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2012

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Comics to Film (and Back Again):

A Study in Stylistic Remediation from 1978-2009

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Television

by

Drew Anthony Morton

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Comics to Film (and Back Again):

A Study in Stylistic Remediation

from 1978-2009

by

Drew Anthony Morton

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor John Caldwell, Co-Chair

Professor Denise Mann, Co-Chair

In this dissertation, I will examine the formal interchange between American film and American comic books from 1978-2009. Building upon the theory of remediation defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, I describe a contemporary facet of the relationship between these two media forms as exemplifying stylistic remediation, or the representation of one medium's stylistic characteristics within another medium. Through the following chapters, I will investigate the complex and ever evolving formal relationship between these two media forms, which are also experiencing convergence at the levels of the industries which produce them and the customers who consume them. Moreover, I will also offer commentary upon the potential economic future of stylistic remediation and what new hybrid forms of media these trends in form and conglomeration have begun to produce. To this end, this study applies

theories of form out of Comic Studies, Film Studies, and New Media Studies to analyses of texts in both media. Moreover, in order to fully contextualize these stylistic developments, I will draw upon an analysis of the industrial and popular presses representing both industries that I will elaborate upon with subject interviews.

The dissertation of Drew Anthony Morton is approved.

Janet Bergstrom

Henry Jenkins

John Caldwell, Committee Co-Chair

Denise Mann, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

DEDICATIONS

Writing a dissertation can both be an exhilarating experience and, at those bleakest early morning hours (many of which involved the inevitable and necessary task of revision), a lonely and depressing task as well. Through every step of the process, I had the emotional and financial support of my loving wife, Nicole Alvarado. She accompanied me to San Diego Comic-Con for a handful of years, aided me in tracking down interview participants, gave me swift kicks to the backside when it came to over simplifying aspects of her favorite medium---animation, and provided an abundance of hugs and kisses when I hit the psychological skids. The dissertation is a milestone of transformation in the life and career of an academic. At times, I felt an incredible confidence in the venture, spurred on by my research and analysis. At other times, a young academic (despite being in the academy for eight years when I began this study, I was still in my mid-twenties) is faced with a bout of acid reflux that comes with feeling as if they are an inexperienced writer and researcher. Nicole has been with me through this draining cycle with her kind words of support, an occasional beer, and her abundance of love and care. I dedicate this modest study to my beautiful, thoughtful wife.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The seeds of this project were planted long before I started writing my prospectus in 2009 and 2010. While taking a course in film adaptation at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with Benjamin Schneider, I was drawn to Frank Miller's Sin City on the eve of its transformation into a film. This attraction capitalized on a love of comic books that had existed for me as a young boy and had dissipated over the years (there are not a lot of comic book stores in Port Washington, Wisconsin). When my passion was re-ignited, both my wife, Nicole Alvarado, and my best friend, Neal Long, encouraged it with thoughtful debate and the gift of an occasional graphic novel. Nicole and Neal accompanied me to the Milwaukee Art Museum for the "Masters of American Comics" exhibit and, at that moment, I knew I could not let comics drift back to the wayside of my interests.

My interest in the form was honed during my years at the University of California, Los Angeles. Prof. Janet Bergstrom, one of the scholars I have been fortunate enough to enlist the aid of in this endeavor, encouraged me to engage with the form with a visual essay and later a piece on Jean-Luc Godard's use of comic book iconography in his films. Later, my distinguished co-chairs, Professors Denise Mann and John Caldwell, pushed me to analyze the concept of stylistic remediation from an industrial standpoint. The three of them encouraged me with criticism and kind words of support throughout the process of writing the prospectus, pushing me to enlist the final member of what I like to call my Fantastic Four dissertation committee: Prof. Henry Jenkins. Henry, a prolific and thoughtful scholar, was giving in his time and support as well. Without the support of this wonderful committee, Nicole Alvarado, Michelle Bumatay, Michael Clarke, Ron Clohessy, Cliff Hilo, Neal Long, Steve Mamber, Scott McCloud, David O'Grady, Bryan Lee O'Malley, Denny O'Neil, Rodrigo Perez, Jennifer Porst,

Mark Rogers, Ben Sampson, Jeff Shuter, Maya Smukler, Vivian Sobchack, Edgar Wright, Julia Wright, my friends and classmates at UCLA, and the many practitioners that have come through these social connections, my dissertation would be a pale facsimile of what it is now. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

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PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Morton, D (2007). Comics to film (and halfway back again). *Flow TV*, 5 (11).

- (2007). Comics to film (and halfway back again). Paper presented at the Midwest Popular Culture Association Conference, Kansas City, Missouri.
- (2007). The plastic spaces of Winsor McCay. Paper presented at the Southern California Media Studies Conference, Los Angeles, California.
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- (2011). Stylistic remediation becomes transmedia style: The Scott Pilgrim experience. Paper presented at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana.
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Chapter I: Comics are in Right Now

Part 1: Overview of Topic

“If you want to sell a story to a Hollywood studio, write a comic strip. That, according to statistics, should increase your chances by about thirty per cent.”-Whitney Bolton, Director of Publicity, Columbia Studios, Undated Memo from the Mid-1940s.¹

“Comics are in right now.”-George Christopher (Ted Danson) in Bored to Death (2009).

Film theorist Dudley Andrew offers a useful insight when considering the practice of cinematic adaptation. Andrew writes, “The making of a film out of an earlier text is virtually as old as the machinery of cinema itself. Well over half of all commercial films have come from literary originals.”² Filmmaking throughout the past century has relied on other texts, such as theatrical plays and the novel, for content that provides not only a pre-established narrative but, in most cases, has a pre-established audience base as well. Yet, despite Andrew’s observation and Columbia Studios Director of Publicity Whitney Bolton’s allegedly quantifiable claim, an odd characteristic regarding adaptation is how little Hollywood has relied upon the comic for source material until recently. Take, for instance, this telling rift in chronology: Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s debut of Superman occurred in Action Comics #1 in June 1938 yet the character did not appear in a feature-length film (this is ignoring the animated shorts produced by Fleischer Studios from 1941-1943) until Superman and the Mole Men in 1951. A similar cinematic fate befell Bob Kane and Bill Finger’s Batman who first appeared in Detective Comics #27 in May 1939, yet did not appear in a feature (ignoring the live-action serial from 1943) until the self-

¹ Undated Memo from Whitney Bolton found in the comic strip clipping file at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ Margaret Herrick Library. Judging from the films referenced in the memo, I would assume the memo dates from the mid-1940s.

² Dudley Andrew, Concepts in Film Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 98.

titled film in 1966.³

As David Bordwell has also observed, “Comic-book movies were scarcely a genre in the studio era, but they became a central one with the arrival of the blockbuster.”⁴ Indeed, shortly after the release of Steven Spielberg’s Jaws (1975), the arguable origin of the contemporary blockbuster, Richard Donner directed Superman: The Movie (1978) for Warner Bros. Yet, as M. Keith Booker describes in his book-length study of comic book adaptations, despite positive reviews and the box office success of the film and its sequels, “the Superman franchise was still regarded in Hollywood as a one-of-a-kind special case, so that Superman films remained the only major example of graphic cinema for a decade...”⁵ The industry-wide trend of adapting comic books to the screen would not reach critical mass until the success of another Warner Bros. film in 1989, Tim Burton’s Batman.

Soon after the success of Burton’s film, slews of adaptations ranging from children oriented superheroes like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1990, 1991, 1993) to the maturely realized The Crow (1994, 1996, 2000, 2005) to hardboiled strips like Dick Tracy (1990) began to hit multiplexes. Judging from the box office and critical response to the top two films of 2008, Christopher Nolan’s The Dark Knight and Jon Favreau’s Iron Man, the proliferation of comic book adaptations is obvious. As film studies scholar Brad Chisholm observed at the 2007 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, “Comic books and tent-poles are an ideal

³ For the most part, I am ignoring a discussion of these live action serials and animated shorts because they fall outside the temporal boundaries of this project as discussed in the section titled “Limits of Investigation.” To briefly summarize, I would argue that the production and cultural contexts between the two periods would make such an all encompassing investigation unwieldy.

⁴ David Bordwell, The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 54.

⁵ M. Keith Booker, May Contain Graphic Material: Comic Books, Graphic Novels, and Film (Westport: Praeger, 2007), xii.

pairing with their reliance on special effects and their inherent possibility for sequels.”⁶ Yet, this proliferation has had more generalized stylistic effects on both media, as films have increasingly relied on the stylistics of the comic book (such as panels, speed lines, the dissection of motion, flat compositions) and comics have found themselves drawing formal influences from film (such as film noir compositional techniques like high-contrast lighting).

My aim in this dissertation is to account for and investigate the intricacies of a new stylistic practice which I will describe as stylistic remediation. Essentially, the stylistic characteristics of comics and film have begun to form a dialogue with one another. For instance, comic book attributes such as the multiframe have appeared in film adaptations like Ang Lee’s Hulk (2003, Figure 1.1) while film noir stylistics such as high contrast, low-key lighting provided the formal foundation of Frank Miller’s Sin City comics (Figure 1.2, 1991-2000).



Figure 1.1: The Multiframe in the Hulk (2003).

⁶ Brad Chisholm, “Colonizing the Comic Book Industry,” presentation at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, 10 March 2007.



Figure 1.2: High Contrast, Low Key Lighting in *Sin City* (1991).

Four interrelated research questions guide this inquiry. How does stylistic remediation complicate the idea of media specificity? What role has horizontal integration and conglomeration had in the process of stylistic remediation? What is the industrial motivation behind remediation, both in films and comics? Is the remediation of comic book stylistics into films fundamentally a by-product of technologies and an indication of a larger ontological shift from cinema to digital cinema? Research and analysis would suggest that this trend could not be fully comprehended without regard for three other factors: industrial practices, the role of special effects technologies, and consumption. Rather, all three of these contexts must be given due attention and considered variable on a case-by-case basis in order to avoid broad generalization.

Before proceeding, I should briefly provide my own definition of the concepts of adaptation and remediation and how they differ. Adaptation is the modification of a prior text from one medium into another. Remediation, on the other hand, is the representation of one

medium in another. That said, remediations are not necessarily adaptations. Take, for example, an eBook, which retains the content, the form of the book (printed pages bound together), and the practice of reading (linearly, left to right and top to bottom) exhibited in the other form. The eBook's remediation of literature does not modify a prior text as it transitions from one medium to another, it simply represents it. Conversely, adaptations are not necessarily remediations. For instance, many film adaptations borrow content without representing the source medium in the process (a notable counter-example would be The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh, a film which features the actual written page as a device used to transition between scenes). Moreover, adaptation is a one-way influence (the source into its repurposing), whereas remediation can be often reciprocal and dialogical. Finally, while remediation is not strictly limited to discussions of form (as interactivity and other factors can also be tied to the concept), I will be focusing primarily on the stylistic aspects of the process, hence my desire to define my study as being concerned with stylistic remediation. These terms are more thoroughly defined in the section on methodology. Also, I should note that while terms and concepts like adaptation and transmedia (a term and concept I later define and complicate) are used within the entertainment industry, I have yet to encounter the term or concept of remediation within trade papers or interviews. Essentially, I am applying the term onto a stylistic practice retroactively.

As noted earlier, in order to better describe this formal practice and to make stylistic remediation a relevant critical and theoretical term, such a discussion must account for industrial practice, advances in technology, and the role of an increasingly visible and vocal fan community. While I will be delving deeper into these contexts in the individual case studies to follow, a brief overview is necessary. First, with regard to industrial practice, Eileen Meehan suggests in her essay on the success of Tim Burton's Batman that "economics must be

considered” as a motivating factor in the rise of superhero films.⁷ Throughout her essay, Meehan suggests that the conglomeration and horizontal integration of the Hollywood studio system gave studios the ability to progress towards a more-coordinated form of industrial practice. Thus, in the case of Batman, Warner Bros. was not only able to buy the rights to the property via a package deal (Warner Communications Incorporated purchased DC Comics in 1971) but to market one product through several media forms (soundtrack albums, trading cards, toys). In this sense, Meehan concludes, the social, economic, and cultural success of the film “is best understood as [*sic*] multimedia, multimarket sales campaign.”⁸ Undoubtedly, the success of a property can be linked to horizontal integration and savvy marketing. Yet, this link can serve as only partial justification of the cause. After all, just because a media giant spends a lot of money and pushes a lot of cross-promotional merchandise at the public does not necessarily translate into box office success. For instance, not even the pre-established property of a Japanese anime series, the talents of the Wachowski brothers (The Matrix series), and a rumored \$80 million dollars in marketing support was able to lift the box office grosses for Speed Racer (2008) above its \$120 million dollar production budget. The industrial-economic aspect with regard to the comic book films is undeniable, but it also requires, amongst many factors, an audience already knowledgeable and passionate about a pre-established property.

The industrial gauge of a comic’s success was, until recently, based around a quantified ranking produced by the Diamond Comic Distributors (DCD).⁹ Essentially, the DCD calculates the ranking by tracking sales from their distribution company to individual comic book retailers.

⁷ Eileen R. Meehan, ““Holy Commodity Fetish Batman!”: The Political Economy of the Commercial Intertext,” in The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media, eds. Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio (London: Routledge, 1991), 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁹ On March 5th 2009, The New York Times started their own best seller list of “Graphic Books” that is now considered supplementary to the DCD ranking.

While this ranking is problematic insofar as a retailer could order 500 copies of the latest Superman title and only sell 10, the DCD numbers make or break individual properties. According to Valeria D’Orazio, a comic book writer who formerly worked as an assistant editor at DC Comics, “we lived or died by those Diamond numbers. They were The Numbers.”¹⁰ Thus, it is normally the bestselling and consequently longer running books like Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and Watchmen that are optioned into films. However, those numbers only tell part of the story. After all, if studios were optioning properties based on sales numbers alone, our contemporary moment would be an odd time to start, as the comic book sales peaked in the decade leading up to the self-regulatory enforcement of the Comics Code in 1954.¹¹ I believe that there is another factor being considered by studios in this contemporary moment, specifically the relationship between the comic book reader and the filmgoer. This relationship has chiefly manifested itself through two avenues worthy of brief discussion: comic book cultural prestige and the visibility of fan communities.

To consider the first factor, cultural prestige, allow me to flashback to the mid-1970s. Warner Communications Incorporated (WCI) then owned DC Comics and with it the rights to Superman. However, the studio had no interest in turning the property into a film, primarily due to concerns that comic book films were inherently campy and would not prove to be a good investment.¹² When approached by a trio of European film producers (Ilya and Alexander Salkind and Pierre Spengler), WCI sold the rights and agreed to distribute the film via a negative pickup deal. Significantly, the producers were only able to secure financing for a budget of an extraordinary 30 million dollars after addressing the camp fears by hiring famed screenwriter

¹⁰ Valeria D’Orazio, “What Makes a Comic Book A Success Nowadays?,” Comic Book Junction, 9 March 2009, <<http://www.comicbookjunction.com/2009/03/09/what-makes-a-comic-book-a-success-nowadays/>> (9 April 2010).

¹¹ Roger Sabin, Comics, Comix, & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art (New York: Phaidon, 1996), 68.

¹² Taking Flight: The Development of Superman, dir. Michael Thau, 30 min., Warner Bros., 2001, DVD.

Mario Puzo (The Godfather films) and casting both Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman. As one of the producers was quoted by the Los Angeles Times, “This Superman will be 100% straight, no spoof, no satire. Puzo will write the opposite of a cartoon.”¹³ Tellingly, Warner Bros. only agreed to provide financial aid towards budget overruns (which allegedly soared to a cost of \$80 million faster than a speeding bullet) when the studio had seen footage, had already sunk money into marketing the film, and the release date was jeopardized by disgruntled producers who allegedly held the final negative for ransom.¹⁴

Yet, despite the monumental success of Superman, studios still produced comic book films with uncertainty for multiple reasons. First, budget overruns occurred on many of the films, as many special effects technologies needed to be invented from scratch (this was the case for Superman and for the notorious Howard the Duck). Secondly, box office success was difficult to grasp, as the 80s witnessed huge financial failures in Supergirl (1984, estimated budget of \$35 million, domestic box office gross of \$14 million), Red Sonja (1985, estimated budget of \$35 million, domestic box office gross of \$7 million), and Howard the Duck (1986, estimated budget of \$52 million, domestic box office gross of \$16 million). Significantly, by the tail end of the decade, even Superman lost money (Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (1987, estimated budget of \$30 million, domestic box office gross of \$15 million). Overall, the failure of these films can also be attributed to a barrage of other factors including their difficulty in capturing the tone of the source material. While the Superman cycle began with producers attempting to address concerns of camp, the pendulum quickly swung the other way: they jettisoned director Richard Donner, who spoke the virtues of verisimilitude (even going so far as

¹³ Mary Murphy, “Movie Call Sheet: Superman Film,” The Los Angeles Times, 9 August 1975.

¹⁴ Carol Blue and Al Delugach, “Superman: Rare Look at Film Finances,” The Los Angeles Times, 3 April 1980.

to hang a sign with the noun on it in the film's production office), in favor of comedy director Richard Lester. As Roger Ebert noted in his review of Superman III (1983), it is "the kind of movie I feared the original Superman would be. It's a cinematic comic book, shallow, silly, filled with stunts and action, without much human interest."¹⁵

After the slew of comic book film failures in the mid-80s, Hollywood began a drive to account for tonal direction by going back to the source material but a larger, related, question lingered: who was the audience for these films? Comic books had traditionally been read by children, but the audience shifted throughout the 70s and 80s. Beginning in the 1970s, independent underground comix (a genre of comics that was published outside of the Comics Code) attempted to cater to the adult reader by embracing controversial topics such as the counter-culture, drugs, and sexuality. At roughly the same time, Michael Uslan, a graduate student at Indiana University School of Law-Bloomington (who would incidentally later buy the rights to Batman, producing all six films), began teaching an undergraduate course entitled "The Comic Book in Society." The comic book's shift from a lowly children's form to a high art medium capable of capturing an adult audience is temporally marked by what might be considered "the medium's greatest year: 1986."¹⁶

1986 marks a significant year for the comic book due to the release of three seminal texts: Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's Watchmen, Art Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale, and Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley's Batman: The Dark Knight Returns. For the release of the third title, comic book publisher DC began utilizing a new square-bound binding for the limited series which they called the "Prestige Format" in order to differentiate the dark

¹⁵ Roger Ebert, "Superman III Movie Review," RogerEbert.com, 17 June 1983, <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19830617/REVIEWS/306170302/1023>> (9 April 2010).

¹⁶ Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, The Power of Comics: History, Form, & Culture (New York: Continuum, 2009), 71.

and gritty project from the other product being offered towards children. As comic book historians Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith note, “Miller’s take on the Dark Knight drew more attention than the character had received since the campy TV show of the 1960s. Miller had brought Batman back to his violent roots and provided a grittier, less sanitized vision of vigilantism.”¹⁷ The financial success of Miller’s comic allegedly jumpstarted production on the film, which had spent nearly a decade in pre-production. Like the producers of Superman before them, the producers of Batman vowed to stray from the campy qualities of the TV series by injecting prestige into the title, specifically in the casting of Jack Nicholson as the Joker.

The Batman example proves a perfect bridge from discussing the recently acquired prestige of comics to the second industrial factor that has been known to make or break a comic book film: fan communities. When the casting of comedian Michael Keaton was announced, fans were incredibly disappointed, fearing that the property had shifted from the dark, adult, vision of Frank Miller’s work to the camp qualities of the TV series. In November 1988, the Wall Street Journal reported that fan publications were receiving hundreds of protest letters.¹⁸ When Warner Bros. got wind of the reaction, they responded by cutting a trailer that inspired an enthusiastic response. According to Newsweek, “When the trailer went into general release at Christmas, word of mouth spread among the fans and beyond....’By the start of the year,” says Rob Friedman, Warner Bros. president of worldwide advertising and publicity, ‘there was a feeding frenzy that we took advantage of, and to a certain extent fueled.’”¹⁹ As Friedman’s quote helps illustrate, marketing can fuel and capitalize upon a fan base, but it does not necessarily form one.

¹⁷ Ibid., 71-72.

¹⁸ Kathleen Hughes, “Batman Fans Fear the Joke’s on Them in Hollywood Epic,” The Wall Street Journal, 29 November 1988, 1.

¹⁹ Bill Barol, “Batmania,” Newsweek, 26 June 1989, 70.

