

A graphic history

The rise of the illustrated novel in Canadian literature

Introduction

This project explores the recent rise in popularity and literary status of the graphic novel in Canada. Once confined to the side street comic book shop, graphic novels now have their own sections in many major bookstores, and two have been nominated for finalists for the Canada Reads contest. Additionally, academics are beginning to turn their thoughts to the genre, even sometimes including graphic novels on their course syllabi.

This project examines the Canadian graphic novel's rise in popularity and status through the following questions:

What are the conditions and dominant attitudes surrounding the graphic novel's entry into academic and other reading communities?

Does this newcomer genre require that academics and others reconfigure their concepts of and ideas about the status of books as cultural objects and works of art?

Methodology

The research for the project incorporates both traditional literary studies techniques as well as new media studies techniques. There are three main steps in the project:

First, four key Canadian graphic novels are identified and analyzed:



Next, secondary sources from academics are sought out and read:

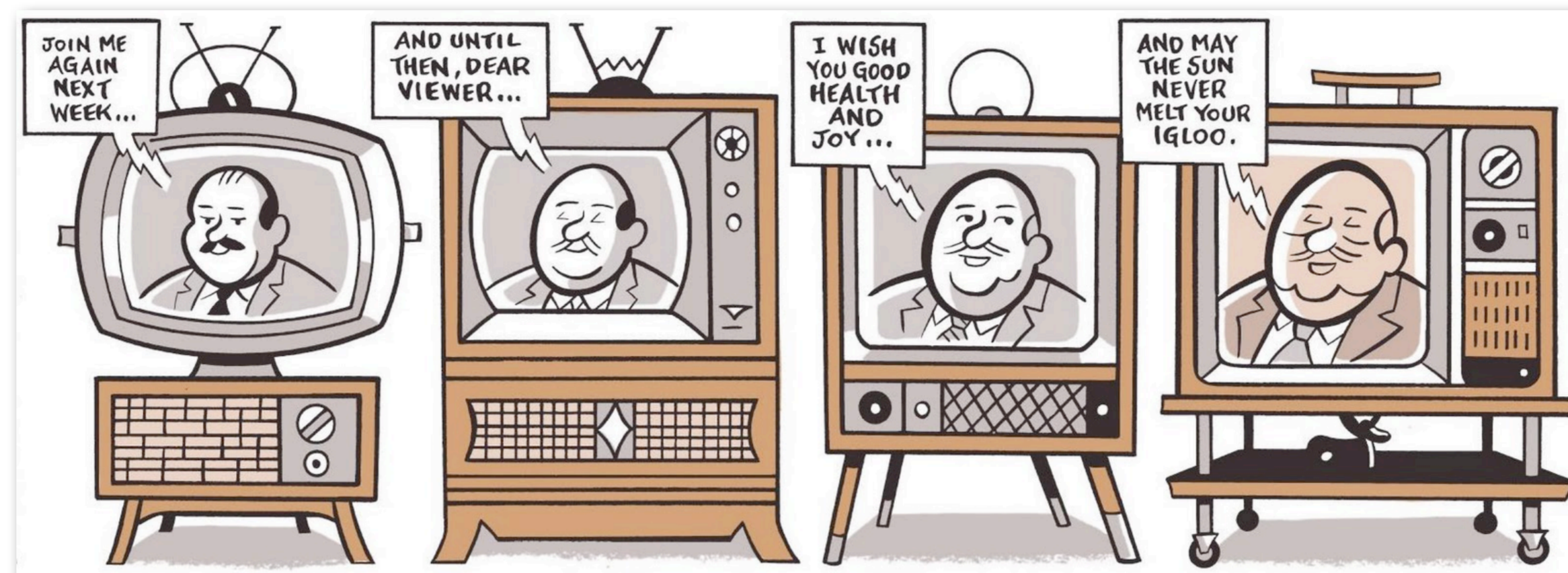


Lastly, the Canadian graphic novel's place in current media landscape is examined:



Results

An early result was that as a new type of literary genre, graphic novels require unique reading strategies of which traditional studies are only a part of. This is particularly noticeable when looking at pages like the one below, from Seth's *George Sprott: 1895-1974*.



This strip is a good example of how time functions differently in graphic novels than in traditional literature.

One way in which the two differ is that in traditional literature, the past is typically a memory and the future is an unknown possibility. In graphic novels, however, both past and future are real, and the reader can fluidly move backwards or forwards through time.

Histories of the graphic novel, like the one provided in Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, report that the genre stems from the popular, and highly consumable comic book. Early twentieth century comic books differ from the modern graphic novel in a few key ways though. For instance, comic books were typically produced on an assembly-line process, where multiple writers would quickly and cheaply produce short strips for large corporations to distribute as free promotional material. Modern graphic novels, however, are more often created by an individual artist on their own agency rather than multiple artists for an advertising department. They are produced over a period of several months or even years, and they are book length narratives, not short strips.

I also discovered that graphic novels are being taught in undergraduate classrooms, but their presence is limited. When the genre is taught, new media teaching techniques are required, along with traditional literary studies.

In regards to the graphic novel's place in modern media landscape, the genre is still subject to many prejudices, and is often tied to outdated notions of what types of media are 'highbrow' and what types of media are 'lowbrow.' These ideas are quite entrenched in both elite and popular reading communities. The Canadian Broadcast Corporation's "Canada Reads 2011 Competition Day 1" offers a perfect case study for investigating these subjects.



Conclusion

The dominant attitude surrounding the Canadian graphic novel's entry into academic and other communities is that the graphic novel is lesser than 'purely' written or visual art. This attitude stems from outdated prejudices that tend to hierarchize some types of books in terms of their aesthetic value and their contribution to culture.

Graphic novels do require that academics and others reshape their notions of books as cultural objects and art. New forms of media like the internet don't necessarily support other new forms of media like the graphic novel, and academics have a responsibility engage productively with and support this new genre.



In Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, he notes that essentially all forms of media have experienced growing pains before wide acceptance. Now is that time for the graphic novel in Canada.

References, Contact, & Acknowledgments

Works cited on this poster include:

The Canadian Broadcast Corporation. "Canada Reads 2011 Competition Day 1." Video. The Canadian Broadcast Corporation, 2011. Web. 7 Feb. 2011.

Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. Web.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press Inc., 1993. Print.

Seth. *George Sprott: 1894-1975*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2009. Print.

A full list of works consulted, as well as answers to questions about the project can be provided by contacting Keeton Wilcock at: T - 519-757-6632 & E - kwilco16@uottawa.ca

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