Encyclopedia > Fredric Wertham

Dr. Fredric Wertham (March 20, 1895 – November 18, 1981) was a German-American psychiatrist and crusading author who protested the purportedly harmful effects of mass media—comic books in particular—on the development of children. His best-known book was Seduction of the Innocent (1954), which led to a U.S. Congressional inquiry into the comic book industry and the creation of the Comics Code.

Early career

Wertham was born in Nuremberg, Germany, studied in Munich, Erlangen, and London, and graduated from the University of Würzburg in 1921. Major influences on his psychiatric career included Sigmund Freud, with whom he corresponded, and Emil Kraepelin; in his work at the Kraepelin Clinic, Wertham absorbed the then-novel idea that environment and social background had major effects on psychological development. In 1922 he moved to the United States, working originally at Johns Hopkins University. He became a citizen in 1927. In 1932 he moved to New York City, where he became the senior psychiatrist for the city's Department of Hospitals connected with the Court of General Sessions. His job was to give all convicted felons a psychiatric examination which was then turned over to the court. He married Florence Hesketh (1902–1987), a sculptor.

Shortly after beginning his work in New York, Wertham was an expert witness in the trial of Albert Fish. Fish was a psychopath, masochist, child molester, and cannibal, whose own childhood was marked by abuse and mental illness. Wertham said that there were no comparable cases in his extensive experience, and that Fish was the most deranged human being he had ever seen. Despite Wertham's testimony, Fish was judged legally sane and executed. Wertham later described the Fish case and his involvement in other murder trials, in his 1949 book The Show of Violence.

Wertham's first book, The Brain as an Organ (1934), was a scientific study of the brain, which demonstrated his rich training in medicine. His wife provided illustrations of cross sections of the brain which accompanied the book. Wertham completed this book while working at Bellevue Hospital. But Wertham's work with troubled youth, and a clinical interest in popular culture, soon turned his focus to the negative influences of mass media. His 1941 book Dark Legend, later adapted into a play, was based on the true story of a 17-year-old murderer who, according to Wertham, had a dark fantasy life based on movies, radio plays, and comic books. Comics were extremely popular among all youth at the time, so it was not surprising that young criminals also consumed them in large quantities, but Wertham increasingly saw a sinister connection.

Wertham's writing, in books and magazine articles, turned exclusively to the unwholesome effects of the media and of comic books in particular. He was not alone in these criticisms, but as a respected clinician who had been called to testify in trials and government hearings, he was particularly influential. His 1948 articles "Horror in the Nursery" (Collier's Weekly) and "The Psychopathology of Comic Books" (American Journal of Psychotherapy) prompted the formation of the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers and the first attempt at self-censorship by the comic book industry. The publication of Seduction of the Innocent (1954), and his subsequent public testimony about comic books, represented the peak of his influence.

Seduction of the Innocent and Senate hearings

Seduction of the Innocent described overt or covert depictions of violence, sex, drug use, and other adult fare within "crime comics"—a term Wertham used to describe not only the popular gangster/murder-oriented titles of the time but also superhero and horror comics as well—and asserted, based largely on undocumented anecdotes, that reading this material encouraged similar behavior in children.

Comics, especially the crime/horror titles pioneered by EC, were not lacking in gruesome images; Wertham reproduced these extensively, pointing out what he saw as recurring morbid themes such as "injury to the eye". Many of his other conjectures, particularly about hidden sexual themes (e.g., images of female nudity concealed in drawings of muscles and tree bark, or Batman and Robin as gay
What is often overlooked in discussions of *Seduction of the Innocent* is Wertham's analysis of the advertisements that appeared in 1950s comic books and the commercial context in which these publications existed. Wertham objected to not only the violence in the stories but also the fact that air rifles and knives were advertised alongside them. Also rarely mentioned in summaries or reviews of *Seduction of the Innocent* are Wertham's claims that retailers who did not want to sell material with which they were uncomfortable, such as horror comics, were essentially held to ransom by the distributors. According to Wertham, news vendors were told by the distributors that if they did not sell the objectionable comic books, they would not be allowed to sell any of the other publications being distributed.

The splash made by this book and Wertham's previous credentials as an expert witness, made it inevitable that he would appear before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency led by anti-crime crusader Estes Kefauver. In extensive testimony before the committee, Wertham restated arguments from his book and pointed to comics as a major cause of juvenile crime. The committee's questioning of their next witness, EC publisher William Gaines, focused on violent scenes of the type Wertham had decried. Though the committee's final report did not blame comics for crime, it recommended that the comics industry tone down its content voluntarily; possibly taking this as a veiled threat of potential censorship, publishers developed the Comics Code Authority to censor their own content. The Code banned not only violent images but also entire words and concepts (e.g. “terror” and “zombies”) and dictated that criminals must always be punished—thus destroying most EC-style titles, and leaving a sanitized subset of superhero comics as the chief remaining genre. Wertham described the Comics Code as inadequate.

Later career

Wertham's views on mass media have largely overshadowed his broader concerns with violence and with protecting children from psychological harm. His writings about the effects of racial segregation were used as evidence in the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* and part of his 1966 book *A Sign for Cain* dealt with the involvement of medical professionals in the Holocaust. To promote this book Wertham made two memorable appearances on the Mike Douglas Show where he ended up debating his theories with the co-hosts, Barbara Feldon (April 10, 1967) and Vincent Price (June 19, 1967). Excerpts were shown at the 2003 Comic-Con International: San Diego.

