

The Symbolic Canadian

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The comic book, as medium that has been so thoroughly dominated both by a single genre – the super-hero – and by the products of a single nation’s cultural industry – the United States of America’s “Big Two” publishers – the becomes a difficult object to analyze on a localized or nationalist basis. This creates a serious question of whether an authentically Canadian approach to the comics medium is possible and what such an approach might look like. I believe that one way of responding to this challenge lies in the work of a group of Toronto alternative cartoonists – Chester Brown, Joe Matt, and Gregory “Seth” Gallant – whose comics came to the fore internationally in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While this is not a perfect solution to the problem of identifying a Canadian comics aesthetic – indeed, one of the cartoonists is an American expatriate who has since repatriated and Brown has said he is embarrassed to have ever been a nationalist (1998:160) – it does represent a way of broadening the discussion of Canadian comics beyond Nelvana of the Northern Lights and Captain Canuck.

When phrased in more general terms, these problems are not unique to comics. With Canadian multiplex screens dominated by Hollywood imports and Canadian soundstages in Vancouver and Toronto occupied by runaway productions, film in Canada has had to grapple with similar issues as it has attempted to define what a Canadian cinema might look like. Is a Canadian film influenced and informed by Hollywood techniques and narrative conventions in any way authentically Canadian? Histories of contemporary Canadian cinema typically place a great deal of importance on the 1960s and the production of

films such as *Nobody Waved Good-bye* and *Le Chat dans le sac*, which blazed a new trail for Canadian cinema as feature films produced by Canadians apart from the Hollywood system (Harcourt 1980). The Canadian film industry would no longer be a branch plant of the studio system; Canadians would now speak for themselves on the screen.

Interestingly enough, these first features share several characteristics in common with the comics of the Toronto scene's alternative cartoonists, specifically in terms of their depictions of their protagonists and their use of semi-documentary realism*. The literature concerning Canadian film is, at present, significantly more developed than that concerning Canadian comics, so I will borrow rather heavily from this body of work to analyze the comics in which I am presently interested. But since we find ourselves with two bodies of work that are on the leading edges of two different media in Canada separated by twenty years or more that nevertheless seem very much alike, we need – and I hope to provide – a theoretical framework or a guiding metaphor that can help us to explain how such similar sets of works emerge at different moments in Canadian cultural history in two media that shared no formal or institutional connections.

Anthony Wilden's book *The Imaginary Canadian* (1980), which takes the revealing of Canada as a colonized nation as its project, is the starting point for developing this metaphor. While the claim that Canada is a colonized nation might seem silly to many Canadians – especially given the number of minorities

* I must note that I am focusing on English Canadian comics and film in this paper. The national trajectory of Quebec and the specificity of its cultural industries are distinct enough from the picture in English Canada that they deserve separate treatment elsewhere.

that have been profoundly wronged by the Canadian state – there is some veracity to it. Canada’s WASP elites were once the local enforcers of the colonial order on behalf of the power at the centre of the Commonwealth, but when the sun finally set on the British Empire, Canada was pulled into the orbit of a new economic, military, and cultural power, the USA. Wilden suggests that we have allowed a series of Imaginary relations and an Imaginary Canada to be constructed in order that we might not have to face the Reality of our own oppression. As he says, “we do not primarily perceive and understand our relationships to the many different kinds of people in Canadian society on the basis of real images and real concepts” but on the basis of “Imaginary images and Imaginary concepts” (1980:65). The Canada we know and, perhaps, love is “an artificial nation, a ‘Canada’ created by other countries for their own benefit,” and “the entire ‘consciousness industry’ in Canada thrives on manipulating this national derangement” (1980:1). The “socially defined and accepted fantasies” that constitute the Imaginary Canada “are dependent for many of their characteristics on the paranoid relationship of opposition to the *others*” (1980:65,67). This description certainly seems an able explanation of the oft-cited complaint that Canadians only ever define themselves in contrast to Americans, but the true value of Wilden’s argument for the analysis at hand lies in the opportunity created by his choice of terminology.

The most intriguing part of Wilden’s use of the word “Imaginary” comes from the knowledge that he has served as a translator for several works by Jacques Lacan. Wilden acknowledges the Lacanian pedigree of the concept,

though claims to have derived it from different sources than Lacan (1980:63). Indeed, Wilden's use seems to more closely echo Louis Althusser's definition of ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (1971:162). However, exploring the implications of a more fully Lacanian interpretation of this term and following that metaphor through to its conclusion will prove fruitful.