Over the past twenty years, comic book conventions, especially San Diego Comic-Con International (SDCC), have proven an invaluable resource for industrial personnel in both developing content for comics and film and – one might argue more so – for marketing such properties. While SDCC has been the Mecca for comic book fans since 1970, it has experienced a monumental growth in attendance from 1989, the year Batman was released, to 2009. Specifically, from 1970 to 1989 the attendance of SDCC grew from approximately 300 to 11,000 people (an average yearly growth of approximately 563 visitors). In contrast, from the 1989 to 2008 SDCC attendance jumped from 11,000 to 126,000 attendees (an average yearly growth of approximately 6000 visitors).²⁰ As SDCC became larger and larger, studios increasingly relied on the convention as not only a means of legitimating product with fans but as an instrumental mechanism in driving cultural awareness as well. After all, who better “sells” a product than satisfied fans, the core audience of a film? In the words of Fox Chief Marketing Officer John Hegeman (who produced Guillermo del Toro’s Hellboy), studios need to hold onto the core audience because without their support a film cannot be financially successful. At the same time, however, the studios have gradually shifted towards a two-tiered marketing approach, utilizing more interactive forms of marketing (alternate reality games, presentation panels at SDCC) to engage with fan communities while also drawing on more traditional and accessible forms (television spots, merchandising) aimed at the more casual consumer.

However, conglomeration, horizontal integration, comic book cultural capital, and the rise of fan cultures do not complete the picture on the recent rise of the comic book films. After all, SDCC was formed in 1970, providing a face to the comic book fan community eight years before the release of Superman and nearly two decades before the post-Batman onslaught of

²⁰ David Glanzer and Gary Sassaman, Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book (San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con International, 2009), 60-116.

films. The final contextual puzzle piece that needs to be briefly considered is the influence of technological developments in cinema, including special effects and computer-generated imagery (CGI) in particular, during the past twenty-five years. As Booker writes:

Until very recently [Booker's study was published in 2007], the technology available for filmmakers simply did not allow them the range and scope that have always been available to comic artists, whose creativity was limited only by their own imaginations. After all, it costs very little to draw an action scene (relying on readers to fill in much of the detail) that might cost millions of dollars to produce for the screen---if it can be produced at all.²¹

Yet, when placed alongside the other factors so far examined, Booker's judgment, while no doubt being true to a point, is also problematic. Of course, CGI gives director Bryan Singer (Figure 2) the ability to bring to the screen the iconic image (Figure 1) of Superman lifting an automobile with great ease in Superman Returns (2006).

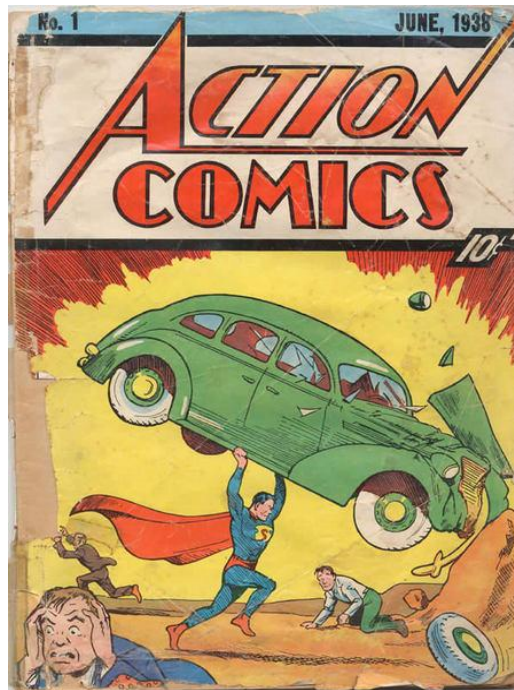


Figure 1.3: Action Comics #1 (1938).

²¹ Booker, ix.



Figure 1.4: *Superman Returns* (2006).

However, CGI is also an incredibly expensive process. For instance, James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) featured a groundbreaking 300 visual effects (VFX) shots and cost roughly \$102 million to produce while *Superman Returns* contained 1,400 VFX shots, pushing its budget to \$261 million.²² Without the financial backing of a horizontally integrated studio and a pre-established fan base ensuring some sort of return on the massive financial investment on films whose budgets surpass the \$100 million dollar mark, I would argue that Booker's observation verges on the terrain of technological determinism, despite a later disclaimer.

Yet, where Booker's observation begins to simplify, I see a great deal of room for elaboration. While technological innovations are part of equation, it is significant that many of these films utilize technology to remediate comic book stylistics. Take, for instance, this excerpt from critic Richard George's review of Zack Snyder's *300* (2007):

Snyder's use of blood and slow motion gives the movie a flair of its own that also seems to channel panels in a comic book. The blood takes on a very flat, 2-D effect that keeps the violence within limits while also making it unique in cinema. We've all seen blood fly in horror movies, but things are done a bit differently here. Miller and colorist Lynn Varley used a similar technique, resorting to paint blotches splattered throughout the battles rather than going for something painstakingly realistic. The result is something

²² Unknown Author, "Forget the Stars; Studios Pay Most for FX," [IMDB.com](http://www.imdb.com/news/sb/2006-05-15#film1), 15 May 2006, <<http://www.imdb.com/news/sb/2006-05-15#film1>> (28 March 2011).

both artistic and viscerally exciting...Last but not least in Snyder's arsenal of techniques is slow motion combined with freezing frames...Snyder will rush along in a battle only to suddenly drop the frame rate down drastically. The effect is something almost akin to a panel.²³

In the case of 300, as was the case with Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller's Sin City (2005), CGI is used by the director as a means of reaching beyond source material to stylistic expressions as well. Yet, this analysis of stylistic remediation is not merely the product of over-zealous formal analysis, as Snyder (specifically in the case of 300) often used Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's original panels as storyboards, instructing his VFX team to "build this."²⁴ As this section has made clear, the slew of comic book films to grace the screen and the evolving stylistic characteristics that have marked them cannot be simplified to a focus solely on the realm of industry, the consumer, or technology, as they all exhibit significant influence upon one another.

Part 2: An Overview of Related Scholarly Material

Out of the limited body of published academic material on comic book films, there are four particularly relevant texts: M. Keith Booker's aforementioned May Contain Graphic Material: Comic Books, Graphic Novels, and Film, Pascal Lefèvre's "Incompatible Visual

²³ Richard George, "300 in Film," IGN.com, 8 March 2007, <<http://comics.ign.com/articles/771/771698p1.html>> (28 March 2011).

²⁴ Ibid. Note that one of the major shifts in the comic book industry during the past decades has been increased creator rights. Depending on the company, and this is how independent publishers like Dark Horse and Image were able to rope in major comic book auteurs, creators and personnel are often offered profit sharing contracts and the possibility of retaining ownership on titles developed at their publisher. This was the case for 300 and Sin City, both of which were published by Dark Horse and owned by Frank Miller. When I spoke to Red (2003-2004) artist Cully Hamner about the terms of his legal agreement with di Bonaventura Pictures, DC Comics, and Summit Entertainment on the rights to his comic once it became a film adaptation (2010), he told me that "I still own my artwork, and Warren and I still own the published comic; DC still owns the rights to publish it, since they've kept it in print. If it had been out of print longer than a certain license period, those rights would have reverted to us eventually, but the movie (and possible sequel) have made sure that DC will keep it in bookstores for a long time. But my art is my art, and actually, even that gets complicated. DC owns the rights to publish that art, as I said, for a period defined by keeping it in print. I, on the other hand, own the physical artwork itself, and can sell it to collectors as I wish. Summit Entertainment has the right to use art from the comic in the film or to market it. They can also hire me to do new art, but that would be...a separately paid and negotiated agreement."

Ontologies?: The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images,” Robert C. Harvey’s The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History, and Michael Cohen’s “Dick Tracy: In Pursuit of a Comic Book Aesthetic.” Booker’s investigation, while noteworthy in its attempt to examine an overlooked genre of film, follows the course of many texts based on film adaptation with regard to its focus on content rather than form (for more detail on film adaptation theory, see my discussion of methodology). Booker constructs his work around fourteen case studies (including the Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man franchises and single films such as Sin City and A History of Violence), each of which focuses primarily on the adaptation of theme and narrative content.

Yet, Booker does occasionally attempt to reach beyond the narrative aspects of adaptation by engaging in discussions regarding style. His chapter on Sin City is more relevant to my concerns when he describes how the “digital noir” style of the film lends itself to postmodernism. However, Booker remains vague in his formal analysis, simply writing:

Much of the success of the film lies in its appreciation of the way the various elements of the graphic novels—the extreme hardboiled writing style; the dark black-and-white visuals...; the larger-than-life characters; the shockingly violent events—work together in careful balance.²⁵

I find Booker’s lack of a stylistic analysis to be the key fault in his investigation. In the introduction to the volume, Booker attempts to investigate comic book films as “graphic cinema.”²⁶ Yet, the term is simply interchangeable with “comic adaptations,” making the attempted shift towards a neologism seem self-serving and unnecessary. Moreover, while Booker alludes to “the look and feel of comic books” in his introduction, he never concretely

²⁵ Booker, 161.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

describes the formal (or “graphic”) characteristics which both comics and films engage.²⁷

Essentially, Booker seems to lack a critical vocabulary outside of literature studies and traditional adaptation theory to address the stylistic relationship between comics and film more specifically.

Booker’s analysis, in my opinion, could have benefitted greatly by two generalized, but particularly relevant discussions of the stylistic characteristics of comics and film: Pascal Lefèvre’s “Incompatible Visual Ontologies?” and Robert C. Harvey’s chapter “Only in the Comics: Why Cartooning is Not the Same as Filmmaking.” Lefèvre’s essay does an excellent job of analyzing the fundamental formal differences between the two media. For Lefèvre, the two main differences are “the material shape of the images and the social aspects of reception.”²⁸ More specifically, the consumption of film is often a group activity while reading a comic is experienced by the individual. With regard to form, comic book panels are static drawing and arranged on a page, unable to produce sound or movement. Film, of course, has its roots in photography, produces motion via the succession of images within the same visual field, and includes a soundtrack.²⁹ These formal differences also alter production practices, as a comic book artist can draw a massive action scene at the expense of a couple pencils and pens while a filmmaker would have to rely on a large budget to capture a similar scene. Lefèvre ends his analysis by positing that these are “problems” and that we must evaluate the newly created work on its own merits.

Harvey’s analysis, like Lefèvre’s, takes the oft-cited generalization regarding the

²⁷ Ibid., xxi.

²⁸ Pascal Lefèvre, “Incompatible Visual Ontologies?: The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images,” in Film and Comic Books, eds. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3.

²⁹ Lefèvre acknowledges that animation is another type of filmmaking and does not seriously consider it in his analysis.

apparent formal similarities between comics and film and devotes a lengthy analysis as to how the two forms are different. While Harvey makes some valid points regarding their differences, particularly in how films utilize time to construct a narrative while comics use space, he makes a troublesome generalization that comic books promote a more engaged reader/spectator while films are a passive medium that do not need “to engage the brain.”³⁰ Harvey goes on to examine how film is a temporal medium and comic books are a spatial one, but he denies cinema the ability to capture the unique style of comics because techniques such as CGI and slow motion tamper “with the nature of the medium.”³¹ At the end of his analysis, he brackets such strategies by arguing that “special effects are more like comics than film: they are animated cartoons, a third medium.”

While Harvey’s analysis is problematic, given the fact that he favors a discussion about photographic film by ignoring films employing animated and special effects techniques that are “more like comics” it is somewhat dated. Published in 1996, just three years after the monumental release of Steven Spielberg’s Jurassic Park (1993) helped bring digital imaging technologies and CGI into the filmmaker’s arsenal, Harvey’s work is unable to address the changes in film style fostered by this shift, be it a trend towards realism or artifice.³² However, as Lev Manovich has noted in his analysis of the role digital technologies have had on film form, “Live-action footage is not only raw material to be manipulated by hand---animated, combined with 3-D computer generated scenes, and painted over...*Born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its periphery, only in the end to become one particular case of animation.*”³³ Thus,

³⁰ Robert C. Harvey, The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 175.

³¹ Harvey, 176.

³² See also Michael Allen, “The Impact of Digital Technologies on Film Aesthetics,” in The New Media Book, ed. Dan Harries (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), 109-118.

³³ Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 302.

while Harvey's discussion of how film and comics are different can be useful as a general analysis, it lacks a thoughtful discussion of digital technologies and animation that is necessary here.

While Lefèvre and Harvey's writings are helpful in generally discussing the stylistic characteristics that make film and comics their own media, Michael Cohen illustrates and elaborates upon their concerns by performing a visual analysis specific to Warren Beatty's Dick Tracy. By placing Chester Gould's original strip in dialogue with Beatty's film, Cohen analyzes how Beatty utilized make up and prosthetics, matte paintings, and mise-en-scène to create a cinematic comic style. Specifically, Cohen discusses how Beatty's film methods can be described in the following formal terms: the "aesthetic of artifice, 'cartooning,' the framing of the hero, and 'paneling.'"³⁴ As Cohen observes in his discussion of the film's "aesthetic of artifice," Beatty utilized stylized mise-en-scène as a means of duplicating Chester Gould's original comic strip.³⁵ Inspired by that philosophy, Beatty ended up instructing cinematographer Vittorio Storaro and production designer Richard Sylbert to only utilize eight colors (red, blue, yellow, green, orange, purple, black, and white) to define the film's locations. Cohen's description of "cartooning" is based upon how Beatty and his production team stripped down the mise-en-scène and the color scheme, utilized make up and prosthetics, and sped up footage to remove the film from the realm of cinematic realism towards the iconographic abstraction of Gould's original strip.

Cohen's third formal category, framing the hero, seems to be an extension of "cartooning." Essentially, Cohen argues that Beatty's lighting and framing of the Dick Tracy

³⁴ Michael Cohen, "Dick Tracy: In Pursuit of a Comic Book Aesthetic," in Film and Comic Books, eds. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-20.

character abstracts him from his surroundings, translating “the privileged posturing and appearance of the hero upon the comic page.”³⁶ Finally, Cohen analyzes Beatty’s use of “paneling,” or “the use of framing and editing to adapt the paradigmatic arrangement of panels in a strip to the cinematic form.”³⁷ More specifically, the camera movement of the film is stationary, allowing the actions to take place within a static frame, much like the encapsulation of a comic book panel. Beatty also extensively utilized a diopter lens to similar effect, staging his compositions in depth and thus producing a language that does not extensively draw upon classical/spatiotemporal analytical editing techniques (ex. transitioning from establishing shots to tighter shot/reverse shot patterns).

I appreciate Cohen’s analysis deeply, as it stands as one of the few analyses to utilize a specific case study to elaborate upon the formal similarities and differences between comics and film. His research on the production of the film and his insightful formal analysis has been a major asset to this project. That said, I feel his distinctions between an “aesthetic of artifice,” “cartooning,” and the framing of the hero overlap a great deal. I feel that, as critical concepts, these categories could be elaborated and expanded upon if applied across a larger sample of case studies, which should add a significant amount of specificity to the vocabulary.

I have discovered in my three years researching this project that the most fruitful approach is to draw upon separate theories of film style and comic book form. With regard to comic book form, four texts are indispensable: Will Eisner’s Comics and Sequential Art, Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, David Carrier’s The Aesthetics of Comics, and Thierry Gronensteen’s The System of Comics. Eisner and McCloud’s volumes are some of the most accessible and widely read in comic book studies, quite possibly because they

³⁶ Ibid., 29.

³⁷ Ibid., 30.

are written by actual practitioners (they are often referred to as cartoonists, comics writers/artists, or practitioners; McCloud is considered a comics theorist by scholars and himself). Eisner's book treats comics as an "art of communication" that, much like David Bordwell's account of classical film style, must adhere to certain formal characteristics to make the narrative comprehensible.³⁸ Thus, the comic book writer/artist normally relies on "a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language---a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of Sequential Art [Eisner's term for comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, etc.]."³⁹ For Eisner, the language of sequential art includes such norms as the left-to-right sequence, lettering as an extension of the imagery, and the use of graphical pantomime to convey narrative without a strict reliance on text.⁴⁰ As noted above, Eisner's text is mainly a pedagogical tool for aspiring comic book writers and artists. However, it also captures an examination of comic book formal codes not applied by critics or theoreticians, but from an actual practitioner, a unique and necessary viewpoint in the study of stylistic remediation.

Scott McCloud, also an industrial practitioner, greatly benefits from Eisner's first explorations and builds upon them greatly, both as a manual for talent and as a seminal theoretical text in comics theory.⁴¹ His study generally looks at how comic book writers and artists utilize iconography, the use of paneling for timing, and the use of lines for synesthetics as

³⁸ Will Eisner, Comics & Sequential Art (Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1985), 6.

³⁹ Eisner, 8.

⁴⁰ Eisner, 10-24.

⁴¹ Eisner and McCloud's studies have some small, unintentional shortcomings worth noting. First, Eisner, being a pioneering practitioner and one of the first theorists of comics studies, passed away in 2005, just before the boom in English language comics theory that took place in the mid to late 2000s. McCloud, despite his stature as one of the founding fathers of English language comics theory, seemed disinterested in more recent comics theory when I spoke to him about it, favoring his artistic practice and experimentation at this point. Thus, while both men were indispensable in introducing valuable and thoughtful comics theory, neither writer continued to participate or refine their theories during the dialogue that they initially spurred.

part of a unique medium in which the reader observes parts of a narrative and participates in the act of closure to seal breaks in time and space between panels. Essentially, the comic book reader/viewer encounters a narrative that is presented in images that form fractured sequences of space and time that they must rectify into a legible whole. McCloud acknowledges that this act of closure is similar to film and television's reliance on the persistence of vision. Essentially, in film and television, the ruptures in space and time are smoothed over by both the continuity editing system and the mechanical apparatus, which projects images at a constant frame rate. For McCloud, the mechanical apparatus of film and television renders closure into a "constant, even overpowering" exercise that does not require the same type of active spectator engagement.⁴²

Carrier's analysis is helpful in his assessment of the nature of comics, chiefly in his investigation of comic art's roots in the art of caricature, the uniqueness of the speech balloon, how the comic strip image sequence differs from film sequences, and finally, how comics are one of the few media forms where image and text are tied together in a master/slave relationship. Like most comic theorist's discussions of film art, Carrier's claims about the difference between comics and film are a bit general and ahistorical. For instance, in his discussion of Winsor McCay, Carrier writes that "McCay's panels seem like separate frames of wide-screen motion-picture film, and so they anticipate his later work in animation."⁴³ Although I can see the formal similarities that Carrier is attempting to link, his statement could benefit from a stylistic history of the cinema, as wide-screen technologies would not be invented until nearly ten years after McCay completed his final film.

Thierry Gronensteen's analysis is the most comprehensive that I have found in its

⁴² Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 65.

⁴³ David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2000), 56.

discussion of comic book form. Gronenstein's analysis is semiotic based and covers much of the same ground outlined above (how time and space function in comics as opposed to film, the use of the word balloon, etc.). However, it is significant insofar as it makes three rather bold claims. First, Gronenstein argues (like Carrier) that comics are a unique medium due to its reliance upon "iconic solidarity." Essentially, Gronenstein uses the bulk of the book to analyze how comic books are a visual language in which text plays a subordinate role. Secondly, Gronenstein demonstrates that the spatio-topical system is the essential tool for creating meaning. While Eisner may place emphasis on pantomime and lettering in leading the reader, Gronenstein's analysis goes beyond the left-to-right rule by arguing that the specific placement of panels upon the page can be utilized linearly ("restricted arthology") or distantly ("general arthology"). Building upon this notion of the spatio-topical system, Gronenstein analyzes a unique concept that he terms "braiding" or the linking of panels in a sequence via non-narrative techniques (notable examples would include the uses of symmetrical layouts and the smiley face in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's Watchmen).⁴⁴

To summarize, the existing body of literature focusing on comic book films is relatively young. There are some notable consequences to this youth. First, studies like those of Booker and Harvey are problematic insofar as they lack the embellished critical toolbox that has come from a boom in English language comics theory throughout the past couple years, primarily in the form of such journals as Studies in Comics and the Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics and English language translations of studies like those of Gronenstein. Secondly, comics studies theory is often produced by practitioners (like Eisner and McCloud) or scholars in literature or art history (David Carrier), making the inevitable discussions of film contained within overly

⁴⁴ Thierry Groensteen, The System of Comics, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 152.

generalized, just as film studies discussions of comics tend to do. Essentially, the contemporary establishment of comics studies has produced a gap in theorization and terminology that has forced writers in both fields to venture into a scholarly no man's land. Given my fortunate position as a scholar in an interdisciplinary program (Cinema and Media Studies) who has benefitted from the increase in scholarly and critical literature over the past ten years in both comics studies and media studies, the study is essentially an attempt to bridge both disciplines with the aim of using formal analysis to further establish the conceptual toolbox at the disposal of scholars while losing sight of the cultural and industrial motivations that ground such practices.

