

Queen City Comics: Introduction to the Proceedings

Until recent years the study of popular culture was not considered worthy of attention in academic circles, in being thought far below the quality of classics such as Shakespeare, Balzac or Murasaki Shikibu. Circumstances are now changing and popular culture is increasingly considered a valid academic research tool into all manner of human affairs. While the likes of Superman, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Hello Kitty will not replace Shakespeare, they are changing the way society perceives culture and can engage in creating new art forms that are in keeping with a democratic mass aesthetic. Literature, art, music, film, and theatre are no longer the purviews of an aristocracy or educated elite, but within the grasp of every person on the street. Moreover, academics are no longer obsessed with written texts and documents; rather the image, since the invention of photography, has become a form of communication suitable for cultural and historical analysis, so that we can now speak of becoming visually literate in response to the onslaught of the visual and print culture of television, film, advertisements, magazines and so forth. It is thus fitting that the comic book and graphic novel are spanning the bridge between text and image.

On May 2nd, 2009, the University of Regina hosted the “Queen City Comics: Astonishing Conference & Festival” at the College Avenue Campus in downtown Regina, Saskatchewan. The conference reflects the growing interest in the academic world in comics, graphic novels and *manga* as they are today not only considered essential vehicles of popular culture but to be also in possession of an aesthetic in themselves that is a barometer of mass sensibilities. The event provided a unique opportunity for multidisciplinary discussions among both local and international artists and academics.

Artists from Saskatchewan, including First Nations, engaged in fruitful exchanges with comics creators from France and Belgium, raising awareness about their respective artistic cultures. The common exhibition became a dynamic window on what is done here and abroad, bridging the local with the international. Academic participants came from a wide variety of disciplines, including Fine Arts, English, French, Cultural Studies, Education, Communication and Business Administration. The following four proceedings represent some of the papers presented at the conference.

Bruce Dadey, from Laurentian University, in *Moving Stillness, Expressive Silence: Reframing the Semiotic Resources of the Comics Medium*, establishes parallels between comics and film to help better understand the potential of comics. Both borrowed conventions from older art forms, then came to develop their own grammar. A few examples of the mutual influence of film and comics are given: storyboards, artist inspired by framing techniques, etc. Dadey uses Lessing’s work on the limits of paintings and poetry to explore the boundaries of time and space. How much time can be expressed by a still image? Choosing the right moment to represent can make the depiction transcend stillness. What Dadey

focuses on are not devices that imitate another medium, but devices that express the true nature of the medium. The ultimate example is Chris Ware's bold experiments with flow charts that challenge the traditional linear reading of comics into a tabular experience that could not be transposed in any other media.

Troni Grande, from the University of Regina, in *Manga Shakespeare and the Hermeneutic Problems of "Double Access"*, quotes not only Shakespeare critics but prominent comics theorists as well. Grande's argument is that the *manga* adaptations of Shakespeare simultaneously exploit two culture systems: high and pop. Tensions and collaborations between the two systems are explored. Grande analyzes *manga* devices and their use to adapt Shakespeare, like onomatopoeia and SD (super-deformed) figures. *Manga* adaptations appeal to educators because they are attractive to kids, but how much alteration to the original text would be acceptable? How competent must the reader be in reading Shakespeare? And how competent must the reader be in reading the codes of manga? Grande proposes many answers using the lens of a two culture system.

Carlen Lavigne, from Red Deer College, argues, in "*Buffy the Lesbian Separatist*": *Cinnamon, Sex, and Gender in Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season 8*, that the comic book version of Buffy proposes to the reader situations of lesbianism and separatism, but does not fully explore the implications of the choices made. If gender hybridity is explored with the main characters, the question of gender balance does not deviate from traditional conceptions. Loss of stability results when the feminine side of a character is confronted with his/her masculine side. For example, Buffy becomes unbalanced when she becomes more masculine than feminine. Sex is either straight or gay; the notion of bisexuality is eluded. But if Buffy cannot sustain over-masculinization, she finds balance in being both masculine and feminine. But Lavigne recognizes that, overall, the series does break ground by showing hybrid genders and breaking stereotypes.

June Madeley, from the University of New Brunswick, Saint John, presents the result of field work and focuses on the reception of translated *manga* by North American readers in her *Girly Girls and Pretty Boys: Gender and Audience Reception of English Translated Manga*. Madeley distills interesting facts from interviews with *manga* readers about their favourite male and female characters as well as about their reading practices. Madeley contextualizes information about the *manga* markets in North America and Japan, the methodology of the interview as well as the huge gap between real life and the pop culture universes of the *manga*. She discusses how in these universes, the portrayal of men and women in Japan is strongly coded but in a way that is different from North America. Male and female readers show huge differences in reading preferences and excerpts from interviews provided some insight into this. Opinions about the "girly girl" and the "pretty boy" characters are the strongest. Madeley suggests that if there is gender fluidity and gender bending in *manga*, the female characters are still not on par with their male counterparts.

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