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Peter Tshetu Jr.  
*University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa*

Brian Pindayi  
*University of Cape Town, South Africa*

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Film Review: *No Straight Lines—The Rise of Queer Comics*

Reviewed by Peter Jnr Tshetu\(^1\) & Brian Pindayi\(^2\)

**Film Information:**
Title: *No Straight Lines—The rise of queer comics*
Director and Producer: Vivian Kleiman
Release Year: 2023
Length in Minutes: 78
Genre: Documentary
Original Language: English
Educational Distributor: GOOD DOCS

*No Straight Lines—The Rise of Queer Comics* is an illuminating and moving narration that explores the rich history and evolution of queer comics, offering a compelling narrative that spans decades of artistic expression, social challenges, and triumphs within the queer community in America. It is a groundbreaking elucidation that looks into the multifaceted world of queer theory, emphasizing liberal engagement and highlighting the unique safety and creativity offered by comics as a medium of queer expression. The film has themes of resilience, as pioneering comics artists set out to produce comics from the 1960’s for no material gain but with the conviction to express a lifestyle and a right to be recognized and respected. This documentary film shows the historical progression of the gay rights movement and illustrates how it has been growing alongside other human rights concerns and activities such as the black rights movement and the concept of equality as espoused by Mohamad Ali (Swank & Fahs, 2012).

To understand the production’s context, it is essential to grasp the fundamentals of queer theory. Queer theory challenges traditional norms of sexuality and gender, aiming to deconstruct and redefine them. It is an intellectual framework that promotes diversity and inclusivity, which *No Straight Lines—The rise of queer comics* masterfully explores. The storyline underscores the importance of liberal engagement with queer theory. It demonstrates how this theory promotes critical thinking, inclusivity, and social progress. By embracing queerness, society can break down barriers and foster acceptance and understanding of diverse identities and expressions.

The film opens with a captivating animation, immediately setting the tone for a personal journey into the world of queer comics. The use of visuals, including powerful images and excerpts from comic strips, effectively conveys the struggles and triumphs of individuals navigating their gender and sexualities in a society that has often misunderstood or marginalized them. The animation serves as a symbolic doorway into the world of queer comics, immediately introducing viewers to the life experiences, perceptions, struggles and triumphs of queer people. The narrative elements supporting the animation powerfully convey the complex emotions tied to the process of coming out as a queer. The film exemplifies why it is important to have art as a form of expression and a mirror of life experiences.

\(^1\)Dr. Peter Junior Tshetu is a research scholar at EDUVOS. He completed his Ph.D. at the Department of Linguistics, University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. His area of academic interests includes Queer Studies, Political Discourse, Feminist Film Studies, and [IM]-politeness studies. He can be reached at peterjunior.tshetu@gmail.com

\(^2\)Dr. Brian Pindayi is a research scholar at EDUVOS. He completed his Ph.D at the Department of Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa. His area of academic interests includes Film and Media Studies, Digital media discourse, and Queer Studies. He can be reached at brianpindy@gmail.com
The issue of coming out of the closet as a queer individual is a central theme that the production effectively emphasizes from the outset. The animated scenes, accompanied by phrases such as “Coming out of the closet,” “One person’s experience,” and “The story of a new lesbian” creates a tangible connection to the personal and challenging experiences faced by individuals in revealing their authentic selves. The reassuring affirmation of why it is important to be authentic and genuine in human relations permeates the commentary as the personal storytelling speaks to the notion of why it is essential to amplify voices that call for equality and recognition.

The narrative structure is skillfully woven, seamlessly blending personal real-life stories, historical events, and the evolution of queer comics as a powerful form of self-expression. The inclusion of personal narratives humanizes the struggles and triumphs of queer individuals, fostering empathy. The film offers a comprehensive exploration of the queer journey through the dynamic lens of comic art. Historical events such as the Stonewall riot and the HIV & AIDS epidemic are seamlessly integrated, providing a contextual backdrop for the societal shifts reflected in queer comics. The documentary adeptly tackles the challenges faced by queer comics, from the restrictive Comics Code of Authority to negative societal perceptions of queers, while celebrating their resilience and creativity. The dark and unfortunate torment experienced during the AIDS epidemic is portrayed vividly, and the period is treated as a historical moment of extreme persecution that forced the queer community to be more united and resilient (Hart, 2002). The film highlights the role of humor as a coping mechanism during the AIDS epidemic and a form of resistance in the face of tragedy.

