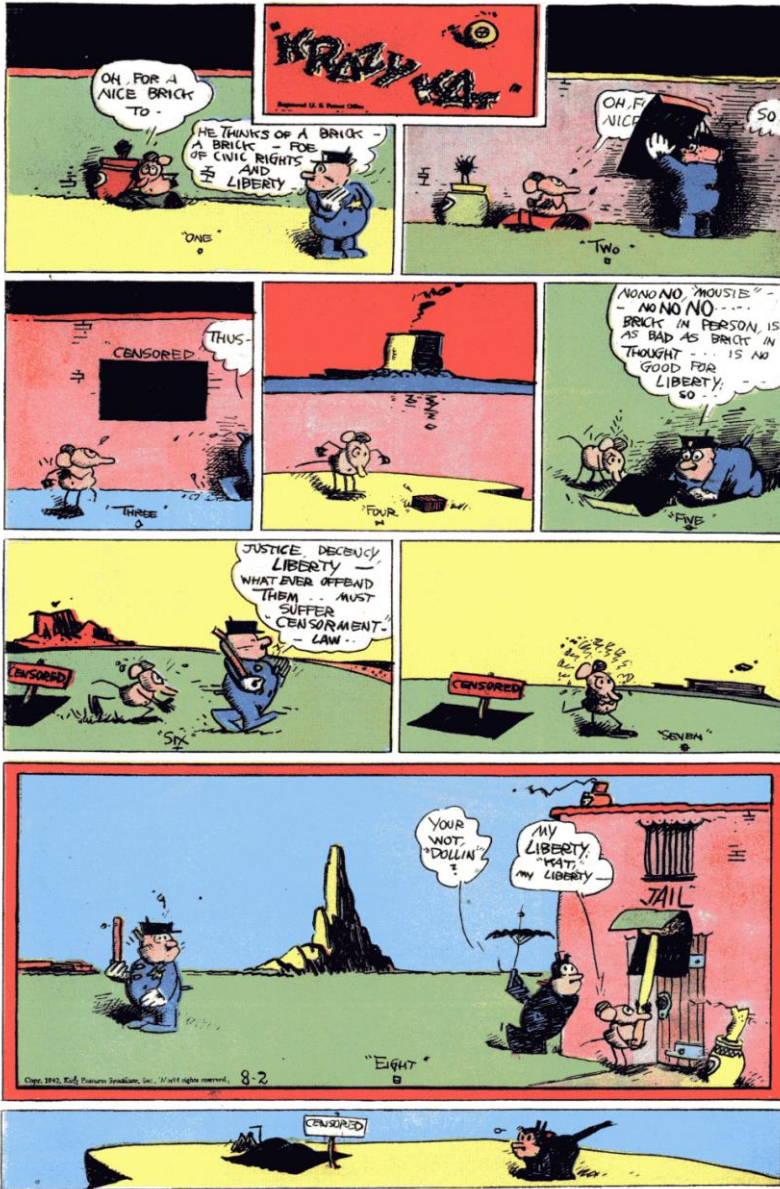
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<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p.545.

<sup>66</sup> Baudrillard, from *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner, in *The Postmodernism Reader*, ed. Michael Drolet (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), p.275.

<sup>67</sup> Orvell, *After the Machine*, p.131-132.

<sup>68</sup> Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), p.97.



The sublimation of violence places *Krazy Kat*, and therefore Disney, in the realm of pre- and post-modernity, as well as pre- and post-history. Temporality becomes staggered. 'Well, Kop,' says Ignatz, in the first panel of a Sunday page, 'as usual—in this picture we gather, me, you, kat. In this picture—we plot—in this one—what ho, Kelly? — brick! Like a bud—the plot—swells—unfolds—and flowers—into this beautiful—climax—we call it 'finale', as he throws the brick at Krazy. 'And I call it, 'overture'—don't we, 'K'?' says Pupp, pouncing on Ignatz, 'and now, mouseie, guess what we do—in the next picture.' 'We rehearse,' replies Ignatz.<sup>69</sup> The 'finale' comes halfway through, followed by the 'overture', and the ending signifies that it is time for a 'rehearsal.' Utopianism is conveyed as temporal rearrangement, through increments of time presented like the panels of a comic strip, the order in which they are read being entirely up to the reader.