Part 3: Methodology

With regard to methodology, I will be drawing from three models specifically: the theory of remediation as proposed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (intersected with the theories of film style and comic book form outlined in the previous section) and the work of two scholars who I have been fortunate enough to enlist on aiding me in this project: Henry Jenkins's study on the vaudeville aesthetic and John Caldwell's work on televisuality. While this project's consideration of comic book films would appear to make theories of adaptation a logical framework, my previous investigations into this subject using that method as a guide have proved to be incomplete.⁴⁵ The problem is that using the adaptation model (specifically of André Bazin) can be difficult to argue. For instance, Bazin writes that "Faithfulness to form, literary or otherwise, is illusory: what matters is the equivalence in meaning of the forms."⁴⁶ He then goes on to say that each medium has its own modes of representation and that the struggle

⁴⁵ Drew Morton, "Comics to Film (And Halfway Back Again): A DVD Essay," *Flow TV* 5, no. 11 (2007).

⁴⁶ André Bazin, "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest," in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 20.

for formal fidelity from one to another is a lost cause. Thus, the main objective of the adaptation should be to capture the original work's "essence."

Yet, this begs the question about how one is to judge what the "essence" of a work might be and what might count as "equivalency." By whom, in this system, is this meaning and judgment assigned? By the perception of the audience? By the intention of the author? I believe there are three central problems with the majority of adaptation theory. First, as I have already illustrated in my analysis of *Booker*, many applications of adaptation theory are limited to discussions regarding the translation of the textual content (the original narrative, themes, and tone). Generally, adaptation theory leaves discussions of the stylistic, the translation of the visual in this case, by the wayside. Secondly, as Dudley Andrew observes in his lengthy analysis and critique, adaptation theory is defined by hermeneutics.⁴⁷ This process, which involves the Bazinian search for equivalency in the adaptation of a literary text to a film, can lead the scholar or critic to disclose relationships that can be difficult to prove beyond the use of textual and formal analysis. Frankly, I find this method of analysis unsatisfactory in its ambiguity, which is one reason why I am attempting to supplement formal analysis with industrial and consumer responses to the text.

This leads me to the final problem that arises with adaptation theory: the unwavering focus on the relationship between two texts: the literary text and the film adaptation. While comics are slightly different from our normal conceptions of this model, as they rely on images as well as words, it still relies on the same inquiry into "translation" that discussions of filmic adaptation began with in George Bluestone's Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema. As James Naremore describes in his analysis of the history of adaptation

⁴⁷ Andrew, Concepts in Film Theory, 97.

theory, “The problem with most writing about adaptation as translation is that it tends to valorize the literary canon and essentialize the nature of cinema.”⁴⁸ In other words, a value system is established in which the prior text is held up as an ultimate goal. Yet, any attempt to match the prior text is met with a paradox: it must try to equate itself with the original’s “essence” but, due to media specificity, will never be able to clone the original. Discussions regarding this process often devolve into the assignment of a moral judgment via one of the most dreaded discussion of “fidelity.”

Adaptation theory has become increasingly aware of the pitfalls of the model of adaptation as translation and to the discussion of fidelity that it ultimately inspires.⁴⁹ The most beneficial writing on adaptation I have found that addresses this pitfall is Robert Stam’s “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation.” Throughout the essay, Stam pushes to find fruitful alternatives to the fidelity discussion, whose “partial persuasiveness...should not lead us to endorse it as an exclusive methodological principle.”⁵⁰ Stam proposes a model that relies on the concept of “intertextual dialogism” which suggests, “Film adaptations...are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin.”⁵¹ By acknowledging this principle, Stam suggests that adaptation theory can flourish by avoiding moral judgments by being “rooted in contextual and intertextual history.”⁵²

Stam’s theory of adaptation begins the shift towards a discussion of dialogism that can potentially deemphasize the concept of priority and the value system that often walks hand in

⁴⁸ James Naremore, “Introduction,” in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 8.

⁴⁹ See Naremore’s introduction for an analysis of the history of adaptation theory.

⁵⁰ Robert Stam, “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,” in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 55.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 75.

hand with it. Yet, Stam's theory of dialogism also leads to the question of treating adaptation as a potential two-way street that I find best complicated in Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation. For Bolter and Grusin, remediation is defined as the representation of one medium in another. This process often defines the relationship between old media and "new digital media."⁵³ As one new medium appears, it often relies on techniques inherent in prior forms of media to define itself. For instance, website design commonly utilizes the graphic design principles of printed media (newspapers and magazines) and derives some of its content from film, television, and music. Yet, unlike theories of adaptation, remediation does not simplify the process of translation in terms of a master-slave relationship. While new media will draw upon previous forms, that is not the end of the process, as old media often react to that initial remediation. As Bolter and Grusin eloquently describe, "established media, such as film and television, respond by trying to incorporate digital media within their traditional formal and social structures....What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media."⁵⁴

Could a stronger theory possibly describe the stylistic interaction between comics and cinema? After all, looking at the history of both forms, reaching back to early cinema and the comic strips, one can trace formal affiliations that bounce back and forth. Take, for instance, Winsor McCay's Little Sammy Sneeze (1904-1906) when compared to the William K.L. Dickson short Fred Ott's Sneeze (1894):

⁵³ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Remediation: Understanding New Media (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 45.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 86, 15.



Figure 1.5: Little Sammy Sneeze (1905).⁵⁵ Figure 1.6: Fred Ott's Sneeze (1894).⁵⁶

Not only is Little Sammy Sneeze similar to Fred Ott's Sneeze in its reliance on bodily performance as spectacle but, as Scott Bukatman has argued, both McCay's structuring of time and his method of framing can be linked to cinematic practices as well.⁵⁷ For instance, the temporal segmentation of the strip is not only strongly reminiscent of the proto-cinematic motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey but also McCay's compositions firmly rely on the medium-shot, knee-up framing of figures commonly described as the "American shot" at this time. Early film historian Tom Gunning also notes the possibility that formal adaptation went from comics to film as well, specifically with regard to Edwin S. Porter's College Chums (1907). Gunning writes that the film "contains some theatrically conceived scenes, while other sequences involve an ingenious use of animated titles and split screen

⁵⁵ Winsor McCay, "Little Sammy Sneeze," New York Herald, 24 September 1905. Reprints of "Little Sammy Sneeze" can be found in various anthologies. I would particularly recommend Winsor McCay, Little Sammy Sneeze, ed. Peter Maresca (Palo Alto: Sunday Press Books, 2007).

⁵⁶ Image taken from the photograph supplied by Edison's Film Manufacturing Company to the Library of Congress for copyright protection, dated 9 January 1894, <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tr018.html>> (09 June 2009).

⁵⁷ Scott Bukatman, "Comics and the Critique of Chronophotography, or 'He Never Knew When It Was Coming!,'" Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal 1, no. 1 (2006): 83-103.

possibly inspired by comic-strip layout.”⁵⁸



Figure 1.7: *The Zoom or Camera Dolly Out in Watchmen (1986).*

This dialogue of remediation between both the comic book and graphic novel forms and film is a key stylistic feature of both media contemporarily. Looking at the first page of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s seminal graphic novel Watchmen (1986), we find a gradual zoom or dolly out, spanning across the page. The first panel gives us a medium-shot of the smiley face pin that defines much of the book, dropped into a blood soaked gutter. Over the next five panels however, Moore and Gibbons zoom out, ending on the final panel two police detectives investigating the murder and on a punch line: “Hmm, that is quite a drop” (Figure 1.7). Looking at the curious case of Frank Miller’s Sin City comic book (Top of Figure 1.8) and the film adaptation by Miller and Robert Rodriguez (Bottom of Figure 1.8), we find remediation perhaps

⁵⁸ Tom Gunning, D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 36.

best exemplified.



Figure 1.8: Remediation and Re-Remediation in Sin City.

In the top image of the figure, the character of Dwight is abstracted from any sense of time or place due to the lack of mise-en-scène and by Miller's choice to render him in only absolute black and white (there is no gray). The film (as seen in the bottom image), abstracts Dwight but not to the extent of Miller's portrayal; the film is a photographic rendering of an icon rather than a graphic rendering. As Booker observes, Sin City was "already mediated through the entire noir tradition. Miller's novels represent not reality, but noir representations of reality, and Rodriguez's film is a representation of Miller's representations."⁵⁹ One might call this re-remediation: Miller is taking film noir high contrast lighting, remediating it via pencil and ink in the Sin City comics, and later remediating his drawings onto film via green screen technology;

⁵⁹ Booker, 161.

he is utilizing film to re-remediate his initial comic book remediation of noir visual style.

In this study, the chief guiding principle in the selection of texts for analysis is the remediation of stylistic devices. Admittedly, Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation defined as the representation of one medium within another is deliberately vague, as it describes a process that various media engage in. Therefore it is necessary to supplement their concept with the vocabularies and studies of comic book style and film form already produced, much of which I have outlined in my review of literature. To return to that material from a methodological standpoint, Lefèvre's analysis of the stylistic relationship between comics and film serves as an excellent starting point in sketching out this process of stylistic remediation. For Lefèvre, the relationship between the forms of the comic and film can be broadly defined across three formal attributes (sound, iconography, and space) to which I would add one final quality: time. With regard to sound, comics obviously do not have a soundtrack. Music, dialogue, and noises can only be expressed through visual means, be it through balloons, text, or icons. In the majority of films, these visual expressions of sound are simply translated into audible expressions. As the flamboyant title inserts of the Batman live-action television series (1966-1968) will attest, attempting to utilize text as a means for representing sound is not impossible, it is simply the less-likely stylistic choice.

The second characteristic that must be addressed when analyzing the stylistic relationship between the two media is that of time. Film is obviously a medium in which temporal duration and movement correlate. This correlation is marked in the relatively stable definition of time marked by the film frame. With the exception of fast or slow motion, one film frame is equated to 1/24th of a second. This correlation between time and space does not exist in comics. Not only can the duration between sequential frames vary in a multitude of ways, but the individual

frame itself is not to be equated with the single instant, as a photograph might be.⁶⁰ As Scott McCloud has shown, an individual panel can include a multitude of temporal durations with actions ranging from a split second to half a minute (or longer) via the artist's use of sound and dialogue.⁶¹ Moreover, the comic's establishment of time is further complicated by the figure of the reader. While a viewer of a film remains relatively passive in their temporal reading of a sequence (unless, of course, they have a remote control), the viewer of a comic book can ponder over individual frames for as long as they please. Hence, there is a tension in the reader's experience of the text, which is the product of the multiplicity of images presented to him or her to understand. Consequently, the path of comprehension in the comic is not overpowered by the medium or the filmmaker. As Will Eisner describes in his study of theory and method and the comic, the attention of the reader cannot be controlled via time, rather the "sequential artist" must utilize composition and the conventions of reading to control the reader.⁶²

The third characteristic that must be addressed is the rift that exists between comics and film in their approach to graphic representation. Film is obviously a photographic medium while photography remains a little explored route in comic art with drawing (be it through inks, pencils, paint, commercial off-set lithography, or even digital methods) being the primary tool of visual expression. McCloud's map of the pictorial language of the comic proves useful here. McCloud, who utilizes the form of the pyramid, constructs his map on a two-axis system.⁶³ The horizontal axis, which McCloud dubs "The Representational Edge," is marked by a spectrum of comic representational method. For McCloud, "Reality" (at the far left) and "Meaning" or

⁶⁰ Scott McCloud, in his seminal study Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art describes six transitions between individual panels: moment to moment, action to action, subject to subject, scene to scene, aspect to aspect, and non-sequitur.

⁶¹ McCloud, 94-97.

⁶² Eisner, 40-41.

⁶³ For simplicity sake, I am ignoring the three-dimensional quality of McCloud's pyramid by simply dealing with the Retinal and Representational Edges.

“Language” (at the far right) defines the spectrum of representation utilized by comics practitioners.⁶⁴ Thus, at the extreme left of the pyramid would lay photography or photorealist art while text would stand at the far right. McCloud complicates his horizontal axis with the vertical axis “The Retinal Edge,” which is crowned by “The Picture Plane.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ McCloud, 51.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 50-51.

Essentially, as images ascend the pyramid, they become more abstracted, rendering them neutral on the “Representational Edge.” The graphic remediation of comics to film is often placed within the art direction of a film by the director and production designers but it is slowly blooming out into the realm of *mise-en-scène* in a more general sense, as best exemplified by the progression seen in production design from Tim Burton’s Batman (1989) and Warren Beatty’s Dick Tracy (1990) to Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller’s Sin City (2005) and Zack Snyder’s 300 (2006).⁶⁶ When these films are charted along McCloud’s “Representational Edge,” it would appear that graphic representation is slowly moving from the domain of photography at the far left towards a middle ground. This area of inquiry, of course, becomes more complicated by animated films.

Finally, the remediation of space, characterized by the metamorphosis from the comic book panel to the cinematic frame, is often simplified by theoreticians who simply equate a comic book with a storyboard. Yet, the difference between the approaches to the production of space taken by the two media, while similar in their reliance upon sequential images, is vast. With regard to the difference between comics and storyboards, the frames of the comic are often interdependent images of space and time, featuring narrative text, presented in unison. Storyboards, the composition of which can vary drastically based upon the artist and the pre-production staff, often lack narrative text and the legibility of comics: they are blueprints for shots; the frame may feature movement vectors (arrows or boxes) to indicate a zoom, pan, tilt, or dolly shot, variables that comics do not include overtly. Essentially, storyboards do not need to be legible the same way comics are because they are not the ultimate, presented, result. They are

⁶⁶ I should note that when I describe these projects with such terms as “Nolan’s Batman” that I am not attempting to indulge in over-determined auteurism but rather trying to differentiate the comics from the films without resorting to redundant prose.

often paired with a screenplay, linked via scene numbers, and are largely incapable of telling a story on their own. Moving beyond the storyboard, comic book theorist Thierry Groensteen describes the difference between the comic book and the film frame helpfully but, as I will examine, problematically. Groensteen writes “In cinema, the frame is, from the moment of shooting, the instrument of an extraction, of a deduction...The frame assigns limits to the profusion of the represented elements, and it elects a privileged fragment. The frame of a comics panel does not remove anything” due to the panel being composed within the frame, not composed around it.⁶⁷

While Groensteen is correct to a degree, he seems to overlook the fact that the modes of spatial representation in both cinema and comics are unstable, as his definition of the film frame as an “instrument of extraction” seems to fall more in line with classical model (1909-1960) as defined by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson.⁶⁸ Yet, as David Bordwell observes in his citation of André Bazin, film language evolved through the dialectic between a tendency on behalf of filmmakers to put “faith in the camera’s ability to record and reveal physical reality” while others sought to “free cinema from photographic reproduction.”⁶⁹ Under this light, the evolution of film language cannot be clearly divided into concrete steps because both tendencies co-existed with one another. In turn, this dialectic allows the film frame to direct space inward (what Tom Gunning calls “the cinema of attractions”) and outward (the classical mode of Bordwell and company).

This dialectic between inward and outward space also exists in the comic strip as well. This spatial tension is particularly exemplified by the phenomenological response the reader of

⁶⁷ Groensteen, 40.

⁶⁸ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁶⁹ David Bordwell, On the History of Film Style (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 61.

the strip experiences. While Scott McCloud is correct when he describes comics formally as being “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence,” there seems to be a tension in how the reader actually encounters the images.⁷⁰ Often, the reader engages with a comic one image at a time because the frames of each panel are closed compositions. Moreover, the closed compositions of the comic panel are often re-enforced by the spatial characteristics of the comic book page, specifically the gutter (the white border around the images), which segregates individual frames from the overall page. The gutter directs space inwards (both in terms of the frame and the overall page) and fractures time and space into an overall sequence which provides the reader with a preferred route towards narrative comprehension.

Regardless of the closed nature of the comic panel, readers are often faced with a series of complex compositions that threaten the narrative flow of the page. As Groensteen observes:

A page of comics is offered at first to a synthetic global vision, but that cannot be satisfactory. It demands to be traversed, crossed, glanced at, and analytically deciphered. This moment-to-moment reading does not take a lesser account of the totality of the panoptic field that constitutes the page (or double page), since the focal vision never ceases to be enriched by the peripheral vision.⁷¹

Many of these techniques are drawn from a process of visual differentiation: the eye is naturally drawn to compositions that are unlike others around it. Visual differentiation, in terms of the comic, can be exemplified through a number of techniques, most notably color, symmetry, and the shape of the panel.

It is appropriate to note at this time that the majority of films based on comic books or graphic novels tend to avoid stylistic remediation. Take, for instance, Christopher Nolan’s Batman series (2005, 2008), Sam Raimi’s Spider-Man (2002, 2004, 2007), and Bryan Singer, Brett Ratner, Gavin Hood, and Matthew Vaughan’s X-Men series (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009,

⁷⁰ McCloud, 9.

⁷¹ Groensteen, 19.

2011). These three series of films, which have grossed a huge sum at the box office and have drawn the respect and sometimes ire of many comic book fans, do not engage with stylistic remediation (with the occasional exception of a credit sequence). While they may borrow iconography for the original text, such as Spider-Man or Batman's suit, the filmmakers and studios behind the properties did not engage with the formal devices of the original comic for any number of reasons. I would speculate that formal remediation in these cases was not attempted for two reasons.

First, both Warren Beatty's Dick Tracy and Ang Lee's Hulk, two films which stood as deliberate attempts to capture comic book style either through the use of primary colors and a minimalist approach to mise-en-scène (Dick Tracy) or the use of CGI to use split-screen methods to capture comic book layout (Hulk), were tremendous failures with critics and audiences. A box office report in Variety noted that Dick Tracy left Walt Disney's Touchstone Pictures with a \$57 million dollar deficit.⁷² Similarly, Ang Lee's attempt to embellish Hulk with a comic book look cost Universal an additional \$1.5 million dollars (the overall production budget was \$137 million) and was reported to be a potential "franchise killer" due to lackluster box office performance.⁷³ Quite simply, to remediate comic book form could be viewed by the industry as an unnecessary risk. Why jeopardize the potential for a blockbuster franchise by venturing away from cinematic realism? As Peter Bart noted in an editorial following the failure of Hulk, "I've talked to several of the studio production chiefs about all this and find myself empathizing with their reasoning. They know they have to deliver 'event pictures' but they dread sitting through

⁷² Claudia Eller, "Tracy Cost Put at \$101 Mil.," Variety, 22 October 1990.

⁷³ I've taken the production budget number from David Bloom, "Hulk Edit Nails Feel of Comics," Variety, 23 June 2003 and the quote from Meredith Amdler and Dade Hames, "Not So Jolly Green Giant," Variety, 24 June 2003.

dailies each afternoon that look like a series of comicstrips [sic.]”⁷⁴

Secondly, any filmmaker or studio attempting to remediate the form of Batman, Spider-Man, and the X-Men could be hard pressed to find a consistent style, as the three titles have not only spanned decades but writers and artists. Ang Lee noted this difficulty in establishing a visual style, remarking that “There’s not a universal voice in the comics and I wanted to show my respect by dealing with the genesis and all of the different back-stories from over the years because there have been hundreds of issues.”⁷⁵ As Lee’s remark notes, most comic book titles go through the hands of various writing and artist teams, often at the same moment in time. For instance, in November of 2009, DC Comics published seven monthly Batman titles, all produced by different creative teams.⁷⁶

The films that do tend to engage with the remediation of comic book form are often properties based upon the work that does not span decades or large teams of writers and artists. Graphic novels or limited series tend to be the norm, as they are shorter narratives that often only involve a handful of creative staff (one or two writers and a small team of artists). Such texts would include: American Splendor (written by Harvey Pekar, illustrated by Robert Crumb and others, 1976-2008; film directed by Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003), Hellboy (written and illustrated by Mike Mignola, 1993-Present; films directed by Guillermo del Toro, 2004, 2008), Sin City (written and illustrated by Frank Miller, 1991-2000; film directed by Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller, 2005), V for Vendetta (written by Alan Moore, illustrated by David Lloyd, 1982-1989; film directed by James McTeigue, 2006), 300 (written and illustrated by Frank Miller, 1998; film directed by Zack Snyder, 2007), and Watchmen (written

⁷⁴ Peter Bart, “Is ‘Brainy’ a Box Office Turn Off?,” Variety, 23 June 2003.