Let us imagine for the moment, for the sake of argument, that we can think of the development of the *Volksgeist* of a newly independent nation as being analogous to the psychological development of a newborn baby. This is, in itself, the derivation Wilden makes from the Lacanian use of the word, using it to describe relationships that "are primarily social and economic relations, rather than 'psychoanalytic' ones" (1980:65).

The Imaginary order revolves around the mirror phase. This is the time in children's development when they attempt to "appropriate or control their own image in the mirror," which has a "corporeal unity" that the child does not yet have "at this particular stage of ... development" (Wilden 1968:160). The image of Canadian identity that we see in mass media representations of Canada is an Imaginary one because we define ourselves by means of this image of a Canada more confident and able than the one we feel we live in. This kind of relation "is thus dependent on the collective and individual projection of image into image, on the identification of image with image, on the opposition of image against image, and on the objectification of images" (Wilden 1980:68). It is easy to

identify this misrecognition as the source of Canadians' ambivalence or mistrust of claims of a universal and essential Canadian identity.

However, the Imaginary order is not the end in Lacanian thought. As Wilden explains:

The child's release from this alienating image [the Self constituted by images in the mirror phase], if indeed he is released from it, will occur through his discovery of subjectivity by his appropriation of language from the other, which is his means of entry into the Symbolic order (1968:161).

The entry into the Symbolic is the acquisition of language and the constitution of the self as a speaking subject. If we also apply this order to economic, political, and cultural relations, we end up in a very different place than where *The Imaginary Canadian* leaves us. With the maturation of its own cultural industries, we find the "spirit of the people" acquiring its own voice, speaking for itself, and consequently developing its own subjectivity.

Intriguingly, this description corresponds fairly neatly with the first two phases of the development of a national culture as described by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1966). The first phase, which I identify with the Imaginary in the Lacanian vocabulary, begins when "the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power" (1966:179). In this phase – "the period of unqualified assimilation" – the cultural production of such an intellectual in the periphery "[corresponds] point by point with [that] of his opposite numbers in the mother country" (1966:179). R. Bruce Elder notes that in the early days of Canadian painting, despite the differences between the Canadian and British landscapes, the "tradition of borrowing conventions to

represent the landscape endured remarkably well” (1989:21). In the same way, Canadian films that imitate the conventions of a Hollywood film and Canadian comic books that simply dress up their super-heroes in red and white maple leaves have proven themselves extraordinarily durable despite the transplantation to a new social and cultural context. Both of these artistic phenomena seem to originate in this phase. While these are the works of Canadian artists produced in Canada, they do not do any more than slavishly imitate the styles established by cultural industries at the centre. The mirror that we use to form our sense of ourselves and our identity turns out to be a screen, upon which images are projected that come from somewhere else and have, at best, a tenuous link with the reality of Canada and the diverse people who live here.

In Fanon’s second phase, which I identify with the entry into the Symbolic, “the native is disturbed” and “decides to remember what he is” (1966:179). The intellectual immerses him- or herself in the pre-colonial culture of his/her society, setting “a high value on the customs, traditions and the appearances of his people” (1966:178). In reaction to cultural domination by an outside power, the artist begins to search for more ways to become authentically Canadian, to speak to Canadians and the world of the Canadian experience. However, Fanon notes that this process “only seems to be a banal search for exoticism” (1966:178). This is why Fanon calls for a third phase, one that sees the artist and intellectual as “an awakener of the people” and the development of “a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature” (1966:179). A look

at the box office results or television ratings in Canada should be sufficient to demonstrate that the mainstream of Canadian society has not reached this third phase, full maturity within the Symbolic order.

Granted, the conditions have never been as dire for Canada's WASP majority as those of Fanon's Africa. The development of culture in a nation such as Canada, which has always been both colonized and colonizer, must of course take a different path than in nations that have had to undertake a long, difficult struggle for independence. For, while a "nation which is born of the people's concerted action and which embodies the real aspirations of the people while changing the State cannot exist save in the expression of exceptionally rich forms of culture", this is by no means the story of Canada's nativity (1966:198). Instead, we see works from both of the first two phases intermingling with one another. Lacan also suggested that the Imaginary and the Symbolic "co-exist and intersect in the subject" (Wilden 1968:161). Canadian culture taken as a whole, then, provides us with an interesting portrait both of whom we like to imagine ourselves to be and of whom we think we really are.