Wertham always denied that he favored censorship or had anything against comic books in principle, and in the 1970s he focused his interest on the benign aspects of the comic fandom subculture; in his last book, *The World of Fanzines* (1974), he concluded that *fanzines* were “a constructive and healthy exercise of creative drives”. This led to an invitation for Wertham to address the New York Comic Art Convention. Still infamous to most comics fans of the time, Wertham encountered suspicion and heckling at the convention, and stopped writing about comics thereafter.

He died in 1981 at his retirement home in Lynn Township, Lehigh County, Pennsylvania. His papers were donated to the Library of Congress and are held by the Manuscript Division where they are available for scholarly research after the expiration in 2001 of a restriction on access. A register of the papers has been prepared.

Wertham in fiction

A fictional depiction of the Wertham-inspired attacks on the comics industry comprises part of the novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. Wertham and the Kefauver hearings have been extensively parodied in comics themselves, notably in the 1977 underground comic *Dr. Wertham's Comix & Stories* and in Rick Veitch's *The Maximortal*.

He was also depicted in the mini comic book series *Fanboy*, first selling comics used for his research, and later testifying that comics were not harmful, opposing his earlier opinions, in the title character's trial, for selling a mature comic book to a minor.

Wertham was also parodied in *Daniel Clowes' Eightball*. The strip illustrates most of Wertham's key points, but then shows most comic book collectors as impotent nerds, unable to engage in any type of criminal behavior.

There's also a character known as Frederick Wertham seen in *Steve Niles* and actor Thomas Jane's image comic mini-series *Bad Planet*.

In *John Kovalic's Dr. Blink, Superhero Shrink* comic, the epymonous character's full name is Frederick Wertham Blink. In this case he acts as a pop condensor for superheroes, instead of attacking the comics they come from.

In the *Justice League* episode "Eclipsed", there is a report condemning children's admiration of superheroes by a psychiatrist named Dr. Fredric, entitled "The Innocent Seduced".

In Kevin Smith's canceled *Superman Lives* screenplay written in March 1997, his last name is used as the "Wertham act" supposedly the only obstacle preventing Lex Luthor from killing Superman.

In Comic Book: The Movie, the first segment is titled, "Seduction Of An Innocent," and the book itself is also referenced, though in this fictionalized version of comics and fandom, the title is given as "Seduction of the Juvenile."

Selected bibliography

References


Dr. Fredric Wertham, an internationally known psychiatrist who believed that comic books, movies and television shows that featured crime, violence and horror exerted a damaging influence on many juveniles and young adults, died November 18 at his retirement home in Kempton, Pennsylvania. He was 86 years old.

online references


External links

- Fredric Wertham - on Lambiek Comiclopedia
- Fredric Wertham - Anti-Comics Crusader Who Turned Advocate- longer online version of Dwight Decker essay listed above
- The End of Seduction - lengthy history of Wertham and censorship of comics
- Comics Reporter: "Let's You and Him Fight" Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4, Part 5 - Bart Beaty and Craig Fischer discuss Beaty's "Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture"

further reading


Results from FactBites:

Fredric Wertham St. James Encyclopedia of Pop Culture - Find Articles (924 words)

Although Fredric Wertham is remembered primarily as the author of Seduction of the Innocent (1954), an incisive, blistering attack on the violence and horror purveyed by the comic book industry, his research took him through this era of crime comics to the culture that violent movies and television created.

Wertham's diagnostic technique was often used in conjunction with paintings by patients, such as the watercolors done by Zelda Fitzgerald when she was under treatment at the Phipps Clinic.

Wertham's support for an intelligent use of the M'Naughton's rule determining legal insanity, his understanding of how environmental forces shape individual responses, and his argument that violence and murder are diseases of society all persuaded him that violence is not innate, and so could be prevented.

Fredric Wertham at AllExperts (1195 words)

Fredric Wertham (March 20, 1895 &ndash; November 29, 1981) was a German-American psychiatrist and crusading author who protested the purportedly harmful effects of mass media &ndash; comic books in particular&mdash;on the development of children.

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Wertham's first book, The Brain as an Organ (1934), was a general study of mental illness based on the theories of Kraepelin.

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Fredric Wertham - Anti-Comics Crusader Who Turned Advocate - longer online version of Dwight Decker essay listed above. The End of Seduction - lengthy history of Wertham and censorship of comics. Although Fredric Wertham is remembered primarily as the author of Seduction of the Innocent (1954), an incisive, blistering attack on the violence and horror purveyed by the comic book industry, his research took him through this era of crime comics to the culture that violent movies and television created. Fredric Wertham. From Academic Kids. Dr. Fredric Wertham (March 20, 1895–November 29, 1981) was a German-American psychiatrist and crusading author who protested the purportedly harmful effects of mass media—comic books in particular—on the development of children. But Wertham's work with troubled youth, and a clinical interest in popular culture, soon turned his focus to the negative influences of mass media. Fredric Wertham (March 20, 1895 – November 16, 1981) was a German-American psychiatrist and crusading author who protested the purportedly harmful effects of mass media—comic books in particular—on the development of children. His best-known book was Seduction of the Innocent (1954), which led to a U.S. Congressional inquiry into the comic book industry and the creation of the Comics Code.