⁷⁵ Elvis Mitchell, “Ang Lee on Comic Books and Hulk as Hidden Dragon,” The New York Times, 22 June 2003.

⁷⁶ Taken from DCComics.com, November 2009 release calendar.

by Alan Moore, illustrated by Dave Gibbons, 1986-1987, film directed by Zack Snyder, 2009). In many of these cases, the original artists were brought in by the filmmakers as consultants on the project (Hellboy, Watchmen) or, in the case of Sin City, as a co-director. The motives for this vary from directors who simply want to work with the creators of some of their favorite titles (Rodriguez and Miller) and the studio's attempted appeasement of a fan community (Bob Kane on the Batman films).

Significantly, I should note that I will not be analyzing the formal relationship between comics and film exhibited by the process of remediation strictly from the standpoint of formal affiliations. Very often, the process is manifested industrially, as creative talent cross between both media. Take, for instance, the careers of Frank Miller and Bruce Timm. Propelled to fame by his 1986 title Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, Miller was hired to write the scripts for Robocop 2 (1990) and Robocop 3 (1993). At the same time, Miller was hired to produce the comic book for the same title. Finally, Bruce Timm, the co-director and one of the animators behind the animated feature Batman: Mask of the Phantasm (1993), would make the leap to comics in 1994 with his Eisner Award winning story Batman Adventures: Mad Love. Clearly, the remediation of comics and film can be studied beyond formal similarities and can be traced down to actual individual cases of creative talent.

With this noted, allow me to elaborate on my final two methodological models as exemplified by Henry Jenkins's What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic and John Caldwell's Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television. The studies authored by Jenkins and Caldwell have served as spiritual guides in reaching beyond the formal analysis of remediation towards a strong consideration of industrial factors. Jenkins's book reflects back on comedian-centered comedies of the late 1920s

and early thirties and analyzes how Hollywood studios attempted to remediate and integrate the vaudeville tradition into traditional film practice. In doing so, Jenkins draws upon socio-cultural discussions regarding humor and intersects them with textual analysis and primary research including studio memos to best describe the stylistic tension inherent in remediation. Similarly, Caldwell's study analyzes the rise of new stylistic practices in 1980s television by complementing, complicating, and grounding his analysis with a strong emphasis on industrial practices, the function of the audience, and the link between emerging stylistic practices and the advent of new technologies. As I hope I have made clear by this point, I find the theory of remediation helpful in describing and analyzing this trend, but that does not allow it to be segregated from both historical and real-world contexts.

Part 4: Limits of Investigation

Finally, the scope of this project must be provided with some boundaries with regard to temporality, geography, and textual examples. Temporally, I feel the most justifiable boundaries for this dissertation are the years between 1978 and 2009. In 1978, we not only have the first release of a comic book film in the blockbuster era, Superman: The Movie, but also the release of Will Eisner's A Contract with God, and Other Stories, a long form comic that is often considered (erroneously) to be the marker for the birth of the American "graphic novel."⁷⁷ 2009, on the other hand, represents a range of factors across both media. Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight was re-released in January in an unprecedented move to drum up support for its

⁷⁷ Julia Round helpfully describes the difference between the comic book and the graphic novel as follows: "the graphic novel (also known as a 'prestige format' single issue) is defined as a 'permanent' comic: it is often longer than the usual single-issue comic (with 20 to 24 story pages) and consists of new material printed on higher-quality paper. Trade paperbacks use the graphic novel form to collect and reprint single stories (either reprinting entire mini-series, or typically runs between four and twelve issues from longer, ongoing series)." See Julia Round, "Is This a Book? DC Vertigo and the Redefinition of Comics in the 1990s," in The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts, eds. Paul Williams and James Lyons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 14-15.

Academy Award campaign. Shortly thereafter, one of the most awaited films based on a graphic novel to be produced, Watchmen (2009), hit theaters in March. 2009 also represented a significant shift in the comic book industry, as DC Comics killed off its iconic hero Batman and the Walt Disney Company announced that it had agreed to acquire the formally independent Marvel Entertainment Group (unlike DC Comics, Marvel Entertainment Group was never aligned with a multimedia conglomeration), home of Marvel Comics and Marvel Studios for \$4 billion in cash and stock.⁷⁸

With regard to geography, I must limit this investigation, for the most part, to comics and films produced in the United States. Admittedly, this process can undoubtedly be viewed as international, as Franco-Belgian and Japanese films based on sequential art are incredibly common and, as I will later discuss in the Scott Pilgrim case study, some formal explorations analyzed here have been gleaned from international texts (manga in this example). However, I feel that in order to investigate the intricacies of this phenomenon that this national limitation must be set. I feel this can be justified in two ways. First, comics and graphic novels from other countries often follow different representational paths. To be more specific, in his discussion of representations of time in international comics, scholar Scott McCloud notes different temporal segmentations from country to country, particularly noting an “east/west split.” As McCloud writes:

Traditional western art and literature don’t wander much. On the whole, we’re a pretty goal-oriented culture. But, in the east, there’s a rich tradition of cyclical and labyrinthine works of art. Japanese comics may be heirs to this tradition, in the way they so often emphasize being there over getting there. Through these and other storytelling techniques, the Japanese offer a vision of comics very different from our own.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ David B. Wilkerson, “Disney to Acquire Marvel Entertainment for \$4B,” MarketWatch, 31 August 2009, <<http://www.marketwatch.com/story/disney-to-acquire-marvel-entertainment-for-4b-2009-08-31>> (10 April 2010).

⁷⁹ McCloud, 81.

McCloud's assertion is echoed in comic historian Roger Sabin's history, who argues that beginning with comic strips, the predecessor to the proto-comic book/graphic novel, the forms expressed in the United States followed "a quite different evolutionary path" than their international counterparts.⁸⁰

Secondly, the cultural history of comics in Japan and the Franco-Belgian region is markedly different from here in the United States. With regard to Japanese readership, 40% of the publishing industry is made up of "manga" (the Japanese term for comics) while comics only make up for 3% in the U.S. Moreover, the property rights for Japanese comics are owned by individual creators, not publishing companies and the publishing format is significantly different, as manga are published in black and white and have relatively low production value. The cultural history of Franco-Belgian comics differs from our own insofar as, in the words of scholars Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, "the French and Belgians have always embraced the comics medium as an art."⁸¹ Most notably, since 1974 the French cultural ministry partially funded a comic book museum and research center, the Cité Internationale de la Bande Dessinée (CIIBDI). The only nation with a comic book industry analogous to our own is the United Kingdom but, much like the relationship between our film industry and theirs, American publishers have hampered the growth of the industry by launching competition in the form of international subsidiaries (such as Marvel UK) or by cherry picking talent (such as Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, Neil Gaiman, and Grant Morrison) for American productions.

Finally, with regard to my selection of texts, I have decided to focus this investigation primarily on feature films. The torrent of animated and live-action television shows based on comics produced during the past thirty years featuring such characters as Spider-Man, the X-

⁸⁰ Sabin, 19.

⁸¹ Duncan and Smith, 291.

Men, Batman, Superman, and The Justice League would simply complicate industrial, stylistic, and audience factors beyond what I feel I can successfully address in this modest dissertation. I will not be completely ignoring the role of television and some of the texts produced for it, most notably some of the Batman television series produced throughout the years, as the medium has played an undeniable and evolving role in the relationship between comics and film.

With regard to stylistic remediation however, while comic books and television can overlap with regard to one stylistic characteristic in an emphasis on seriality, in the time period analyzed here, rarely does a live-action or animated television show reach beyond graphical remediation (with one notable exception being MTV's The Maxx).⁸² This may be because stylistic remediation, as I have already begun to explore, is often tied to the extensive use of CGI, which inherently raises production budgets. Moreover, the industrial rationale behind many comic book films has been to move as far away from television product as possible, as the “campy” stigma of earlier incarnations proved to be a major concern. As Batman producer Jon Peters noted when faced with a lawsuit by TV's Batman, Adam West, when he rejected him as a candidate for the film: “I never saw the TV show but this has nothing to do with the television show.”⁸³ During the bulk of the timeframe covered in this study, studios producing comic book films have sought to differentiate their product from television in their continual quest for cultural prestige, be it through the casting of Marlon Brando or Jack Nicholson, the hiring of critically lauded directors (Christopher Nolan, Bryan Singer, Ang Lee) and comic book personnel (Frank Miller, Dave Gibbons), and, as I hope to argue in this dissertation, the embrace of a comic book stylistic devices. Essentially, a film's embrace of comic book form holds a lot

⁸² Greg M. Smith, “Shaping The Maxx: Adapting the Comic Book Frame to Television,” Animation Journal 8, no. 1 (1999): 32-53.

⁸³ Peter J. Boyer, “Film Clips: As Batman, West is Out of Movie Lineup,” The Los Angeles Times, 5 August 1981.

of water with fans, who are the film's main demographic. Adapting comic books to film without considering style is akin to making a musical without dance sequences, it misses something fundamental about the original form.

While I will be leaving television by the way side due to these concerns, I should note that I will not be giving preference to live-action features over animated live-action titles such as Batman: Mask of the Phantasm and the many versions of Watchmen (which began as an animated "motion comic" prior to its theatrical release, became a solely live-action film when released theatrically, and ended up as a live-action/animated hybrid in its "Director's Cut" home video release). To focus solely on live-action films would over simplify discussions of stylistic remediation in ways that have plagued many previous studies. For instance, Booker's study neglects to engage in any analysis of animated films whatsoever, only offering fleeting references to the production of them in his production contexts for their live-action counterparts. Comic historian Robert C. Harvey, in his discussion of comic books and film, simply writes animated cartoons off as "a third medium....a different genre."⁸⁴ Finally, the edited anthology Film and Comic Books never once engages with an animated film in one of its many case studies. In fact, one of the authors included significantly suggests they "deserve a proper analysis of their own."⁸⁵ I view this dissertation as an elaboration and complication of the significant work that has already begun to be laid down and as an attempt to offer such an analysis.

Part 5: Chapter Breakdown

The second chapter, "The History of Remediation between Comics and Film," will briefly note the stylistic convergence between comics and film before 1978 (specifically

⁸⁴ Harvey, 175.

⁸⁵ Lefèvre, 2.

discussions regarding cartoonist turned animator turned Vitagraph founder J. Stuart Blackton, the inspiration of films on comic books like Walt Disney's Comics and Stories (1940-1962), and serials and animated shorts based on comics throughout the 30s and 40s), the bulk of the chapter will deal with the period from 1978 to 2003, the year that the comic book films Hulk and American Splendor were released and, as I hope to argue in this chapter, the industrial and stylistic practice of remediation began.

I will trace three industrial cycles within the comic book films over the thirty-one years this dissertation covers. Cycle one runs from Superman: The Movie in 1978 to Superman IV: The Quest for Peace in 1987 as the industry drew upon a comic book with the initial goal of reproducing realist style before shifting towards camp. Cycle two runs from Batman in 1989 to Batman & Robin in 1997, as the industry re-defined the realism of the property as being the original tone of the comic before shifting once again towards camp and, more specifically, a self-destructive drive towards merchandising. Cycle three begins with the production of X-Men in 2000 and is still in progress, as the industry has once again tried to imbue the films with prestige by hiring successful directors born from the independent sector (Christopher Nolan, Bryan Singer, Sam Raimi, Ang Lee, Robert Rodriguez) and production personnel (Dave Gibbons and others noted below) from the comic industry.

I have structured the third chapter, "Stylistic Remediation in Comic Book Films," as the conceptual launch pad of this dissertation. First and foremost, I've decided to structure this chapter around my classification of the four chief formal qualities dealt with in the remediation of a comic text to film: graphics, time, space, and text. I think basing these three sections upon actual case studies (to be outlined below) will avoid many of the generalizations I've found in the few texts that address remediation in this genre. Judging from the limited pool of scholarship

already covering this topic, specifically the studies performed by comic book semiologist Thierry Gronensteen, comic book historian Robert C. Harvey, and comic book theorist Pascal Lefèvre, nearly all of them lack concrete discussions of the formal similarities and differences between both media forms that are grounded in specific case studies. As I make clear throughout the dissertation, not only is there more than one way to structure a comic book but a film as well. While the generalizations by Gronensteen, Harvey, and Lefèvre are undeniably important as initial steps in defining the relationship between these two media, I believe that there is much room for expansion and elaboration.

This chapter begins with a formal analysis of Warren Beatty's Dick Tracy with specific regard to graphical remediation. I believe Beatty's film is the proper place to begin my analysis for two reasons. First, it was perhaps the first comic book film of the post-Batman blockbuster era to attempt a remediation of comic book form. Secondly, as already outlined in my literature review, Dick Tracy is the subject of one of the only scholarly examinations of this brand of remediation. In my analysis of Beatty's remediation of graphics, I plan to focus primarily on the iconographic quality of the mise-en-scène.

The second section of this chapter focuses on the remediation of time and space across three films: Hulk, 300, and Watchmen. While a distinction between time and space could be made when dealing with film, producing a desire to separate these elements, time and space work in parallel in comics as progressions in space (panel to panel transitions) are nearly always needed to progress time. I specifically analyze Ang Lee's use of split-screen in Hulk to stand in as an attempt to capture the multiframe (to borrow from Gronensteen's analysis) or the grid layout of the page. I also analyze Zack Snyder's use of slow-motion in capturing the dynamic of action in 300 and Watchmen to explain how superimposition (particularly the splashes of

“flattened” blood) in 300 is utilized to flatten the spatial dimensions of the film frame with the objective of capturing the texture of the page.

The final section of this chapter deals with what I’m describing as textual remediation, or the remediation of the word balloon and caption of the comic in film (the form, not the content). For this case study, I’ve chosen Shari Spring Berman and Robert Pulcini’s film American Splendor (2003), based upon the works of Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner. American Splendor is an interesting case, not only for its production background as one of the few independent films based on a comic book, but for standing as one of the few attempts to translate the textual form of the comic to film.

The fourth chapter, “Remediation Beyond Comic Book Films and an Initial Consideration of Transmedia from a Stylistic Perspective,” moves beyond comic book films by focusing on two texts in order to more vividly sketch the wide range that this practice of stylistic remediation has in both films and comics. Specifically, I will argue that the “bullet-time” sequences in The Matrix (1999) remediate the comic convention of moment-to-moment time, often intensified by the use of speed lines. While the Wachowski brothers have offered few comments on their work, preferring to have it speak for itself, and the film is also inspired by kung-fu wire fighting and video game stylistics, the talent brought in to form the film’s team of conceptual designers is telling. Specifically, the Wachowski’s hired Geoffrey Darrow (who collaborated on Frank Miller’s Hard Boiled) and Steve Skroce (who worked extensively for Marvel Comics, illustrating issues of The Amazing Spider-Man), two notable comic book artists, as both conceptual designers and storyboard artists to work on the bullet-time sequences before

the scenes moved to the pre-visualization stage.⁸⁶ As the property took off, the Wachowski's invited the pair (along with other comic book writers and artists) to launch a Matrix comic book.

I was drawn to this aspect of formal remediation in a conversation regarding Stephen King's The Dark Tower (2007-2010) with media scholar Janet Bergstrom. When I was working on my visual essay "Comics to Film (and Halfway Back Again)" in 2007, I was at a loss as to how to explain to Janet how the frame and gutter functioned in comic books. I reached for the only comic book in my possession, the first copy of The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger Born (2007). I leafed through the issue with Janet and explained the formal conventions of the book (much easier with visual evidence!), who promptly noted that the volume's artwork by Jae Lee and Richard Isanove reminded her of Sergio Leone's widescreen compositions. I researched this aspect of the comic after the conversation and discovered that King had based his hero, Roland Deschain, off of Clint Eastwood's "Man with No Name."⁸⁷



Figure 1.10: The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly (1966).

⁸⁶ Dan North, "Virtual Actors, Spectacle and Special Effects: Kung Fu Meets 'All That CGI Bullshit,'" in The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded, ed. Stacy Gillis (New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), 54.

⁸⁷ Stephen King, The Gunslinger: Revised and Expanded Edition (Toronto: Signet Fiction, 2003), xxvii.



Figure 1.11: *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger Born* (2007).

While I haven't found an interview with Lee or Isanove acknowledging the filmmaker's Westerns as an inspiration, I should note that King is the creative executive on the project and requested a portfolio from Lee before he was approved to work on the project. Also, many reviewers have been quick to note the connection. As Daniel Greenfield notes, as the narrative develops, the comic "[is] rendered in The Good, The Bad and the Ugly classic Western Sergio Leone frames and angles."⁸⁸ This chapter engages in a discussion regarding the cross-pollination of these stylistic devices beyond comic book films, a particularly important examination given that, according to the comic book publishers I've spoken to, many of their projects have been

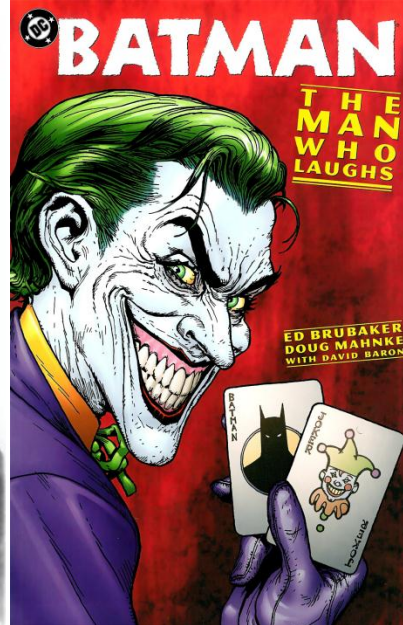
⁸⁸ Daniel Greenfield, "Gunslinger #3-Stephen King's The Dark Tower-The Gunslinger Born Three," Hubpages, Publication Date Unknown, <http://hubpages.com/hub/Gunslinger_3_-_Stephen_Kings_The_Dark_Tower_-_The_Gunslinger_Born_Three> (28 March 2011).

based off of scripts written by aspiring screenwriters and some, like Darren Aronofsky's The Fountain (2005), were later turned into films.

Chapter five, "Remediation as a Cyclical Cultural Process," is divided into two analyses in order to demonstrate how the stylistic remediation is, like the theory proposed by Bolter and Grusin, a reciprocal process and not a linear one. The first analysis will focus on the career of comic book writer, artist, and filmmaker Frank Miller. Miller, as already noted, helped launch the American comic book renaissance in 1986 with his influential comic book miniseries The Dark Knight Returns. However, Miller is also unique as he is one of the few comic book writers/artists to successfully make the transition to filmmaking. Following the success of the series, Miller started making the transition into filmmaking when he was hired to script Robocop 2 and Robocop 3. After the disheartening experience, Miller went back to comics to work on his film noir influenced series Sin City. A few years later, when approached by Robert Rodriguez, Miller was hired as a co-director of the film and ultimately went on to helm the comic book film The Spirit (2008). The films and comics of Miller are obviously of interest, as his comics remediate noir stylistic devices and the subsequent films re-remediate the comic's interpretation of noir style.

The second study traces the graphical evolution of the DC Comics villain The Joker as being the fruit of a stylistic dialogue between comics and film. As originally designed by creators Bob Kane, Bill Finger, and Jerry Robinson, the Joker's "ultimate appearance was based on photos...showing actor Conrad Veidt in the makeup he wore to play the disfigured hero in The Man Who Laughs (1928)," a film that would later inspire the title of an arc sketching the origins of the Joker.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Les Daniels, Batman: The Complete History (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 40.



Figures 1.12 & 1.13: *The Man Who Laughs* (1928) and *Batman: The Man Who Laughs* (2005).

Years later, after the success of Burton’s film and shortly after the launch of the television animated series *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-1995), Joker’s television version was graphically remediated into the tie-in comic series *The Batman Adventures* (1992-1995) until he finally reached the big screen in the animated film *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* (1993). Joker’s graphical remediation has continued, particularly after the success of Nolan’s *The Dark Knight*. The unique design aspect of the Joker, as portrayed by the late Heath Ledger, was that his trademark smile broke with tradition by being a Glasglow grin, a smile produced by expanding the grin to the ears with a knife or razor. This uncharacteristic depiction subsequently became the basis for writer Brian Azzarello’s graphic novel *Joker* (2008). Clearly, the graphical remediation of the Joker exhibits the cyclical nature of this stylistic process.