This is the context in which I situate the Toronto scene of the late '80s and early '90s. Their work represents an attempt to acquire the language of identity and move into the Symbolic phase, reacting against the artificial images of the Imaginary. We might expect, then, that the character of the Imaginary images would have some influential part in the form that reaction took.

Though there have been "Canadian connections" to mainstream comics throughout the modern history of the medium through artists such as *Little*

Nemo's Winsor McCay, *Prince Valiant's* Hal Foster, and Superman co-creator Joe Shuster, a Canadian comics industry did not take shape as such until during the World War II period. The passing of the War Exchange Conservation Act in 1940 placed restrictions on the importation of non-essential goods, including comic books, from the USA (Bell 2004:4). A number of Canadian publishers began printing so-called "whites," the comic books with black-and-white interiors that characterized Canadian comic publishing during this period (2004:5).

These books were primarily about adventure, including both Canadian-produced strips starring American characters and a number of original Canadian super-hero characters (2004:6). Cartoonist Jerry Lazare, a teenager when he worked in the Canadian comic book industry during this period, recalled that "lots of books had to do with the war" and showed the influences of both American and British sources on the young artists (Furness, Kelly, and Lazare 2004). This flowering of comic book production in Canada was ephemeral. The end of World War II brought the restoration of the American comic book industry's dominance in Canada, which reduced the Canadian industry to a few reprint publishers (2004:15). With the demise of the Canadian industry, "only US comics would be available on the newsstands until the 1970s" in English Canada (2004:26).

This was the status quo until the Canadian "Silver Age" of comics was "ushered in" by the release of *Captain Canuck #1*, who "represented the first appearance on the newsstands of a Canadian superhero since the demise of Johnny Canuck, Sergeant Canuck, and Canada Jack in 1945" (Bell 1986:39). The Captain was followed by new Canadian super-heroes like The Northern

Light and Northguard, but these comics belonged to the field of “alternative and underground comics ... publishers” emerging in the 1970s and ‘80s, the instability of which meant that “none of these heroes thrived in the nineties” (Bell 2001). In a sense, the history of the super-heroic comic book in Canada has been one in which many people have run into the same dead ends decades apart from one another.

However, the three Toronto cartoonists I have chosen to focus on were not the first Canadian cartoonists to break with the mainstream comics style of spandex-clad adventurers. The 1960s saw a “new expression of comic art, which differed markedly from that of the 40s and 50s” in that its origins “derived from the convergence of three developments: the growth of a youth counterculture, the flourishing of the literary small-press movement, and the emergence of a national comic-book fan community” (Bell and Viau 2002). The 1970s even saw the brief flowering of a Canadian underground comix movement, as focussed on “drugs, sex, rock music, and radical politics” as its American contemporaries (2002). But none of this production was as sustained, as successful, or as influential within Canada and abroad as the work of the three I have chosen to profile. As noted by Bell and Viau, in the 1980s “the centre of small-press comic-book activity in Canada shifted from Winnipeg to Toronto” and the comics produced took on “a post-modern sensibility quite different from that of the 60s counterculture” (2002). The emergence of the Toronto scene, and these three celebrated cartoonists in particular, is emblematic of the maturing of Canadian

comics and their rise to prominence within the medium in general (or, at least, its more literary circles).

The trajectory of Canadian film production is somewhat similar. The first screenings of motion pictures in Canada took place in 1896 (Clandfield 1987:1). Since then, the movies have become a part of Canadian life as they have for most people around the world, and a great many Canadians have worked in film production. The first Canadian feature film was *Evangeline*, produced in 1913 and based on the Longfellow poem of the same title (1987:3). With our first feature, it seems, the Canadian character of film production in the country was already problematic.

Two towering figures in the early history of Canadian film are Ernest and Nell Shipman, a husband and wife team that produced a series of films based on the works of the American pulp author James Oliver Curwood and set in “God’s Country,” a re-imagining of the untouched wilderness of the Canadian north (1987:4). However, the 1919 production of *Back to God’s Country* was partially filmed in Hollywood, with California scenery standing in for Canada. Nell Shipman went on to “a successful career as actress, screen-writer, and director” in the USA after her divorce from Ernest (1987:5). Though the takeover of the industry by “the Hollywood giants” pushed Ernest Shipman out of business, his “seven-film adventure” was remarkably successful relative to the modest history of Canadian film production (1987:6).