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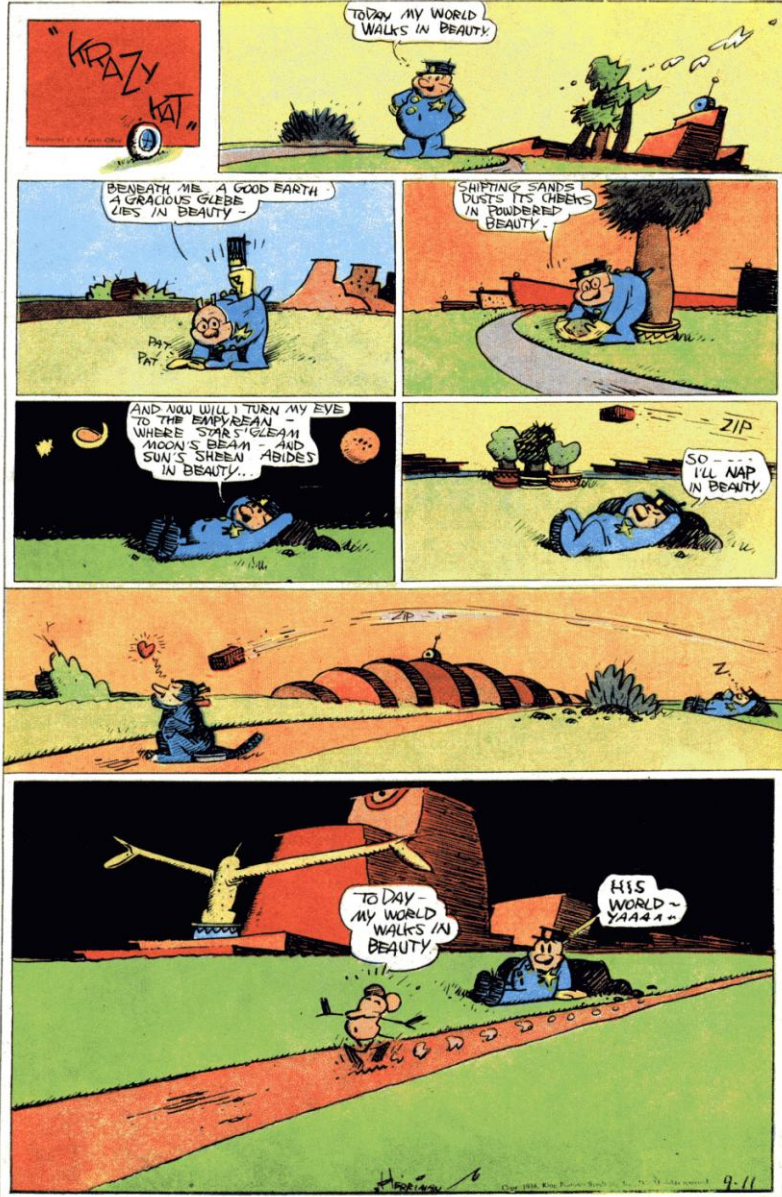
When Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* was released in 1925, the editor of *Movie Classics Magazine* asked Herriman if he would like to review the film. Herriman had previously stated that Chaplin was one of his two favourite 'Chorleses', the other being Dickens. Herriman obliged, downplaying not only his own 'kritical' ability but the practice of criticism in general, in the printed review. 'Me, make kritical remarks, me analyze, me krack wise animadversions about holy shux, I should be so loose with my language, I should be so kareless with my khirography, I should get so free with fustian.' He portrays Chaplin in terms easily applicable to Krazy—'the magic of transmutation takes place ... there is no question of why he is here, slipping, sliding or scampering ... we have waited long to katch this sprite at play'—and concludes by declaring:

Let all the kobblers of earth fashion flat shoes, all awry—and all the tailors trim trousers as loose as gunny sacks, put all the reeds of the world into kanes, and let the hatter go mad making Derbies—then pour into them the genius of another Chaplin. It is as easy as writing kriticizm—mes amis—Twice as easy!!!! And now, Ignatz!! The BRICK!!!<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> 25/1/42.

<sup>70</sup> Herriman, 'The Gold Rush' as Seen by Krazy Kat', in *Krazy & Ignatz 1925-1926*, p.9.



'Criticism' is therefore as easy as replicating genius—that is, impossible—and deserving of the brick. At the same time, intellectualism—as demonstrated by the variety of interpretations applicable to *Krazy Kat*—also resembles Ignatz's perpetual brick-throwing in its continuous attempts at definition. Krazy then mirrors not only the text in which she appears but the slapstick text in general, inasmuch as she invites and avoids clarification, alchemising the analytical brick into hagiography, a 'missile of love and affection.' Slapstick is characterised by, amongst other things, impulse and the deflating of pomposity. *Krazy Kat* is therefore an archetype of slapstick in that it impels the pompous act of criticism, the unthinking urge to *think* something through, yet it ultimately avoids all efforts to that end.

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