The sixth chapter, “The Future of Stylistic Remediation between Comics and Film,” looks at one recent formation in the remediation process between cinema and comics: the motion comic. In essence, the motion comic is best described as an audio book version of a comic. The panels of the original work serve as individual film frames which are subsequently

animated in order to ensure that the duration of time is long enough to tell the story and that the transition between panels and angles is seamless. With regards to the soundtrack, the motion comic is commonly supplied with a voice over reading of the comic by one narrator, which makes it more like an audio book and less like radio theater. They are distributed across multiple platforms, be it via the web (as was the case with Saw: Rebirth in 2005), mobile device (Watchmen: Motion Comics in 2008), or DVD (which Watchmen: Motion Comics were also packaged under).

These motion comics serve a variety of industrial purposes. Some, like Saw: Rebirth or the series launched alongside the film I Am Legend (2007) primarily serve to market film franchises with unique content. Others, like Watchmen, market the film but also serve as a gatekeeper into the world by providing an alternate route to the source material. For instance, Watchmen: The Motion Comic was launched nearly nine months before the film hit theaters, seemingly to educate potential viewers of the film as to the complicated narrative relayed in the film. Tellingly, the DVD came with a voucher for a discounted ticket to the feature film when released. Finally, a third type of motion comic, particularly exemplified by Marvel's approach to the form, serves the literal purpose of providing an alternate means of delivering the same story being told in the concurrent series.

The second section of this chapter covers the production of the film Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2010) and how the previous chapters' discussion of stylistic remediation and transmedia storytelling became complicated by the production and subsequent box office failure of a comic book film.

By the end of the dissertation, I will answer the following research questions and elaborate and complicate these preliminary hypotheses.

1. What role has horizontal integration and multimedia conglomerates had in the process of stylistic remediation?

My initial hypothesis is that horizontal integration has not only made comic book films more economically feasible (a larger company can carry the burden of high production budget more easily than a small studio can) but economically desirable. As many scholars have been swift to note, most significantly Eileen Meehan and Douglas Gomery, comic book properties can serve as licensing goldmines, drawing not only ancillary revenue for conglomerates in the form of toys and clothing but as a primary source of profit by attempting to bring consumers across different media platforms. Essentially, a new Batman film (produced by Warner Bros.) may introduce new readers to the comic book (published by DC Comics) or a soundtrack (Warner Bros. Records); the original property serves as an engine that can maximize profits across a multimedia conglomerate's subsidiary companies. Stylistic remediation merely serves as an additional hook, an attempt to capture the experience of reading a comic, in order to draw the consumer's horse to the conglomerate's water.

2. What are the industrial motivations behind stylistic remediation, both in films and comics?

With regard to this research question, I again presume that cross-platform or transmedia profitability is one of the key industrial motives for stylistic remediation. However, even if a movie studio or comic book publisher stylistically dresses a text up, that does not mean it will be inherently profitable. Stylistic remediation may be motivated by profitability but it is on the assumption that in order to be profitable, a

text must rope in the target demographic of the comic book fan. Fans, judging from the exhibitions at San Diego Comic-Con each year, embrace the work of both writers and artists, making the visual form of comics an additional hook to bring in that demographic, which has become increasingly visible and vocal with the power of making or breaking an adaptation. Yet, at the same time, too much stylistic remediation – as I later investigate – can alienate the larger audience. With regard to stylistic remediation not directly tied to an adaptation, I would simply contend that image culture, while it relies on certain stylistic norms, is not a static entity. To integrate additional means of expression onto a stylistic palate keeps texts from being redundant and monochromatic; style can become an experience, and a marketable one and culturally powerful one at that.

3. Is the remediation of comic book stylistics into films fundamentally a by-product of technologies and an indication of a Manovichian shift from cinema to digital cinema? This research question is perhaps the most difficult to answer with a concise hypothesis. While stylistic remediation appears to be intimately linked towards advances in CGI technology, as many of the texts embracing stylistic remediation have been shot on digital backlots laced with green screens (see Sin City, 300, and Watchmen), the conclusion that this will manifest itself as a Manovichian shift is much more elusive. Essentially, for every financial success at stylistic remediation during the past thirty years (Sin City, 300) there have been embarrassing box office failures (Dick Tracy, Watchmen). Moreover, with the financial failure of more recent films embracing stylistic remediation like Kick-Ass (2010) and Scott Pilgrim vs. the World, the Hollywood Studio system appears reluctant to draw upon stylistic

remediation, as it is tied to CGI, which can almost always mean a larger production budget. Finally, as I will describe, Manovich's theorization of digital cinema implies a new visual code that, while it takes formal cues from comics (the presentation of sequential images---spatial montage as Manovich calls it), does not even completely manifest itself in some of the comic book adaptations that embrace stylistic remediation. Instead, comic book style in these films tends to be adapted to the norms and rules of the continuity system.

Chapter II: The History of Remediation between Comics and Film

A Brief Prelude: Comic Strips and Film (1896-1911)

While the stylistic remediation present between comic books and film, briefly outlined in the preceding chapter and thoroughly explored in the following chapter, is unique for many reasons (most notably the conglomeration and horizontal integration of the Hollywood studio system and the ease of the stylistic process thanks to CGI technologies), to conclude that it is purely a byproduct of the contemporary period under investigation here (1978-2009) would be ahistorical. In fact, it is possible to trace the history of stylistic remediation between comics and film back to their near birthdate: 1896. That year, a young cartoonist and reporter for the New York Evening World by the name of J. Stuart Blackton interviewed inventor Thomas Edison regarding “that newest invention, moving pictures.”⁹⁰ When the cartoonist arrived at Edison’s East Orange Laboratory, Edison asked Blackton to sketch while being filmed. As the artist later noted, “I did and that was my entrance into the motion picture industry. I finished that picture with two others with the name of Blackton, Cartoonist of the New York Evening World.”⁹¹

Blackton’s film, The Enchanted Drawing (copyrighted in 1900, but probably filmed earlier) stands as perhaps one of the strongest examples of remediation at this time. By combining the vaudeville tradition of the lightning sketch (already a form of remediation between “graphic and performing art”) with film, Blackton would help lay the foundations for what would later become the medium of animated film.⁹² Shortly after his interview with Edison, Blackton acquired a projector, becoming perhaps the first cartoonist to enter the young

⁹⁰ Marian Blackton Trimble, J. Stuart Blackton: A Personal Biography by His Daughter (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1985), 12.

⁹¹ J. Stuart Blackton, “Lecture Given at the University of Southern California, February 29, 1929,” in Hollywood Directors: 1914-1940, ed. Richard Koszarski (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 16.

⁹² Donald Crafton, Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 48.

motion picture industry as he formed Vitagraph Studios. Significantly, Blackton's engagement with both media would reach beyond Edison's short. During the early 1900s at Vitagraph, he would portray Frederick Opper's comic strip character in a series of live-action Happy Hooligan shorts (1899-1903). A few years later, in 1906, his experimentations with sketching and film would lead to what is arguably the first animated film, Humorous Phases of Funny Faces.

Significantly, Blackton was not the only cartoonist dabbling with multimedia at this time. Comic strip artists Bud Fisher (Mutt and Jeff) and Richard Outcault (Hogan's Alley, McFadden's Row of Flats, and Buster Brown) demonstrated their cartoonist abilities on vaudeville stage and, in the case of Outcault, also in front of Edison's camera. Yet, the closest equal Blackton would find as a mixed media artist would be Winsor McCay. McCay, like Blackton, Fisher, and Outcault, was also a cartoonist hired as a lightning sketch artist in vaudeville. In fact, in 1906, McCay was signed by vaudeville producer and theater owner F.F. Proctor as rival act to Outcault (Outcault and McCay were friends).⁹³ By 1911, Blackton approached McCay and offered to produce a live-action/animated short. The resulting film, Little Nemo (or Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonist of the N.Y. Herald and his Moving Comics) stands as one of the key texts in this investigation of remediation between the comic strip and film. The short not only involves producers of both media behind (Blackton and McCay) and in front of the camera (McCay and fellow cartoonist George McManus), but also features McCay performing a variation of his lightning sketch for the audience and characters from his comic strip, Little Nemo in Slumberland (1905-1914, 1924-1927).

Yet, as the range of academic sources noted will testify, these linkages between the ancestral form of the modern day comic book, the comic strip, and film have already been

⁹³ John Canemaker, Winsor McCay: His Life and Work, Revised Ed. (New York: Harry Abrams Publishers, 2005), 131.

elaborated upon and debated for nearly forty years. This exploration began when the French author Francis Lacassin authored his famous analysis of the stylistic evolution of both forms (it was translated into English in 1972) and John Fell elaborated upon the parallels between the dissection of space and time by both media (1974). Over the following decades, Lacassin and Fell found their analyses privy to voices of support (most notably in the work of film historian Tom Gunning and comic strip historian David Kunzle) and condemnation (in the elaborated critiques mounted by animation historian Donald Crafton). Thanks to the work of those scholars, the connections between comic strips and film during the first decades of the 20th century have been teased out, complicated, and revised.⁹⁴ With this historical disclaimer in mind, we can proceed to 1934, the year Harry I. Widenberg, a sales manager at Eastern Color Printing, and his salesman M.C. Gaines began publishing Famous Funnies, a series that included a collection of comic strip re-prints and original material that has often been cited as the first “modern comic book.”⁹⁵

Part 1: Comic Books, Film, and Television Before the Blockbuster (1934-1968)

“This country cannot afford the calculated risk involved in feeding its children, through comic books, a concentrated diet of crime, horror, and violence.”-The United States Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency.⁹⁶

“The void created by the arrival of the Comics Code in 1955 was quickly filled by [publisher] Dell’s morally irreproachable comics, which predominantly featured characters from animated cartoons....the reality of the comic book industry during the second half of the 1950s: the disappearance of ‘contestable’ genres (romance, crime, horror) gave way, at least initially, to an increased value for ‘acceptable’ comics (whose contents targeted preadolescents)...”-Jean-Paul Gabilliet.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ For those who desire a longer discussion of the relationship between comic strips and film during this period, please see Drew Morton, “Sketching Under the Influence? Winsor McCay and the Question of Aesthetic Convergence Between Comic Strips and Film,” Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal 5, no. 3 (2010): 295-312.

⁹⁵ Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, The Power of Comics: History, Form, & Culture (New York: Continuum, 2009), 30.

⁹⁶ Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 172.

⁹⁷ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 202-203.

In order to more fully grasp the industrial and cultural affiliations between comics and film, a brief contextual history of the two industries during the three decades preceding the temporal window of this study is necessary. According to comic book historian Bradford Wright, the birth of the comic book in the form of Famous Funnies was far from an overnight success.⁹⁸ While the first issue, financed by Dell and printed by Eastern Color, sold out its initial run of 35,000 copies, newsstand distributors showed little interest in the product, prompting Dell to withdraw its financial support. The second series of 250,000 copies, released in July 1934, lost Eastman \$4,000. After a lukewarm launch, Eastern began turning a profit with the sixth issue in the series and, according to Wright, by the time the twelfth issue hit newsstands “Famous Funnies was netting Eastern Color about \$30,000 each month.”⁹⁹

The eventual success of Widenberg and Gaines’s reprints was not lost on other publishers, most notably Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson. In 1934, Nicholson founded National Allied Publications which, after Nicholson was forced out by his business partners Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz in 1937, ultimately took its name from the title of its publication: Detective Comics (National Allied would become Detective Comics Inc., or DC Comics). In June 1938, DC published the debut of Superman in Action Comics #1. While the character was created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster (providing the inspiration for Michael Chabon’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay), it was owned by the publisher, which had purchased the intellectual property rights for a measly \$130.¹⁰⁰ Superman, according to Wright, “won a large audience very quickly. At a time when most comic book titles sold between 200,000 and 400,000 copies per issue, each issue of Action

⁹⁸ Wright, 3-4.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁰ Duncan and Smith, 32.

Comics (featuring one Superman story each) regularly sold about 900,000 copies per month. Each bimonthly issue of the Superman title, devoted entirely to the character, sold an average of 1,300,000 copies.”¹⁰¹ Superman quickly became the first star established by both DC and the American comic book industry at large.

The success of Superman spawned a range of imitators from both inside and outside DC Comics. One of the most notable outside examples, Wonder Man, was coincidentally developed by Victor Fox, a former accountant for DC who was no doubt privy to the rising sales figures of Superman, which, in 1940, grossed nearly \$1,000,000. Fox set up his own publishing operation, Fox Features Syndicate, and hired Will Eisner (who would create The Spirit shortly thereafter) and Jerry Iger to produce the title, which hit newsstands in May of 1939. Their imitation, however, failed to appear in more than one issue as DC quickly accused Fox of copyright infringement, forcing their former accountant to shelve the character. Attempting to catch lightning in a bottle twice, DC unleashed their newest hero the same month Fox attempted to launch Wonder Man: Batman, created by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger. By 1941, Superman, Batman, and an assortment of other superhero titles (including Captain America, Captain Marvel, Green Lantern, and Flash) were vastly outselling comic strip reprints like Famous Funnies. Two years later, comic fever would be hard for publishers and vendors to ignore as the cheap, illustrated books took over 33% of the newsstand market.¹⁰²

The success of Superman and Batman was not lost on DC, which quickly licensed their properties for cross-media ventures. In less than three years after Superman’s debut, DC National had launched a radio series entitled The Adventures of Superman (1940-1951) and Paramount, which had acquired the screen rights, hired Fleischer Studios to produce a series of

¹⁰¹ Wright, 13.

¹⁰² Duncan and Smith, 33.

animated cartoons for theatrical release (1941-1943). The core audience for the comic, radio show, and animated shorts was obvious: children. According to comic historian Mike Benton, industrial surveys compiled during the period revealed that 75% of the industry's annual revenue (roughly \$15 million dollars), "came directly from the pockets of children themselves."¹⁰³ As the industry became aware of this demographic, comic historian Roger Sabin notes, "comics were increasingly produced especially for them. The age range took a marked tumble."¹⁰⁴ As comics became increasingly youth orientated, sociologists began to express concerns over the effects of the comics on children. Did reading stories told via pictures infringe on a child's ability to read proper literature? What about their influence on the health of American youth, critics asked, when eight-year old Jimmy Henderson dressed up in a Superman costume and took a swan dive off of a second-story landing, spraining his ankle, in the summer of 1942?

For the most part, these critiques, including Dr. Fredric Wertham's "The Psychopathology of Comic Books" published in July of 1948, were ignored throughout the 40s. Comic books were a children's pastime which, according to Sabin, "were coopted into a vision of childhood that included climbing trees, flicking catapults, and playing tag."¹⁰⁵ The booming comic book industry, however, was dealt a blow between 1946 and 1947 as the glut of superhero comics had saturated the market. Hoping to diversify and to perhaps capture adult readers, the industry began to explore other genres including westerns, war, crime and, most famously, horror. Horror comics, including The Vault of Horror (1950-1955) and Tales from the Crypt (1950-1955) published by William Gaines, the son of M.C. Gaines, and his company Entertaining Comics (EC) became noteworthy for their lurid subject matter and abundance of

¹⁰³ Mike Benton, The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1989), 37.

¹⁰⁴ Sabin, 35.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

gore. The turn towards other genres and adult readers initially seemed successful. By 1954, EC presses were printing 150 million books each month and fanzines began to circulate.¹⁰⁶

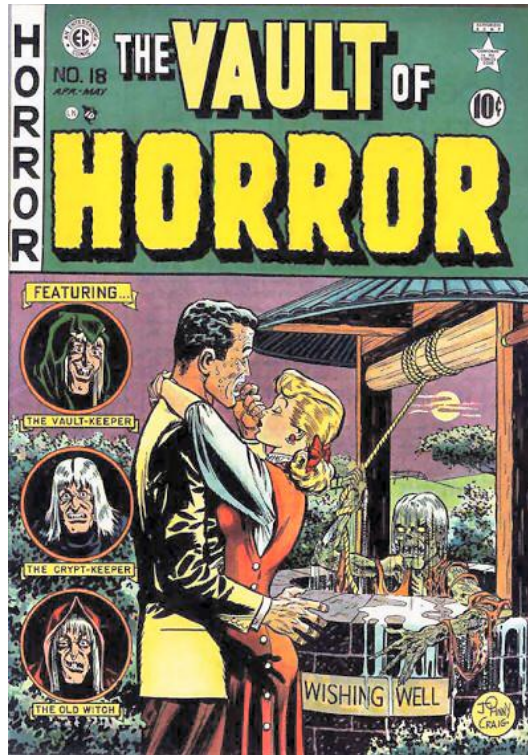


Figure 2.1: Lurid Subject Matter and Gore in EC's *Vault of Horror* #18 (1951).

However, EC's rise would be temporary as its successful exploitation of the horror market would raise the ire of parents and social reformers. By 1954, thanks to EC's graphic portrayals of violence and perversion, social critiques against comic books were no longer ignored. Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, who originally began his crusade against the form in the late 40s, published his infamous study Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth (1954), which claimed that horror and crime comics in particular negatively affected youth. Wertham's study quickly found an audience when it was excerpted in Ladies' Home Journal, rousing protests and several book burnings. On April 21st 1954, the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency began to hold hearings on the effects of

¹⁰⁶ Duncan and Smith, 39.

comic books.¹⁰⁷ Wertham and Gaines were called to testify and while the Subcommittee would announce its official conclusions in 1955 that “this country cannot afford the calculated risk involved in feeding its children, through comic books, a concentrated diet of crime, horror, and violence,” the consequences of the public outcry and Senate hearings were addressed almost instantaneously by the comic book industry.¹⁰⁸ Their solution? Follow in the footsteps of Hollywood and Major League Baseball: hire a comics czar (Charles F. Murphy) to head the Comics Magazine Association of American (CMAA) which would establish an enforceable code forbidding “all scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gore and gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, [and] masochism.”¹⁰⁹

By 1955, the effects of television’s growing dominance in the household, poor public sentiment, and the resulting enforcement of the Code produced both an industry and individual comics that “looked very different to” those that came before.¹¹⁰ Essentially, the shockwaves killed off entire genres (horror and crime), publishers (EC), and by the requirements of the Code, any hope of capturing an adult audience. Notably, this “kid friendly” turn of events helped improve Dell Publishing’s position in the industry. An established producer of the titles in the “funny animal genre,” Dell had arranged licensing with Walt Disney (publishing Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories from 1940-1962), Warner Bros. (publishing several titles including Looney Tunes and Merry Melodies, which later became just Looney Tunes, from 1941-1962), and MGM.¹¹¹ By the 1950s, “Dell was the largest publisher of comic books in the world,” selling

¹⁰⁷ For more information on the “comic book scare,” see David Hajdu, The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

¹⁰⁸ Wright, 172.

¹⁰⁹ Duncan and Smith, 40.

¹¹⁰ Sabin, 68.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

more than 300,000,000 books annually.¹¹²

Coincidentally, just as the comic book industry was finding its core audience recalibrated towards children, the Hollywood studio system was experiencing a similar identity crisis. Thanks to volatile mixture of factors, including the collapse of the classical studio system, the post-World War II baby boom, and the correlation between the rise of television and decline in film attendance, American film went from a mass medium to what film historian Thomas Doherty has called “a less-than-mass medium” thanks to “a shift in marketing strategy and production [that] initiated a progressive “juvenilization.”¹¹³ Oddly, the shared audience demographic seemed to have been lost on the studio system during this period. While Paramount had financed the Superman animated shorts during the 40s and Columbia had produced serials based on Batman (1943 and 1949) and Superman (1948, 1950), studios began to shy away from comic book properties, perhaps due to their formal affinity with seriality.

Yet, while the studios were apparently disinterested in comic books, television producers were not. As The Adventures of Superman radio drama reached its end, DC commissioned a television unit and acquired space at RKO Studios in Culver City. The motive, according to Superman historian Jake Rossen, was to produce a feature film entitled Superman and the Mole Men (1951) that the publisher could use as a “calling card for a TV series.”¹¹⁴ Starring George Reeves and distributed in November 1951 by Lippert Pictures, the film was a success and did indeed launch a syndicated TV series: Adventures of Superman (1952-1958).¹¹⁵ While George Reeves’s death in 1959 ended the production of Adventures of Superman and proposed spin-offs

¹¹² Benton, 42.

¹¹³ Thomas Doherty, Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 2.