As Canadian filmmaking took a documentary turn with the making of *Nanook of the North* and the later founding of the National Film Board, Hollywood

picked up the slack for fiction film. The first American film about Canada was 1907's *An Acadian Elopement* (Berton 1975:15). As of the writing of Pierre Berton's *Hollywood's Canada*, Hollywood had produced 575 fiction films that were set in Canada, almost half of which have featured the red serge of the Mounties (1975:16,111). But the Canada represented in these films was a shallow, misrecognized one:

Obviously Hollywood felt that Canada was somehow different from the United States ... But the differences that Hollywood showed were always superficial ones: instead of desert sands, the movie audiences got snowy wastes; instead of typhoons, thundering avalanches. Jungles became pine forests; American sheriffs were transformed into mounted policemen; Mexican villains switched accents and became French-Canadian bad guys. (Berton 1975)

In short, this was a make-believe Canada with little or no relation to the real one. Indeed, only eight of the 575 films used the words "Canada" or "Canadian" in their titles, most preferring such euphemistic and evocative labels as "Northwest or Big Snows or Great Woods" (1975:19).

Berton notes that the end of the era of these Hollywood Northern Westerns corresponded neatly with the rise of a new, revived feature film industry in Canada:

We know that as long as Hollywood made movies about Canada, Canadians made very few movies about themselves. We also know that when Hollywood stopped making movies about Canada, Canadians began to make movies of quite a different kind for the international market – movies such as *Mon Oncle Antoine*, *Goin' Down the Road*, *Kamouraska*, and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. These films spring out of a different kind of Canadian experience, one which has nothing to do with the foreign mythology of the Great Woods. (1975:236)

While Berton refrains from suggesting a direct, causal relationship between these respective fall and rise of these two periods, I don't think it is a large or unreasonable leap to suggest that the Imaginary Canada has something to do with the way that representations of Canada and Canadian identity took shape in new Canadian cinema that followed.

Though Don Haldane's 1963 film *The Drylanders* was the National Film Board's first feature English film, it is 1964 that is celebrated by Peter Harcourt as the beginning of a beginning for Canadian cinema (Clandfield 1987:87; Harcourt 1980). Perhaps this is because Don Owen's *Nobody Waves Good-bye*, a story of youthful rebelliousness whose form was inspired by the NFB's Candid-Eye documentaries, represents a more significant break with the conventions of Hollywood film. Filmmakers like Don Shebib (*Goin' Down the Road*) and Clarke Mackey (*The Only Thing You Know*) followed. Among the films produced by this group of new Canadian fiction filmmakers trained in documentary techniques like "an observational shooting style ... open-ended structures, contemporary social settings and themes, and archival footage," Owen's film "is usually singled out as the groundbreaker" (Clandfield 1987:89). While Clandfield suggests that the "tensions that generated dramatic conflict in their films were not rooted in a sense of emerging national identity" like those of their Quebecois contemporaries, it is equally plausible to interpret "the disaffection of contemporary youth in a conflict of generations" on which these filmmakers focussed as corresponding to cultural growing pains going on in English Canada (1987:89). Contrary to Clandfield's view, Harcourt sees *Nobody Waved Good-bye* as a "distinguished

representation” of its culture, “telling us about the dilemmas and the anguish of our Canadian way of life” (1980:76). It is this body of anti-heroic and documentary-influenced fictional film that I wish to relate to the work of the Toronto scene cartoonists.

In contrast to the super-heroic tradition, the work of the Toronto scene has been largely autobiographical and semi-autobiographical. Works that have moved outside of these genres have still remained firmly grounded in dramatic realism, such as Brown’s historical piece *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* (2003) and Seth’s pseudo-memoir *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken* (2003). They are also characterized by a level of candour on the part of the authors, who depict themselves warts and all. Though the world of literary cartooning in general is “a place of longing, loss, sexual frustration, loneliness and alienation” (McGrath 2004:3), this seems particularly true of Canadian cartoonists, as noted by comics theorist Scott McCloud (McCloud 2000:112). The “benign version” of this brutally honest approach “is Chester Brown’s sweet and innocent-seeming novels ‘Playboy’ and ‘I Never Liked You’; the dark, self-loathing, porn-addicted and parodic version is Joe Matt’s ‘Poor Bastard’” (McGrath 2004:4).