The inclusion of key figures such as Howard Cruse, Mary Wings, Alison Bechdel, Jennifer Camper, and Rupert Kinnard adds depth to the storyline, providing firsthand accounts of their experiences and contributions to the queer comics movement. While the production enriches its narrative by featuring such key figures, it inadvertently raises questions about representation and authenticity within the queer comics movement. By prominently featuring creators all of whom identify as queer, the film leaves us pondering whether being a queer comic necessitates personal engagement with non-heteronormative identities. The showcased comics, including Alison Bechdel, Jennifer Camper, Howard Cruse, Rupert Kinnard, and Mary Wings, all share same-sex partners, prompting viewers to question whether there is room for allyship or if one must be personally gay to authentically contribute to queer comics. The homogeneity in experiences inadvertently limits the diversity of narratives within the queer comics movement. The absence of voice from artists with different sexual orientations, such as bisexual or heterosexual allies, potentially restricts the scope of presentation and the exploration of varied perspectives. Including the voices of outsiders could have added a layer of objectivity to the film. Their perspectives might have offered insights into the broader societal perceptions, challenges faced by queer individuals from an external viewpoint, and the evolving dynamics of allyship. While the film excels in highlighting the intersectionality within the queer community, it leaves this query unanswered, inviting further exploration into the dynamics of identity and representation in the world of queer comics.

The film achieves a commendable balance by portraying a spectrum of experiences within the queer community, ensuring representation from both male and female queer comics who are all involved in same-sex relationships. This balanced representation underscores the universality of the challenges and triumphs faced by individuals regardless of gender. By featuring comics artists from various backgrounds, the production avoids reinforcing stereotypical narratives and instead offers a comprehensive look at the multifaceted nature of queer experiences. Thus, the film is more inclusive and representative of the rich tapestry of queer lives and narratives within the space of queer comics.

The storyline powerfully portrays how women within the queer comics movement played a transformative role by breaking barriers, challenging societal conventions, and taking
ownership of their own narratives in defiance of societal expectations. It illuminates the resilience and determination of women like Mary Wings, who actively sought to reshape the narrative surrounding queer experiences. A standout moment is when Mary Wings receives crucial support from two women who own an offset printing press. This collaboration exemplifies the solidarity among women within and outside the queer comics community. By assisting each other, they not only transcended societal limitations but also actively participated in pushing boundaries and challenging norms. The film highlights how these women, by owning their narratives and supporting one another, became catalysts for change, contributing to the larger movement of breaking down barriers within the queer community and the world of comic art.

As an artistic expression, the production effectively underscores the profound significance of comics as a powerful medium for expressing and exploring queer sexualities. The featured artists use the visual and narrative elements of comics to articulate the intricacies of their queer experiences. As a cinematic illumination, it portrays comics as a unique and accessible tool that allows creators to navigate the nuances of gender and sexuality, breaking away from traditional norms and fostering a sense of empowerment. This art form is presented as a vehicle for individuals to reclaim their narratives, challenge stereotypes, and contribute to a broader cultural dialogue surrounding queer sexualities. Unlike other productions, it effectively captures the transition of queer comics from traditional publishing to the digital era, illustrating how online platforms provided a new frontier for queer artists to share their stories and connect with a broader audience.

The emphasis on community and connections within the queer comics world is a heartening aspect, showcasing the resilience and mutual support among queer artists. The documentary beautifully captures how each featured artist, despite navigating their individual journeys, was aware of the existence of others within the comic world. Notably, Jennifer Camper’s tapping into the knowledge and guidance from Howard Cruse exemplifies the mentoring and knowledge-sharing dynamics within the queer comics community. The film also highlights instances of solidarity and support between comic artists, such as the connection between Alison Bechdel and Rupert Kinnard. Their reaching out to each other not only showcases a shared understanding of the challenges faced within the industry but also exemplifies the resilience fostered through a sense of community. This interconnectedness becomes a source of strength.

The film’s dedication to Howard Cruse, a trailblazer in the world of queer comics, is a fitting tribute to his legacy and the impact he had on subsequent generations. The film succeeds in not only documenting the history of queer comics but also in conveying the cultural significance of these narratives in challenging societal norms and fostering a sense of pride and understanding within the queer community. In conclusion, No Straight Lines — The Rise of Queer Comics is a thought-provoking and visually engaging documentary that skillfully weaves together personal stories, historical context, and the evolution of queer comics. It stands as a testament to the power of art in shaping narratives, challenging stereotypes, and creating a space for diverse voices within the queer community.

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References