¹¹⁴ Jake Rossen, Superman vs. Hollywood: How Fiendish Producers, Devious Directors, and Warring Writers Grounded an American Icon (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 24.

¹¹⁵ The film was edited and aired on television as two episodes of the series in 1953.

based around Superboy, Superpup, and Jimmy Olsen failed to materialize, the series still ran strong in reruns, pushing DC to approach ABC to air a television series based on Batman (which was subsequently produced by Twentieth Century Fox and Greenway Productions). From that point until 1978, television was the primary outlet for the cross-media exploration of comics. Yet, television's stance towards stylistic remediation was fluid; the Adventures of Superman made little to no attempt to remediate comic book style while Batman (1966-1968) wore comic book style on its sleeve to the point of backlash.

Batman is significant for elaborating on the cultural and industrial context behind the relationship between comics, television, and film, particularly in the light of stylistic remediation. As media historians Lynn Spigel and Henry Jenkins have analyzed, the Batman television series occupied a unique position between two distinct audience demographics. Driven by ABC's positioning of the series as the latest manifestation in pop art (Andy Warhol was invited by ABC to attend a "cocktail and frug" party celebrating its premiere), the show appealed to both children and adults, thanks to a polysemic text that provided both a "fantasy portrayal of real life" and a "camp sensibility."¹¹⁶ By embracing pop art and camp (primarily through the utilization of a garish form of mise-en-scène and wooden performance style), the show perversely altered the perception of comics among adult viewers by providing a "comfortable distance from the show's comic book materials."¹¹⁷ As Spigel and Jenkins describe, thanks no doubt to cultural critic Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," the sensibility held particularly high cultural capital at the time. The success of the show's first season pushed Fox to green light a feature film, also titled Batman, and DC to progressively

¹¹⁶ Lynn Spigel and Henry Jenkins, "Same Bat Channel, Different Bat Times: Mass Culture and Popular Memory," in The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media, eds. Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991), 123-124.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

lighten the tone of their comic book offerings.¹¹⁸ Yet, the camp and Bat-craze were temporary. By the time the second season aired, ratings were down and some commentators noted that the show felt “too self-consciously campy.”¹¹⁹ The show would only last three seasons, ending in 1968.

The polysemic strategy utilized by William Dozier, producer of the Batman series has cast a long shadow over the relationship between comics, film, and television. While Will Brooker notes in his cultural study of Batman that the show’s camp qualities stem from many Batman comics of the 1960s, the show would become the source of ire amongst many fans and even some comic book creators.¹²⁰ Perhaps in response to the rapid rise and fall of Batman, the bulk of television programming based on comics to come in its wake removed the polysemic element. Shows went from live-action to animated, aimed strictly at a child audience. As Rossen notes, even the titles of properties, such as the Justice League becoming the Super Friends (1973-1986), were altered to mirror the “homogenized, dumbed-down approach.”¹²¹ Yet, both approaches (the kid-friendly and the camp), were subsequently bound to stylistic remediation in the mind of the Hollywood studios and producers when it came to comic book adaptations. As Frank Miller would later note in the introduction to his Batman: Year One (1987), “If your only memory of Batman is that of Adam West and Burt Ward exchanging camped-out quips while clobbering slumming quest stars Vincent Price and Cesar Romero, I hope this book will come as a surprise. For me, Batman was never funny.”¹²² In film productions based off of comics, the tide turned against stylistic remediation in favor of realism

¹¹⁸ Sabin, 61.

¹¹⁹ Les Daniels, Batman: The Complete History (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 113.

¹²⁰ See Will Brooker, Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2000), 171-248.

¹²¹ Rossen, 52.

¹²² Frank Miller, “Introduction,” Batman: Year One (New York: DC Comics, 1988), Page Number Not Listed.

and verisimilitude, a sentiment best illustrated by a series of production cycles whose case studies I will turn to now.

Part 2: The Superman Cycle (1978-1987)

“[Superman: The Movie will be] 100% straight, no spoof, no satire....the opposite of a cartoon.”-Producer Ilya Salkind.¹²³

“[Superman III is] the kind of movie I feared the original Superman would be. It’s a cinematic comic book, shallow, silly, filled with stunts and action, without much human interest.”-Roger Ebert¹²⁴

Following the success of their films, The Three Musketeers (1973) and its sequel The Four Musketeers (1974), European producers Alexander Salkind, his son Ilya, and their business partner Pierre Spengler, contemplated where to turn their energies and recently acquired financial prosperity. Ilya proposed a film based on Superman, a risky proposition as the only historical precedents had been animated shorts, live-action serials, and low-budget films tied to television properties, none of which had sustained any interest. The producers approached Warner Communications Incorporated (which had been formed in 1971 when Kinney National Company re-organized its entertainment assets including DC Comics) to inquire about the rights to the property. According to Ilya, Warner Bros. head of production Dick Shepherd was more than willing to license the rights. “He said, ‘Ah, sell it. It’s not worth it. It’s not a good property for a film.”¹²⁵ While Warner Bros. was quick to endorse selling the rights, DC was more ambivalent. The publisher had a “desire not to besmirch the image of their All-American Hero,” and proposed contractual clauses in which their approval on certain production aspects must be attained.¹²⁶ With contractual talks stalled, Ilya contacted Warner Publishing (the parent

¹²³ Mary Murphy, “Movie Call Sheet: Superman Film,” The Los Angeles Times, 9 August 1975.

¹²⁴ Roger Ebert, “Superman III Movie Review,” RogerEbert.com, 17 June 1983, <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19830617/REVIEWS/306170302/1023>> (9 April 2010).

¹²⁵ Quoted in Rossen, 60.

¹²⁶ Addison Verrill, “Superman Headed Over Budget but Sitting Pretty,” Daily Variety, 22 July 1977.

company of DC), who signed the rights over to the Salkinds and Spengler for a period of twenty-five years in exchange for \$3 million.¹²⁷ The negotiations also resulted in a negative pick up deal, which required the Salkinds and Spengler to fund the project while Warner Bros. would be given first look for a distribution deal, and a clause that required that the Salkinds accept input from a DC liaison on the production.

For the producers, their film had to be the complete opposite of every adjective that properties based on comics had become infamous for, most notably “cartoonish” and “campy.” The film had to be prestigious and realism became the dominant style. When interviewed by the Los Angeles Times in 1975, Salkind declared that the film would be “100% straight, no spoof, no satire...the opposite of a cartoon.”¹²⁸ Essentially, the Salkinds did not want their project to show any signs of stylistic remediation. This move was not strictly cultural, as the producers needed to secure financing for the film’s massive budget. In order to do so, the producers hired screenwriter Mario Puzo (who had recently won Oscars for his collaborations with Francis Ford Coppola on the first two Godfather films) and cast both Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman (both recent Oscar winners as well) in the roles of Jor-El, Superman’s father, and Lex Luthor, Superman’s arch-nemesis. Notably, the producers would take out an advertisement in the trades announcing nearly every personnel decision made, despite the fact that the film would not hit theaters for another three years.

The producers’ quest for prestige and cinematic realism (“100% straight”) manifested itself both in front of and behind the camera. When the producers feared that even Puzo’s screenplay ventured towards camp, they hired Robert Benton, David Newman (both of whom

¹²⁷ Army Archerd. Title Unknown, Daily Variety, 8 July 1975.

¹²⁸ Mary Murphy, “Movie Call Sheet: Superman Film.”

co-wrote Bonnie and Clyde) and David's wife, Leslie, to re-write the screenplay. With the screenplay in a presentable form (Puzo's original had been 500 pages and was re-structured to serve as the guide for not one, but two films that would be shot simultaneously), the Salkinds and Spengler began the quest for a director who could capture their desired style. After considering a range of candidates (including pre-Jaws success Steven Spielberg and post-James Bond success Guy Hamilton), the producers settled on Richard Donner whose belief in film's inherent verisimilitude led him to hang a sign with the noun and Superman painted on it in the film's production office.¹²⁹

Interestingly, the one exception to Salkind's "100% straight" rule of style is the film's opening. The film begins with a black and white, Academy ratio shot of Action Comics being opened as a voice-over is read. The short sequence, clocking in at roughly a minute, stylistically remediates both the original comic (being directly represented in front of the camera) and the George Reeves television program (paid homage by the choice of black and white film stock and the Academy ratio frame) before fading into the cinematic realism of its primary style of color stock, three-point lighting, and a widescreen aspect ratio. Yet, this stylistic choice appears not to have been made out of kind homage but in the interest of product differentiation. As Ilya Salkind notes, the sequence "was based on that idea of suddenly, bingo, we go from the small format to the big stuff."¹³⁰ The sequence announces that the filmmakers are following the philosophy "Out with the old, in with the new." This sentiment continued in the film's advertising, which often contained the subheading "The Movie" following the title.

¹²⁹ See the documentaries Taking Flight: The Development of Superman and Filming the Legend: Making Superman, both on the Superman: The Movie Special Edition DVD (2001).

¹³⁰ See the commentary by Salkind and Spengler on the 1978 theatrical version, included in the Special Edition DVD.

While the ties between comics, children, and derogatory tastes concerned the Salkinds and Spengler and pushed most film studios away from green lighting films based on such properties, there was a second concern: could expensive but unreliable special effects technology capture the amazing feats depicted in comics without killing any hope of a financial profit? While the Salkinds and Spengler pushed an advertising campaign exclaiming that “You’ll believe a man can fly,” the preliminary results were far from inspiring.

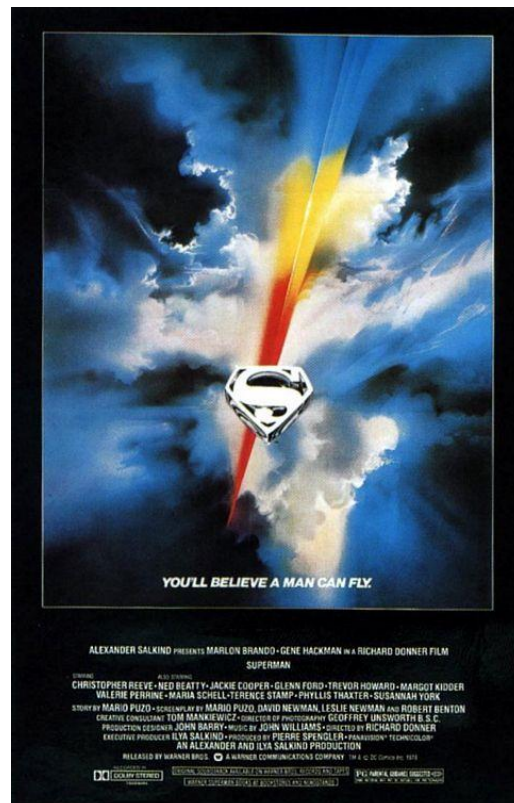


Figure 2.2: “You’ll Believe a Man Can Fly,” a Poster Advertising Superman (1978).

A crew of experienced special effects technicians, including production designer John Barry (Star Wars), Geoffrey Unsworth (2001: A Space Odyssey), and special effects supervisor Colin Chilvers (Battle of Britain), attempted a range of techniques from launching dummies in the air, animation, and a model airplane shaped like the hero to realistically bring the effect to life.

Essentially, the crew needed to invent the technology as the shoot progressed, eventually settling on a set of catapults, wires, and cranes that were subsequently painted out and composited using blue-screen.¹³¹ In contrast with the book and the shorts, the flying sequences needed to be photorealistic; there needed to be a tactile quality visible in Superman's engagement with the world around him while flying.

This desire for verisimilitude is particularly evident in the scene in which Superman saves Lois Lane's life after her helicopter malfunctions. Donner sets the stage with a sequence that shows the actual helicopter spinning around on the roof top of the Daily Planet in establishing shots, only cutting in closer for a fearful reaction from Lois. Similarly, when Superman inevitably appears, he is shot flying up the side of the building in a wide shot. Donner then goes on to shoot the sequence from above, below, and behind, only tightening the framing on Superman after he rescues Lois via a close embrace. Donner's audacity to shoot the sequence from such a medium distance serves two purposes. First, we are close enough to notice that we're looking at an actual person, not a dummy. Secondly, we are given enough of the space around the superhero to realize that we cannot see any sort of wire rig; we believe a man can fly.

As feared, the quest for such awe-inspiring results led to massive budget overages as production on both Superman and Superman II (which were being shot simultaneously to try to alleviate costs) went one year over schedule. Originally budgeted at \$20-30 million, the budget for the two films soared to a reported \$70-80 million. When an audit was later conducted, a significantly higher number was disclosed: \$109 million, all of which was on the producers'

¹³¹ See the documentary The Magic Behind the Cape on the Special Edition DVD for a rather simplistic overview of the technologies used in specific sequences.

shoulders due to the negative pickup deal they had with Warner Bros.¹³² To put this in historical economic context, the production budget for the blockbusters Jaws (1975) and Star Wars (1977) ranged from \$7-\$11 million. In 2006, Forbes produced a list of the most expensive films ever made (adjusted for inflation): Superman ranked 19th, the oldest film on the list aside from Cleopatra (1963).¹³³

The budget overages pushed the Salkinds and Spengler to take corrective actions, some rumored to have been more drastic than others. First, they brought in director Richard Lester, who had worked with them on the Musketeers films, to supervise Donner, as the producers blamed him for the budget overages. Secondly, production on Superman II was halted in order to ensure that the first film could be completed without the budget going further off the rails. Relief finally came when Warner Bros. began infusing money into the project. The studio's injection of capital has been interpreted in several ways. According to Rossen, "Warner Bros. delighted in the overruns, figuring that eventually it could buy out the Salkinds and hoard the return for itself."¹³⁴ The Los Angeles Times tells a slightly different story: the Salkinds allegedly held the film's negative hostage, ransoming it for a \$15 million payment.¹³⁵

Once the film hit theaters in December of 1978, the film became one of the most profitable in Warner Bros.' history by grossing \$300 million worldwide. Moreover, critical reaction to the film was enthusiastic. In the context of the cultural prejudice against comic books and their adaptations, Variety critic James Harwood's review is rather illuminating. Harwood writes that the film overcomes "every challenge in presenting the man who leaps tall buildings in

¹³² Todd McCarthy, "Salkinds' Lucrative Superman Films Also Costly and Litigious," Variety, 8 July 1987.

¹³³ Lacey Rose, "Hollywood's Most Expensive Movies," Forbes, 18 December 2006.

¹³⁴ Rossen, 94.

¹³⁵ Carol Blue and Al Delugach, "Superman: Rare Look at Film Finances," The Los Angeles Times, 3 April 1980.

a single bound” and that the personnel involved will not “let the silliness get out of control. It’s easy enough to just enter their world and adjust to the new realities.”¹³⁶ While the film’s success broke the gridlock on the sequel (which would ultimately be credited to director Richard Lester, not Richard Donner), it also inspired a flood of lawsuits. The night of the film’s premiere, Mario Puzo sued for a greater share of the gross receipts. Two days after the release, Marlon Brando sued for \$50 million, claiming that he was not delivered his 11.3% share of the profits (he would later be paid approximately \$15 million for roughly fifteen minutes of screen time).¹³⁷ Soon, actors Margot Kidder (Lois Lane) and Christopher Reeve (Clark Kent/Superman) literally followed suit.

Despite the judicial wrangling between the Salkinds, Warner Bros., and several members of the film’s cast and crew, when Lester’s Superman II hit theaters in summer of 1981 it was also an economic success. Grossing \$108 million domestically, the film ranked 3rd in the year’s top grossing films (just behind On Golden Pond and Raiders of the Lost Ark). For the most part, reviews were positive but some writers noted that the new director (who had previously directed the Beatles films A Hard Day’s Night and Help! and the comedy The Knack...and How to Get It) had shifted the tone away from Donner’s original film. As Roger Ebert wrote in his review, “the whole film has more smiles and laughs than the first one. Maybe that’s because of a change in directors.”¹³⁸ The success of the film led the Salkinds to begin development on a follow up, advertising the film during the 1981 Cannes Film Festival. After negotiating a contract with Christopher Reeve and authoring a treatment that introduced new characters and subplots taken

¹³⁶ James Harwood, “Superman Movie Review,” Variety, 13 December 1978.

¹³⁷ See McCarthy, “Salkinds’ Lucrative Superman Films Also Costly and Litigious” and Rossen, 105-107.

¹³⁸ Roger Ebert, “Superman II Movie Review,” RogerEbert.com, 1 January 1981, <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19810101/REVIEWS/101010303/1023>> (4 May 2010).

from the comic book series, Ilya Salkind approached Warner Bros., who now had exclusive distribution rights to the film.¹³⁹

According to Rossen and his sources, Warner Bros. was ambivalent about the treatment and “dismissed the narrative as ‘too sci-fi,’ too embedded in Superman lore....was pandering to comics devotees and would require too much exposition for casual audience members.”¹⁴⁰ The narrative and tone of the film took an extreme turn for the worse when Richard Pryor expressed interest in the film and was ultimately cast for a fee of \$4 million.¹⁴¹ According to Superman aficionado, American film producer and screenwriter Tom DeSanto (whose credits include the first two X-Men films), Pryor’s performance brought the franchise to a halt for fans. DeSanto notes “Kryptonite never killed Superman but Richard Pryor sure did.”¹⁴² When the \$35 million dollar budget film, also directed by Lester, was released in summer of 1983, it was initially successful, grossing \$13 million its opening weekend.¹⁴³ However, attendance steadily dropped and the film ultimately grossed \$60 million, a 50% drop from the previous film. While it is just as feasible for the Superman franchise to experience diminishing returns thanks to franchise exhaustion, reviewers, such as Ebert (who enjoyed the first two films), took note of the property’s continued trajectory towards humor. Giving the film a 2.5 star rating, Ebert wrote that the film is “the kind of movie I feared the original Superman would be. It’s a cinematic comic book, shallow, silly, filled with stunts and action, without much human interest.”¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ Rossen, 135.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 141.

¹⁴² See the Starz Channel documentary Comic Books Unbound.

¹⁴³ Catherine Shapcott, “Superman Lands in Calgary,” Variety, 1 September 1982.

¹⁴⁴ Roger Ebert, “Superman III Movie Review.”

Shifting away from the Superman franchise specifically for a moment, I would argue that the difficulties exhibited in the behind the scenes tension of the first three Superman films are emblematic of many comic book films during the 1980s. For instance, the George Lucas produced version of Marvel Comics' Howard the Duck (1986) experienced massive budget overages due to special effect difficulties. Originally budgeted at \$20 million, Lucas's effects firm Industrial Light and Magic was unable to complete a convincing look for the film's protagonist. By the time the techniques were refined and reshoots were performed by director Willard Huyck, the film reached a budget of \$52 million.¹⁴⁵ The infamous film would go on to gross just \$37 million worldwide. Other comic book film properties that also had difficulties compromising budgetary costs with box office grosses included the Salkind's own Superman spin-off, Supergirl (1984, estimated budget of \$35 million, domestic box office gross of \$14 million) and the Brigitte Nielsen and Arnold Schwarzenegger film Red Sonja (1985, estimated budget of \$35 million, domestic box office gross of \$7 million).¹⁴⁶ A symbolic death to the mid-1980s trend in comic book films came when the Salkinds, faced with the disappointments of Superman III and Supergirl, sold the rights to Superman to the Cannon Group for \$5 million, a slight profit (if any, after the final production budgets were audited) on their original investment. By the tail end of the decade, even Superman lost money: Cannon's Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (1987), budgeted at an estimated \$17 million, grossed only \$15 million domestically.

Part 3: The Batman Cycle (1989-1997)

"This [Batman] has nothing to do with the television show." -Producer Jon Peters.¹⁴⁷

"This is a darker Batman, not at all like the campy '60s TV show....Director Tim Burton obviously wants to...tell a more adult kind of story and that adult approach is what I found so

¹⁴⁵ Unknown Author, "An Expensive Duck," The New York Times, 22 August 1986.

¹⁴⁶ Unless otherwise noted, I've taken the production budgets listed at Box Office Mojo, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com>>.

¹⁴⁷ Peter J. Boyer, "Film Clips: As Batman, West is Out of Movie Lineup," The Los Angeles Times, 5 August 1981.