This tendency is partly rooted in the pervasive influence of the American underground comix of the 1960s. As noted by Charles McGrath, Robert Crumb, in particular, “dominates the brief history of the graphic novel the way Cimabue dominates Vasari’s first volume of ‘Lives of the Artists’ – as both an inescapable stylistic influence and a kind of moral exemplar” (2004:4). After all, “almost every aspiring graphic novelist ... goes through a Crumb period” (2004:4). But, at the

same time, the use of this kind of “loser protagonist” is so similar to the characters that populate the Canadian cinema that it seems that this is also its presence is also an indicator of a connection to a particular set of discourses within Canadian art. While the Toronto cartoonists may not have been thinking about the Candid-Eye movement in Canadian documentary film or the theme of survival, their work – and its prominence at a specific moment of the medium’s history in Canada – is tied into specific discursive practices that seem evident on the page.

Robert Fothergill’s article “Coward, Bully, or Clown: The Dream Life of a Younger Brother” (1977) – a bit punchier with its original title, “Being Canadian Means Always Having to Say You’re Sorry” – is the starting point for the study of the “loser cinema” of English Canada. Fothergill says that “if elements of a distinct consciousness ... have indeed been engendered by the emotional and historical experience of being Canadian, then the imaginations of writers and directors will have inherited it to some degree” and this consciousness “will lead them to project themselves into a certain range of experience” represented on the screen (1977:235). However, “the version of *la condition canadienne* reflected to us by our feature films” is again and again the depiction of “the radical inadequacy of the male protagonist – his moral failure, especially, and most visibly, in his relationships with women” (1977:235). This description is just as apt when applied to the work of the Toronto cartoonists.

Fothergill proposes a model that divides representations of the Canadian male into three aspects, the Coward, Bully, and Clown of the article’s title. The

Coward is characterized by “pusillanimity”; though “he can be quite appealing at times – sensitive, vulnerable, mild – and a woman can find herself drawn to him,” he is also fundamentally marked by “a deep-down gutlessness that renders him incapable of reciprocating her commitment” (1977:237). In the guise of the Bully, “the threatened and insubstantial male ego” tries “to assert its dominance through displays of brutal inconsideration and sullen rage,” especially through “the sexual degradation of his womenfolk” (1977:238-239). This is “the ugliest of the three faces, and the scenarios usually work to punish the characters who display it” (1977:239). The Clown is closely related to the Coward; he “shies away from the responsibility of a self-determining adult” and is “given to ‘acting up’ with irrepressible exuberance” (1977:237). These are three distinct types that representations of the male protagonist tend to take in Canadian cinema – none of them particularly positive – and touches of all three can be seen in the comics I am examining.

The series of strips titled with variations of “Things You Should Know About Joe Matt” that recur in his comic *Peepshow* represent him as the Clown. In these strips, which mix straightforward claims about the author with obviously ironic ones, the fact that he “fancies himself a blues man,” “bites his toenails,” “regrets all his decisions anyway,” “worries alot [sic],” “plays the air-bass,” and “eats scabs” is deployed for comedic effect (Matt 2003b:1,22,48). In *Fair Weather*, Matt portrays his childhood self as a manipulating, greedy Coward who ends up betraying the trust of his best friend in hopes of getting a copy of *Action Comics #1* (Matt 2003a). In *The Poor Bastard*, he adds a bit of the Bully to the

mix, quarreling constantly with his girlfriend Trish about his use of pornography and lack of direction while obsessively fantasizing about one of her co-workers, getting a fan of his comics to set him up with someone, and striking up a relationship with an old girlfriend (Matt 2002). Matt states that “he only portrays himself as neurotic” but, be that as it may, without access to the referent, the way that he chooses to represent himself in his comics is the simulacrum that readers must accept (2003b:22).

The male protagonists in Seth and Chester Brown’s work tend towards the Coward, primarily. Seth’s drawing style, which is heavily influenced by artwork from the first half of the 20th Century, especially the masters of gag cartooning at the *New Yorker*, is itself something of a retreat to the past. That retreat is more fully realized in *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken*, where a character very much like Seth searches for information about a gag cartoonist from the ‘50s who turns out to have been from a small Ontario town where Seth spent part of his childhood (Seth 2003). While at one point in the story Seth is shown in what seems to be a fairly successful relationship, it leads to “no contentment” and “no real lasting happiness” because “the closer they get – the further [he retreats]” (2003:121-122). One of the leads in Seth’s *Clyde Fans* is an old man living in a shop that has been closed for years because he was unable to keep pace with the times; his brother is shown failing terribly at the family business of sales, unable to connect with people and instead choosing the company of novelty postcards (2004). Brown’s *I Never Liked You* deals primarily with his awkward early relationships with girls, which fail due to his inability to express his feelings

to them (2002). In “Helder,” Brown chooses not to intervene when the character Helder beats his fiancée Anne, both residents in the same rooming house as Brown (1998:47-67). When a new resident of the house, who Brown is attracted to, takes up with Helder, he prefers to “let her find out for herself” about Helder’s abusive tendencies because it would “look like sour grapes” coming from him (2002:59). All of these representations speak to an inability to confront people directly, as is characteristic of the Coward.

However, they do not portray themselves only as the Coward. Seth takes a Clownish turn in “I Should’a Ran,” a short story from his days in the Toronto punk scene in which he gets beaten up for intentionally provoking a group of homophobes on the subway (Seth 2001). In *The Playboy*, the young Brown’s repeated purchase of Playboy magazine and subsequent destruction of each issue in order to hide the evidence pushes him into the role of the Clown, especially as accompanied by the commentary of a small, impish version of his adult self (1992). Brown’s story “The Weird Canadian Artist” has a group of comics scholars in the year 2050 searching him out, only to find that he apparently died while masturbating to drawings of “Supergirl taking her costume off” (1998:127). While it seems that the representations of individual characters can vary greatly from story to story, it is possible to see all of them as variously garbed manifestations of Fothergill’s three categories.

Another intriguing aspect of this group’s work is that, as colleagues working on autobiographical and semi-autobiographical comics in the same community, they often appear as characters in one another’s works. This creates

a continuity or narrative universe in the same way one might speak of the DC and Marvel Comics universes. This continuity also creates the opportunity for a parallax of representation between one cartoonist's caricature of himself and how he is portrayed by his colleagues. In *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, Chester Brown fills the role of the foil for Seth's shifting pusillanimity. In a Chester Brown story called "Showing Helder," Seth returns the favour, serving as the artistic elder that Brown goes to for advice with his comic (1998:83-85). Matt portrays both Seth and Brown as more collected than himself (Matt 2002; 2003b:75). However, Seth makes an exception to this rule in the strip "Some things I think you should know about Joe Matt," included at the end of *Peepshow*, that "brings out the bully" in Seth as he provides a different side of Matt's "victim act" (Matt 2003b:88-89).

Fothergill believes there is "a consonance between the imagery and reality" that explains the prevalence of this kind of representation, and he goes on to explain it through the metaphor of Canada as the younger of two brothers, whose feelings of inadequacy stem from his loyalty to the fatherland in the "Oedipal struggle" that was the American Revolution (1977:244). He clearly sees this condition as a negative, a national mania that obstructs our self-realization. Geoff Pevere is less pessimistic. He recognizes the group of characters "defined by the sense of inadequacy and disconnection [they share], by their collective inability to function within – or even comprehend – the systems of social exchange from which they feel excluded," but believes the outcry against our cinematic losers is "ultimately futile and misguided" because "the very act of

calling for more heroic Canadians misses the point of the films' strident lack of them: that hero worship itself may be culturally and politically deleterious, especially if the heroes have been beamed in from elsewhere" (Pevere 1992:61,63). The "long march of losers" on the Canadian screen "is not only comprehensible, it's *necessary*" as an act of resistance and a "rejection of a core Hollywood myth" that "all obstacles to individual fulfillment can be transcended by force of will" (1992:62,65). In a sense, this is an affirmation of peace, order, and good government – Canada's quiet virtues – over and above life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. After being inundated by hero-centric stories, an attempt to carve out new territory led to the other extreme. But once the break with the first phase has been made clearly, there is room for the representations to become more nuanced and varied.

The antiheroic tendency of Canadian culture, while internally coherent, is also understandable as part of a larger impulse towards realism in Canadian art. R. Bruce Elder says it is even "something of a cliché that Canadian art tends to take on a realistic, often documentary character" (1989:1). He attempts to explain this tendency through an exploration of Canadian philosophical and artistic history. Of primary importance to this explanation is an understanding of the influential role that the experience of nature has had in shaping the way that Canadians have come to think about being Canadian:

Because the opposition of nature and consciousness is acutely felt in our harsh landscape and climate, the realistic image which provides a model for the relatedness, even the reconciliation of consciousness and nature, has an especially important place in our culture. (1989:29)

Thus, Canadians have sought “an art capable of reconciling the opposition between consciousness and nature,” and this leads Canadian artists towards realism, “for it seems to accept things as they are” and, “having some of the spatial features of the real and some of the temporal features of mental representations ... can be considered both as an expression of a self and as a depiction of the real” (1989:83). If we accept this as being an outgrowth of a fundamental Canadian experience of the encounter with a harsh climate that is relatively intolerant of humanity for half of the year, then it is easy to see the prominence of direct cinema styles in film and autobiography in comics as an outgrowth of this philosophical and ideological orientation.

The “dualistic view of reality” as something “made up partly of mental stuff and partly of physical stuff, with the two entirely different from one another” that is identified as characteristic of Canadian thought plays out in interesting ways in the comics medium (Elder 1989:29). While much of Canadian art is influenced by photography (1989:3), the ideal of the realistic image must take on different properties in a form that is as non-indexical as comics are. There is no guarantee of mechanical accuracy of representation, nor even an attempt to approximate that accuracy, with cartooning. Instead, paradoxically, comics become more realistic as they foreground their constructed nature. Chester Brown accomplishes this with the pair of stories “Helder” and “Showing Helder”. In the latter, he describes reactions he got from people as he showed them the former before it was published and the changes he made as he worked on it (1998:68-

101). Allowing the reader into the process of constructing the story opens up the larger, contextual reality in which the story is produced.

Seth and Matt approach this in a slightly more postmodern way. Seth's seemingly autobiographical *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* hinges on the search for the cartoonist Kalo, who is an invention of the narrative despite the fact that Seth even includes a portfolio of all the Kalo drawings he has supposedly managed to collect over the years. The discovery that Kalo is not real gives some extra importance to the line that the Chester Brown character gives, saying that Kalo kind of draws like Seth (2003:19). In *The Poor Bastard*, the characters Andy and Kim approach Matt towards the end of the book, having just read an earlier chapter of the story serialized in Matt's and angry about the use and representation of characters named "Randy and Kitty," who are clearly based on them (2002:156). Matt's defence is that the characters are fictional, pointing out that the Randy character has dreadlocks, while Andy is drawn as bald (2002:156). From the reader's point of view, both of these techniques profoundly destabilize the reality principle assumed to be part of the autobiographic mode.

But showing reality to be subjective and constructed is not necessarily a betrayal of realism. In fact, this is a part of the documentary tradition in Canadian filmmaking and its particular interpretation of the *verité* movement, a style which was the inspiration for many of the new Canadian films of the 1960s:

Canadian Candid-Eye films, because they admit to being informed by certain conceptual notions, because they don't rely on the myth that pure final truths can be transmitted merely by presenting raw facts, have no reason to pretend that they are purely mimetic

constructs, which lack altogether in diegetic features (Elder 1989:133)

As Seth says of *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, "Most of it is true in a way. Just the plot isn't true" (Epstein). It is for this reason, the "immanence of the universal in the particular", that the slice of life style of autobiography – even when that slice of life is not entirely factual – is so prevalent in this group of comics.

However, all these analyses must be taken in their proper scope. As Elder points out, the "concern to establish the distinctiveness of Canadian culture has all too frequently locked the discussion into the register of the Imaginary" and, in doing so "has been unable to answer Oedipus' puzzle and tell us who we really are" (1989:11). While the metaphor of the Symbolic and the entrance into Fanon's second phase provide a way out of this trap conceptually, there is also the danger of being too imprecise and creating a claim for some kind of essential unity of form, theme, and purpose in all Canadian art. This is patently not the case. What I am arguing, instead, is that certain discourses in Canadian culture generally and the history of the comic book in Canada specifically has an influence in shaping the kinds of comics that were made and celebrated as the medium grey beyond the boundaries of the super-hero genre. The representation of the protagonist as an antihero and the concern with realism provide a way of seeing a deep, profound Canadian-ness in these comic books, despite the lack of adventurers in red and white tights.

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