*refreshing about this Batman movie. We have so many films these days that are being made for the teenage audience....”-Gene Siskel, At the Movies.*¹⁴⁸

In October of 1979, less than one year after the success of Superman, producers Michael Uslan and Benjamin Melnick formed Batfilm Productions and successfully secured an option for the feature film rights (including animation but not television) to DC’s other signature property, Batman.¹⁴⁹ According to Uslan, the duo approached nearly every studio in town to attempt to secure financing.¹⁵⁰ Finally finding a potential production company in Peter Guber and Neil Bogart’s Casablanca Records and Filmworks, the four producers were unable to convince Casablanca’s affiliated studio, Universal, to fund the project. While the film would eventually become Tim Burton’s Batman, a massive box office and critical success that would reignite America’s Batmania in a way not seen since the ABC television series, it would take nearly ten years for the producers to get the film financed and produced. Despite the initial success of the Superman films and, when asked about Adam West’s potential involvement, producer Jon Peters’s public proclamation “this [film] has nothing to do with the television show,” the Batman property still carried the cultural stigma of camp associated with the television series and studios were ambivalent to sign on.¹⁵¹ To put it simply, it would take a cultural shift in the public reception of both comic books and Batman to run the industrial red light.

While the juvenilization of comics books following the enforcement of the Comics Code (1954) would face relatively little change for nearly a decade, two industrial shifts from 1954-

¹⁴⁸ Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel, “Batman Review,” At the Movies,

<<http://bventertainment.com/tv/buenavista/atm/reviews.html?sec=1&subsec=170>> (15 May 2010).

¹⁴⁹ Lawrence Cohn, “Batman a 10-Year Journal for Uslan and Melniker; Execs’ Next Game: Monopoly,” Weekly Variety, 7 June 1989.

¹⁵⁰ See the documentary Shadows of the Bat: The Cinematic Saga of the Dark Knight on the Batman Special Edition DVD.

¹⁵¹ Boyer, “Film Clips: As Batman, West is Out of Movie Lineup.”

1964 are worthy briefly noting. First, DC Comics found itself challenged as the top dog of the industry as Marvel Comics (formerly Atlas Comics), under editor Stan Lee, began a “more human approach to its heroes.”¹⁵² Under Lee’s editorial direction, Marvel launched a series of seminal superhero titles in the span of three years: Fantastic Four in 1961, The Incredible Hulk in 1962, and the Amazing Spider-Man in 1963. Secondly, in 1961, DC editor Julius Schwartz began to nurture comic book fandom by printing letters to the editor a move which, according to comic historians Duncan and Smith, provided fans with the ability to “build a community of their own.”¹⁵³ Even if the publishers of the early 1960s lacked the ability to challenge the Code, the move towards increasingly complex heroes and fan community strengthening implies that the publishers were beginning to move beyond children as the main reader demographic.

The public conception of comics being simply a form of entertainment for children (and the Comics Code by extension) would be directly challenged by the late 1960s through two separate trends. First, an influx of young talent began to break into both DC and Marvel many of whom, according to comic historian Bradford Wright, “entered the field as fans with career ambitions in the industry” rather than a stepping stone or a last resort.¹⁵⁴ Thus, comic titles began to deal with social issues such as the battle for racial equality and the Vietnam War in order to “connect with the sensibilities of teens and young adults” rather than just children.¹⁵⁵ This trend manifested itself most significantly in 1970 when Stan Lee, upon the urging of the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, penned a three issue arc for Amazing Spider-Man that depicted a character’s fight with drug addiction. While the Comics Code refused to give the arc its seal of approval, Lee was able to convince Marvel to publish it

¹⁵² Duncan and Smith, 46.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 172.

¹⁵⁴ Wright, 234.

¹⁵⁵ Duncan and Smith, 59.

anyway.¹⁵⁶ The confines of the Code, like its cinematic equivalent a few years previous, were beginning to be shed by the industry.

Secondly, the Code was also challenged by comic book writers and artists not working under the umbrella of DC or Marvel. The emergence of underground comics by such talent as Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, and S. Clay Wilson brought forth a slew of comic books focusing on the counter-culture movement (most notably sex and drugs). However, the underground comics fad would be short-lived, lasting from roughly 1968 to 1973 when the U.S. Supreme Court declared that local communities could determine their own First Amendment standards with regard to obscenity, which ultimately led to a series of busts and prohibitions. Moreover, the underground's influence on the mainstream and American culture at large was relatively limited. After all, underground comics, as the name implies, were not widely sold at newsstands but via head shops. Tellingly, when Marvel attempted to embrace the movement and bring it to a wider public by publishing Comix Book in 1974, it lasted for only five issues.¹⁵⁷

For comic book historian Roger Sabin, the long-term achievement of the underground comic movement was setting the path for what would later become "alternative comics," "a new kind of avant-garde....typified by [Art Spiegelman's] Raw."¹⁵⁸ Between the rise of underground comics, which were only able to find a limited audience through head shops, and alternative comics, a new form of comic book distribution was embraced: direct marketing and the rise of the comic book specialty store. Comics had long been sold through newsstands and pharmacies, which carried limited titles and no back issues, which made some comic titles inaccessible, as readers had no way of catching up on their chosen titles. Moreover, as comics scholar Stephen

¹⁵⁶ Wright, 239.

¹⁵⁷ Sabin, 116-119.

¹⁵⁸ Sabin, 127-128.

Weiner describes, comics were often sold “in bundles of mixed titles on the basis of sale-or-return: publishers agreed to buy back any unsold comics, a commercial system relatively successful in the 1940s and 1950s when popular titles sold over 70 percent of their print run, but less so in the 1960s and 1970s when break-even sales of 30-40 percent were accepted.”¹⁵⁹ A remedy to this unstable distribution practice arose in 1973 when comic book fan Phil Seuling established the Sea Gate Distribution Company, planting the seeds for what would become the direct market system. Unlike the previous system, which essentially boiled down to news vendors ordering books and then sending them back to the publisher after a month for recycling and inventory credit, the direct market system stood as an intermediary between publishers and shops. Through precise ordering based on demand, publishers no longer suffered from printing too few or too many copies and vendors could order based on the tastes of their consumers.

The direct market system aided in establishing comic book specialty stores which were now economically feasible because, as Weiner writes, “Retailers could order a specific number of copies of individual titles for their store, tailoring the comics they bought to the clientele they served, thus minimizing unnecessary expense. If issues on the shelves did pass out-of-date, rather than return them to publishers, retailers stored them in special plastic bags and sold them as back issues. Publishers could offer greater reductions to the retailer on the direct market because they were saving costs by not printing comics that would be returned unsold.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, the direct market system both nurtured fans and encouraged publishers to take risks on titles, as advance orders from retailers kept print quantities in check.

¹⁵⁹ Stephen Weiner, “How the Graphic Novel Changed American Comics,” in The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts, eds. Paul Williams and James Lyons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 4.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Moreover, as scholar Mark Rogers argues, the direct market system also nurtured the comic book industry to the point where it could support two modes of production: industrial and artisan. For Rogers, the direct market transformed the industry “from a Fordist mass medium, which sought to sell comics to as large an undifferentiated audience as possible, to a post-Fordist ‘niche’ medium which sought to maximize its profits by efficiently selling to a narrow audience.”¹⁶¹ Now, thanks to the direct market and its pre-order system, which took the burden of overproduction off of the publisher, the comic book industry could find and cater to those niches without losing their shirts. From the 1930s into the 1970s, the majority of comics were produced in color, on a monthly schedule, with a strong division of labor (see figure 2.3 and 2.4 for an overview of the comic book publishing industry). Now, artisan publishers sprang up, promising writers royalties and ownership rights, which “supported a wider variety of styles and genres....more varied in score and more interesting aesthetically.”¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Mark Rogers, “Beyond Bang! Pow! Zap!: Genre and the Evolution of the American Comic Book Industry,” Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1997, 69.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 87-88.

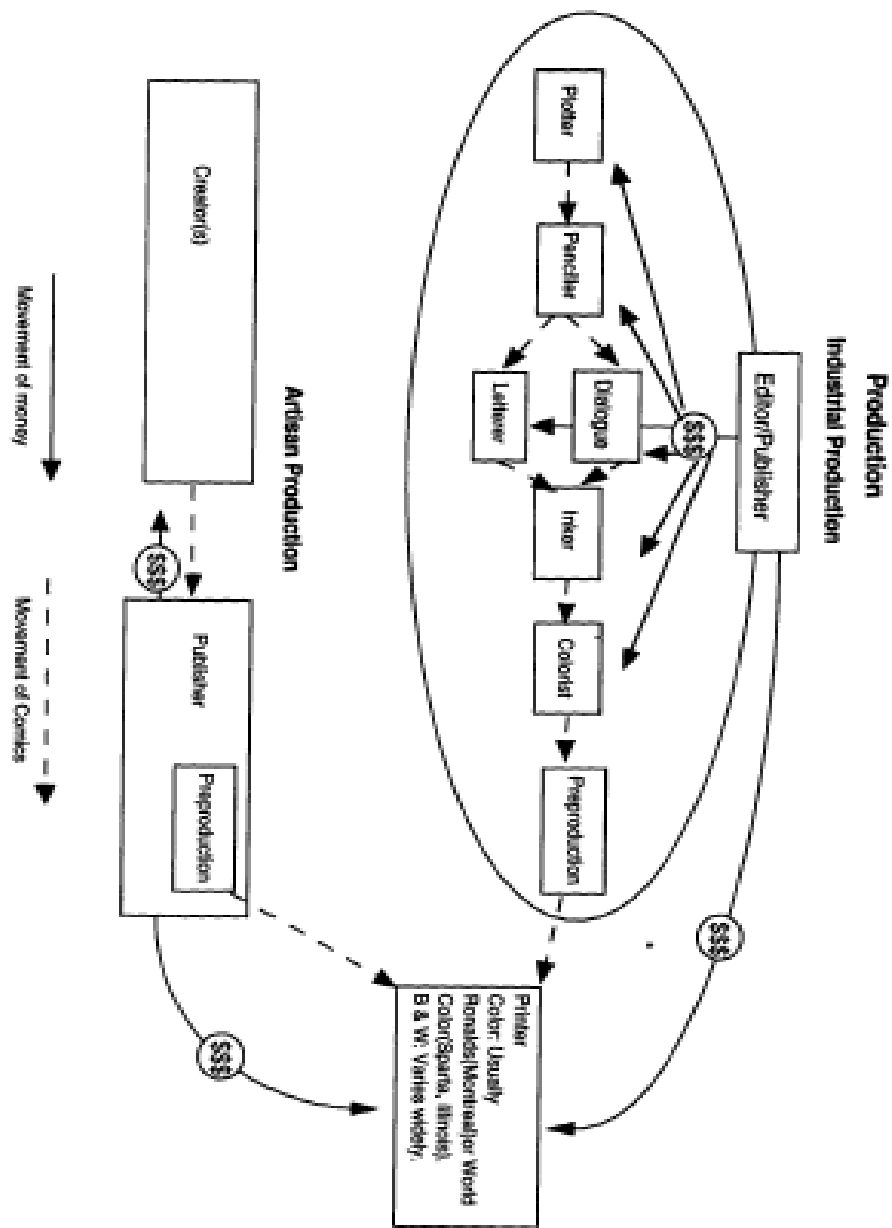


Figure 2.3: Rogers' Map of Comic Book Production.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Ibid., 113.

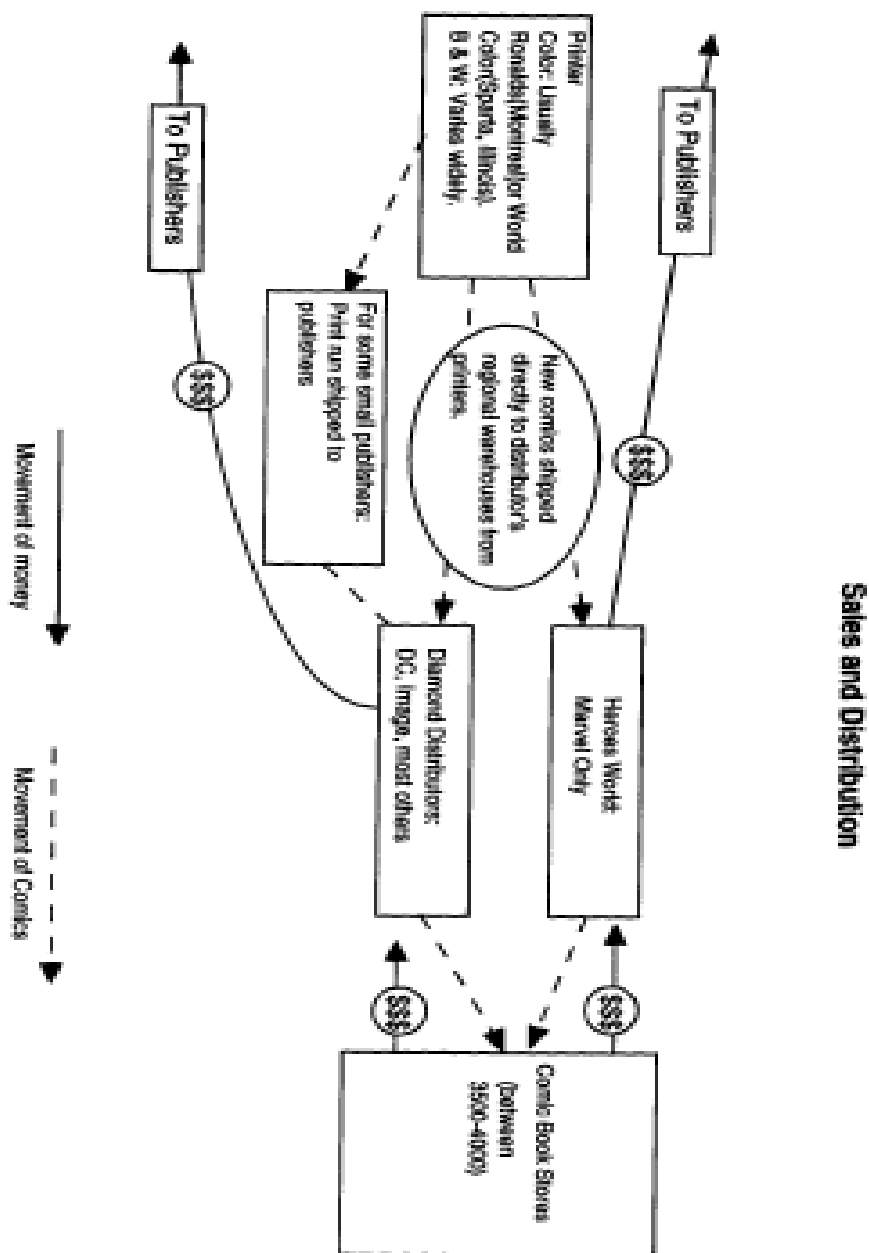


Figure 2.4: Rogers' Map of Sales and Distribution in the Comic Book Industry¹⁶⁴.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 114.

While the direct market system opened up opportunities for competition with DC and Marvel, altering the means of production from Fordist to Post-Fordist, advances in technology also changed the way in which comics were produced. From the 1930s up into the 1970s, comics were colored via a separated 4-color system (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) which, when applied via pre-designated color values, made 64 colors possible. The system was cheap and easy to reproduce and special printing effects like airbrushing were typically only used on covers. Each color separation was placed onto an acetate overlay and combined with the penciled art to complete a photographic negative that was used for burning print plates. This system went through some alterations during the 1980s as artists began to explore full color printing, most notably in magazines like Heavy Metal (1977-, the magazine featured reprints of European comics that had also experimented with full color) but it was not the most economical system for publishers.

Finally, in the 1990s, computer hardware became affordable enough and software, like Adobe Photoshop, made it possible for artists to digitally ink the artwork. According to colorist Steve Oliff, who founded the computerized coloring company Olyoptics, high quality computer color became one of the marketable assets of one of the newly sprung independent publishers, Image.¹⁶⁵ Regardless of the color separation method, once the colorist completed work the proofs were prepared and sent to the printer, with whom the writers, artists, and publishers had little interaction. As Denny O'Neil, a former writer and editor for DC and Marvel informed me

¹⁶⁵ Steve Oliff, "The Image Era Changes Comic Color," Olyoptics.com, publication date unknown, <<http://www.olyoptics.com/test/Timeline1992Page1.htm>> (19 May 2011). Oliff's website is indispensable for a firm understanding of the comic book production process.

in an interview, “We had nothing to do with printers.... We went through a certain process and a month later we had a comic book in our hands.”¹⁶⁶

This convergence of factors including the challenging of the Comics Code by both mainstream publishers and the underground, the resulting shift in narrative material and interlinked aim towards older readers, and the rise of independent publishers and comic book specialty shops can also be tied to the rise of the graphic novel, a mode of comic production that entails a longer, sometimes self-contained narrative. While, according to Duncan and Smith, the mode had been in existence since 1976, Will Eisner’s A Contract with God “garnered wide attention and firmed established” the graphic novel as a literary mode.¹⁶⁷ In 1986, the mode, as exemplified by Art Spiegelman’s Maus: A Survivor’s Tale, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s Watchmen, Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley’s Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, would produce a significant shift in America’s cultural value of comics. Shortly after their releases, Maus would win a Pulitzer Prize Special Award (1992) and Watchmen would win a Hugo Award (1988).

While sales of graphic novels into the early 1990s “were disappointing,” Weiner notes that this sales trend began to change when the comic book industry began to evolve.¹⁶⁸ As Weiner and scholar Julia Round note, the launch of specialty imprint labels like DC’s Vertigo (which would go on to publish Neil Gaiman’s seminal series The Sandman) and the foundation of Dark Horse Comics, both of which focused on self-contained narratives or “limited series” (as Weiner defines, “a story told in a finite number of issues publicized in advance and then

¹⁶⁶ Denny O’Neil, phone interview with author, 19 May 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Duncan and Smith, 70.

¹⁶⁸ Weiner, 7.

collected into a graphic novel”) led to a “statement of literary sophistication.”¹⁶⁹ As Round describes, thanks to DC’s rebranding of Vertigo (which specialized in reconceiving former DC titles for a new and adult audience) including a “digital aesthetic” (computerized production and multimedia artwork such as that of artist Dave McKean), repackaging via the graphic novel (lending comics, which had previously been considered disposable, with a “sense of permanence”), and a literary style (recognition of writers and artists into a the notion of a star creator, self-reflexivity and deconstruction), the distribution of comics began to evolve once again.¹⁷⁰

Sales of comics at specialty stores, “aimed at more dedicated fans...[and] intimidating and consequentially unattractive to the general public,” began to deflate after a comic market crash in the mid-1990s. The format of the graphic novel was more affordable to casual readers and, thanks to its accessibility by collecting various issues into story arcs, comics began to penetrate bookshelves at commercial retailers such as Barnes & Noble and libraries.¹⁷¹ In turn, this consumer friendly form of distribution altered comic readership by widening the demographic. As Round describes, in the early 1990s, DC market research suggested that the average comic reader was “twenty-four and male and very literate.”¹⁷² Vertigo, headed by Karen Berger, attempted to bring female readers to the medium by a “move away from superheroic...[and the embrace of] strong female characters” in addition to what Berger describes as the nurturing of “the emotion and the love and passion” in these narratives.¹⁷³ For

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷⁰ Julia Round, “‘Is This a Book?’ DC Vertigo and the Redefinition of Comics in the 1990s,” in The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts, eds. Paul Williams and James Lyons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 18.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷² Ibid., 23.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Round, “the expending popularity of science-fiction and fantasy television...has seen a preponderance of gender-neutral merchandise in comic book stores. This, together with the move to the bookstores and the variety of mainstream titles available, has resulted in an expanded audience, and the closed-front comic store is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.”¹⁷⁴

I would add to Round’s informed analysis a few other factors that have led to the redefinition of the form and its consequential evolution of comic book readership. During the past decades, comics have also become embraced by the art scene, perhaps due to the work of pop artists like Roy Lichtenstein whose paintings Blam (1962) and Drowning Girl (1963) stylistically remediated by relying on the interaction between text and image so central to comics (textual remediation, as I will later describe) and the construction of images via Ben Day dots (similar to the dot matrix printing process that mimicked early comic book print technology, a form of what I later describe as stylistic remediation) and appropriation artists like Gary Panter. For art historian Jonathan Fineberg, “many artists of the late seventies increasingly looked to ready-made images or ideas as the data of personal experience as well as the raw material of one’s own expressive work....The art world took up the issue of appropriation....as part of a reexamination of the possibility of originality and authenticity in the growing corporate mass culture.”¹⁷⁵

This postmodern movement of using the “low art” of comics, a medium whose rapid rise by the targeting of a juvenile audience “cemented the association of comics and children in the public mind” according to comics scholar Bart Beaty, to redefine a “high art” form like painting may have led to curators Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik to feature comics in their High &

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Jonathan Fineberg, Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2000), 467.

Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1990.¹⁷⁶

Moreover, the increased attention to the form brought by both popular journalism and the beginnings of a stream of English language academic writing aided in the cultural redefinition of comics. Consequently, the form has become the subject of college courses across the United States, one of which was coincidentally taught by Batman producer Michael Uslan. Thanks to the graphic novel and the factors that nurtured its existence, comics lost the thirty year old stigma of simply being children's entertainment to being a form of modern art in less than a decade.

According to Warner Bros. animator, Batman comic book writer, and Batman: The Animated Series producer Paul Dini, the cultural re-appraisal of comic books and, in particular, the success of Frank Miller's dark and gritty portrayal of Batman in The Dark Knight Returns gave Warner Bros. the courage to finally green light the film version.¹⁷⁷ With newfound zeal for the project, the studio and producers handed over the directorial reins to Tim Burton, who had made an impression on the Warner Bros. with his unique visual style when the modestly budgeted dark comedy Beetlejuice (1988, estimated budget of \$14 million) grossed more than \$70 million domestically.¹⁷⁸ Burton, who had worked with actor Michael Keaton on Beetlejuice, was quick to hire the actor as his choice for Bruce Wayne/Batman. In the twenty years since Batman premiered, it seems odd to think of anyone else for Burton's film in retrospect. However, at the time, Keaton's previous screen credits (including Night Shift, Mr. Mom, and Johnny Dangerously) leading into production on Batman spurred many to write him off as merely a comedian. Amongst Batman fans, Keaton's persona was the exact opposite of the grim

¹⁷⁶ Bart Beaty, "Introduction to In Focus: Comics Studies, Fifty Years After Film Studies," Cinema Journal 50, no. 3 (2011), 107.

¹⁷⁷ See the documentary Shadows of the Bat: The Cinematic Saga of the Dark Knight on the Batman Special Edition DVD.

¹⁷⁸ Jane Lieberman, "Short Brings 'Simple' Approach to Complex Special-Effects Work," Variety, 29 April 1988.

hero portrayed in Frank Miller's seminal book. The initial response from readers was famously pessimistic.

From July to November of 1988, press coverage of Keaton's involvement was overwhelmingly negative. On July 3rd 1988, the Los Angeles Times ran a reader letter by Allan B. Rothstein entitled "Mr. Mom as Batman?" that is worth quoting at length:

So Michael Keaton has been cast as Batman/Bruce Wayne...? He might have made a good Joker, but his comic style, which he seems unable to shake (but he can amplify) has doomed this promised "serious" treatment of Bob Kane's character to the same tired, boring level of artificial "camp" that made the TV series a hit yet simultaneously doomed it to an early cancellation. The painful lesson of "Superman III"---when you don't treat venerable superheroes with respect the audience rejects the property---has been ignored in this cynical, opportunistic attempt to capitalize on the success of "Beetlejuice"...Batman has been a popular character for almost five decades---not because he is a figure of comedy, but precisely because he is *not*, especially in the last couple of years....Better they should have filmed Frank Miller's "Batman: the Dark Knight Returns." But that would have required courage, taste, and imagination.¹⁷⁹

Rothstein's reader letter perfectly illustrates a number of issues relevant to this chapter. First, Rothstein's account eloquently offers up what doomed the Batman television show and the later Superman films to failure ("artificial camp") in the eyes of fans. Secondly, his letter implies the cultural shift that comic books experienced during the 1980s (by referencing Miller and the renaissance of "the last couple of years"), reacting against the campiness of the comic by embracing the serious ("precisely because he is *not*"). Finally, Rothstein merges all of these threads under his concern about the casting of comedian Keaton as putting the final nail in the coffin for the film's potential because it would essentially hit the reset button on the cultural shift comic books benefitted from.

¹⁷⁹ Allan B. Rothstein, "Mr. Mom as Batman?," The Los Angeles Times, 3 July 1988.

Tellingly, this cynical account authored by a Batman fan living in North Hollywood was not an anomaly. On November 29th 1988, the Wall Street Journal ran a front-page article featuring a sketch of Keaton next to a sketch of Batman. The headline? “Batman Fans Fear The Joke’s on Them In Hollywood Epic.” The first line of Kathleen A. Hughes’s article reads “Batman’s sidekick, Robin, is officially dead, but for followers of the dynamic duo everywhere, the worst is yet to come: The caped crusader may turn out to be a wimp.” While the bulk of the article is focused on the criticisms of fans regarding the film (many of which echo those of Rothstein), Hughes’s article is notable for a number of reasons. First, given the article’s placement on the front page of America’s most widely read source on business, fans, the film’s “core audience” appear to have gained a great deal of power, forcing Wall Street and Hollywood to reflect on the project. Secondly, the article notes the length to which Warner Bros. was willing to go to address those criticisms “without changing the movie”: Batman creator Bob Kane was hired as a creative consultant, the studio issued a public statement by Tim Burton to the Comics Buyer’s Guide, and a marketing consultant asserts that “I’ve read all the drafts [of the script] and the only times I laughed were at some of the Joker’s comments....Nothing about Batman is a joke.”¹⁸⁰ According to Nancy Griffin and Kim Masters’s account of the careers of producers Jon Peters and Peter Guber, Hughes’s article forced Peters to rush out an early trailer for the Christmas season with the hopes of quelling the angry fan response.¹⁸¹ By the time the film hit theaters in June of 1989, it was clear that Peters and the marketing team at Warner Bros. had succeeded in ensuring that the core audience was appeased: the \$35 million dollar film grossed over \$400 million worldwide.

¹⁸⁰ Kathleen A. Hughes, “Batman Fans Fear the Joke’s On Them in Hollywood Epic,” The Wall Street Journal, 29 November 1988.

¹⁸¹ Nancy Griffin and Kim Masters, Hit and Run: How Jon Peters and Peter Guber took Sony for a Ride in Hollywood (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 170-171.

The visual design of Burton's film, credited to production designer Anton Furst (who won an Oscar for his contributions) is noteworthy for embracing the German Expressionist style. Apartment blocks are not so much refuges from work, but their own, dark prisons (figure 2.4). Skyscrapers, complete with towering spires, lick the moon while providing criminals with ample, shadowed, cover on the serpentine streets below. This is not a cityscape founded on the modern principles of form following function; Gotham City's mangled metropolis is symbolic of the psychological torment of Bruce Wayne (and, by proxy, Jack Napier/Joker). Yet, despite Burton and Furst's stylization, the film owes more to film noir than the design of the comics, even those of Frank Miller (most notably Dark Knight Returns and Batman: Year One), who would fully engage with the noir style in his later Sin City books.



Figure 2.4: Burton and Furst's Gotham City in Batman (1989).

It would be simplistic to describe this embrace of the baroque as only being present in films based upon comic books, nor is stylistic excess simply the product of comic books becoming a culturally acceptable art form. As Justin Wyatt has traced, during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the American film industry sought a way to redefine itself in what is commonly referred to as the "post-classical" period. "Post-classical" normally refers to the

period after 1960, an evolution from the period covered in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and the Mode of Production to 1960. Essentially, scholars like Justin Wyatt, Thomas Schatz, and Geoff King have argued that industrial shifts in the mode of production (the shift from studio control to the rise of the producer and the production company, the end of vertical integration via the Paramount Decree, the rise of independent productions, and the influence of other media forms and international cinemas, etc.) have fundamentally altered film form. As Schatz writes, "Equally fragmented [he is referring first to the Hollywood film industry] perhaps, are the movies themselves, especially the high-cost, high-tech, high-stakes blockbusters, those multi-purpose entertainment machines that breed music videos and soundtrack albums, TV series and videocassettes, video games and theme park rides, novelizations and comic books."¹⁸²

For Wyatt, the post-classical cinema is synonymous with what he terms "high concept." As Wyatt writes, "The term 'high concept' originated in the television and film industries, but it was soon adopted by the popular presses, who seized the term as an indictment of Hollywood's privileging those films which seemed more likely to reap huge dollars at the boxoffice [sic]."

For Wyatt, "high concept can be considered as a form of differentiated product within the mainstream film industry. This differentiation occurs in two major ways: through an emphasis on style within the films, and through an integration with marketing and advertising."¹⁸³

Essentially, for Wyatt, Schatz, and to a much lesser degree, Geoff King, the post-classical style has produced a shift away from narrative causality to spectacle and from spatial continuity rules to more fractured formal means of establishing cinematic space. Yet, as Bordwell later

¹⁸² Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in Film Theory Goes to the Movies, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), 10.

¹⁸³ Justin Wyatt, High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 7.

examined in his pseudo-sequel to The Classical Hollywood Cinema entitled The Way Hollywood Tells It, high concept “remains a fairly isolated phenomenon...[the Classical Hollywood System] is at once solid and flexible.”¹⁸⁴ Moreover, as King acknowledges, “the classical style has not been abandoned. Far from it. The conventions of continuity editing and cause-effect narrative structure remain largely in place.”¹⁸⁵ Essentially, and I elaborate upon this in the following chapter, I view stylistic remediation as a formal variable in what Bordwell refers to as the “bounds of difference” of the classical system: post-classical stylistic flourishes that essentially bend to the rules of the continuity system.¹⁸⁶

While fans and audiences were onboard with Burton’s surreal and foreboding stylistic interpretation of Batman, critical response was mixed. While many critics applauded the film’s production design, some critics were perplexed by Burton’s adult approach to the material. The opinions voiced in Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel’s At the Movies foreshadow the problem the studio would face over the franchise in the coming years.

SISKEL: As has been reported, this is a darker Batman, not at all like the campy ‘60s TV show...Director Tim Burton obviously wants to...tell a more adult kind of story and that adult approach is what I found so refreshing about this Batman movie. We have so many films these days that are being made for the teenage audience....

EBERT: There’s a great deal of hostility and anger in this film...It’s not a film for children...It’s not for kids, it’s an extremely disturbing film.¹⁸⁷

While Warner Bros. was quick to reassemble their winning formula of Keaton, Burton, and an adult approach for Batman Returns (1992), the studio was disappointed with the results.

¹⁸⁴ David Bordwell, The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 7, 13. Note that Bordwell is working off of a passage written by André Bazin in the second-half of the quote.

¹⁸⁵ Geoff King, New Hollywood: An Introduction (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 5.

¹⁸⁶ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 70-84.

¹⁸⁷ Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel, “Batman Review.”

Budgeted at \$80 million, the film grossed \$266 million worldwide, a 40% slide in returns against a 225% increase in budget in comparison to the first film. While not a box office failure by any stretch of the imagination, the studio felt that Burton had gone too far to the dark side, making the material questionable for children, which was reflected not only in the box office receipts but in another significant factor: merchandising. Given the huge success of the first film and the Batmania it inspired for toys, t-shirts, and the like, merchandisers were brought into pre-production on the film in order to get toys ready in time. While it is unclear how much Burton's approach may have affected merchandise sales (the approach did cause McDonalds to distance themselves from a Happy Meal tie-in), a documentary covering the making of the film implies that the film's reception as not being kid friendly motivated the studio to push an already exhausted Burton out of the director's seat for the third film.¹⁸⁸

With Burton relegated to an executive producer's role on Batman Forever (1995), Joel Schumacher was brought in as his replacement. Hoping to make a film that would re-capture a wide audience, Joel Schumacher saw the Batman comics of the 40s and 50s as an opportunity to move away from Burton's gritty portrayal of Batman in favor of a tone that would be bigger and lighter.¹⁸⁹ Replacing Keaton, Schumacher cast Val Kilmer in the title role and, most notably, cast rising comedian Jim Carrey as one of the film's villains, the Riddler. Budgeted at \$100 million, the kid friendly approach seems to have worked, as the film grossed \$336 million, an increase of 26% from the previous film and, notably, McDonalds stayed involved with their marketing tie-in of crystal drinking glasses.

¹⁸⁸ See Anne Thompson and Pat H. Broeske, "Hawking Batman," Entertainment Weekly, 10 July 1992. See also the documentary Shadows of the Bat: The Cinematic Saga of the Dark Knight on the Batman Returns Special Edition DVD.

¹⁸⁹ See the documentary Shadows of the Bat: The Cinematic Saga of the Dark Knight on the Batman Forever Special Edition DVD. The special edition DVDs are notable for mixing depreciating commentary based on the franchise with small doses of justification.

Yet, Schumacher and the studio went beyond abandoning the claustrophobia of Burton's noir style. Schumacher's noteworthy alterations included adding nipples to the costumes of Batman and Robin, an animal skin suit for Tommy Lee Jones's Two-Face (figure 2.5), and a Batmobile that appears to have been draped in a zebra skin. Moreover, the director ditched Burton's preference for absolute blacks and overwhelming shadows in favor of electric neon colors (green in particular) and garish mise-en-scène.



Figure 2.5: The Garish Costumes of the Riddler and Two-Face in Batman Forever (1995). Critics, including the New York Times' Janet Maslin, noted the stylistic shift and believed it to be an appeal to the youth audience. As Maslin writes, after noting the film is "so clearly a product that the question of its cinematic merit is strictly an afterthought," that Schumacher's approach panders "more directly to a teen-age audience than either Batman or Batman Returns did."¹⁹⁰ Fans, despite the film's glowing box office returns, were livid with Schumacher's change in direction.

As best documented by Will Brooker's Batman Unmasked, fans read Schumacher's approach as analogous with the camp qualities of the Batman television series. As Brooker

¹⁹⁰ Janet Maslin, "New Challenges for the Caped Crusader," The New York Times, 16 June 1995.

writes in his analysis of fan internet postings regarding Schumacher's two entries into the series, Batman Forever and Batman and Robin (1997), "emerging from these posts is a dislike of the 'campiness' Schumacher brought to the movies, and in turn fear of any return to the 1960s television aesthetic."¹⁹¹ As Brooker describes, the camp style has a basis in the Batman comics themselves of the 50s and 60s and fans have engaged in a form of historical revisionism over the years regarding this aspect of Batman, given that the camp style became intertwined with a homophobic reaction against Fredric Wertheim's infamous critique of what could be perceived as the hero's less-than-traditional relationship with Robin.¹⁹² Essentially, what differentiates the Batman films from the Superman films is that the industry and fans appear to have accepted stylization (exemplified by the success of Burton's films) as an alternative to verisimilitude. However, the limit to that acceptance amongst fans ends where style takes on the negative connotations of camp, trading dark cityscapes and high-contrast lighting for neon soaked buildings, costumes featuring nipples, and villains unsuccessfully cloaked in flamboyant clashes of color.

These experiments in the stylistic remediation of comics into film died a relatively quick death. One of the film's pre-dating Schumacher's flamboyant stylization, Warren Beatty's Dick Tracy (1990, which will be analyzed in more detail in the following chapter), left Walt Disney's Touchstone Pictures \$57 million dollars in the red. I would not suggest that the film failed at the box office because of cultural tastes regarding Beatty's attempt at stylistic remediation, as the film was applauded for its style by most critics. The film's failure, I would venture to guess, had more to do with a lack of cultural awareness amongst the public that resulted in lower

¹⁹¹ Brooker, 300-301.

¹⁹² Ibid.

attendance, which was unable to counter-act Beatty's costly stylistic experiment which carried a production budget of \$101 million dollars.¹⁹³ More red ink followed for stylistically experimental films, including Rachel Talalay's Tank Girl (1995), based on the British comic by Alan Martin and Jamie Hewlett, which grossed just \$4 million domestically against a production budget of \$25 million. Essentially, stylistic remediation, as I will discuss in the following chapter, can be a valuable means of roping in the main demographic for these films, the comic book fans, but it can also be a costly gambit. As I have already suggested, in order to fully account for this formal phenomenon, we cannot ignore the economic and cultural contexts of these productions, which I have and will attempt to account for via a combined focus on production budgets, critical and consumer reaction.

In 1997, like Superman before it, Batman experienced a tremendous shift in on-screen popularity. While it would make a profit once international sales were calculated, Schumacher's Batman and Robin, budgeted at \$125 million, grossed just \$107 million domestically (\$238 million worldwide). The film fell 62% from opening in first place during its first week of release to third place in its second, prompting top executives at Warner Bros. to admit that the film "was a great disappointment.... It's just a crappy piece of product. Jesus Christ couldn't have saved this picture."¹⁹⁴ Warner Bros., under the impression that they had gone back to the well too quickly and too often with the property (as the Schumacher films came out only two years apart), decided to hold up production on another sequel. As co-chairman Robert Daly was quoted after

¹⁹³ Claudia Eller, "Tracy Cost Put at \$101 Mil.," Variety, 22 October 1990.

¹⁹⁴ Charles Fleming, "Naked Hollywood: Bat Out of Hell," L.A. Weekly, 8 August 1997.

the failure of Batman and Robin, “It’s not over. It could be three more years, or even four... There *will* be another Batman.”¹⁹⁵

Part 4: The High Fidelity Cycle (2000-2009)

While this section jumps two years from the failure of Schumacher’s film to the release of Bryan Singer’s X-Men (2000), it would be incorrect to conclude that there was a drought of comic book films. 1998 to 2000 brought some successful theatrical films, such as Blade (1998). However, 1997 was marked by schizophrenic highs and lows for the genre. While Men in Black (1997) and Spawn (1997) turned a profit for their respective studios, both Batman and Robin and the Shaquille O’Neal vehicle Steel tanked, the latter grossing a measly \$1.7 million against a production budget of \$16 million, leaving DC’s parent company, Warner Bros., with some red ink on its hands. There are two significant shifts industrially during this period worth briefly noting that both appear with Singer’s film. First, Marvel Comics had gone through a cycle of highs and lows during the 1990s. Having relied on licensing property rights for profits, Marvel’s status as not being tied to a movie studio via horizontal integration (this would change in 2009 with the Disney acquisition) was a compromised system. According to Derek Johnson, 26% of Marvel’s revenue came from licensing in 2002.¹⁹⁶ Yet, by licensing away the rights, the publisher robbed itself of the ability to capitalize on the success of its own properties in other media. For instance, the rights for X-Men were sold to Twentieth Century Fox for “a few hundred thousand dollars” while the four films (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009) went on to gross \$1.4 billion dollars worldwide.¹⁹⁷ Essentially, thanks in part to the successes of the X-Men franchise

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Derek Johnson, “Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?: Marvel’s Mutation from Monthlies to Movies,” in Film and Comic Books, eds. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 72.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

at Fox, the Spider-Man (2002, 2004, 2007) franchise at Columbia Pictures, and the Iron Man (2008, 2010) films at Paramount, Marvel was able to rebound from bankruptcy into a \$4 billion dollar deal with the Walt Disney Company.

Secondly, the film industry began culling talent for many of these films from previously overlooked venues. The directors of three Marvel franchises, with the exception of X-Men: The Last Stand (2006) director Brett Ratner, all started their filmmaking careers in the independent sector. Bryan Singer, the director behind the first two X-Men films and later Superman Returns (2006), jumped to notoriety for his neo-noir The Usual Suspects (1996). Sam Raimi, the director of the Spider-Man trilogy, began his career in the Roger Corman tradition with The Evil Dead films (1981, 1987, 1993). Jon Favreau, director of the Iron Man films, began his career behind the camera as the writer of Swingers (1996) and the director of Made (2002). This trend is also exemplified in Warner Bros.'s Batman reboot franchise (2005, 2008), helmed by Memento (2000) director Christopher Nolan and Sin City (2005), co-directed by El Mariachi (1992) director Robert Rodriguez.

Contributing to this, as comic book writer/artist Jim Steranko has noted, the writers, directors and producers involved are “real comic fans...playing with material that they grew up with and they had a love for.”¹⁹⁸ Secondly, no doubt a by-product of these directors’ own fandom, many of these projects involved comic book personnel creatively. While Bob Kane had been brought in as a creative consultant on Burton’s Batman, the practice became more commonplace during the 2000s. Notable examples include Guillermo del Toro working with comic book writer and artist Mike Mignola as a consultant on Blade II (2002) and the films based on Mignola’s own series, Hellboy (2004, 2008), Rodriguez co-directing Sin City with

¹⁹⁸ See the Starz documentary Comic Books Unbound.

writer and artist Frank Miller, and Zack Snyder working with illustrator Dave Gibbons on Watchmen (2009). The result of this hiring practice is what scholar Bob Rehak has begun to describe as a high-fidelity trend that has taken the form of stylistic remediation.¹⁹⁹ It is important to note, at this point, that high-fidelity adaptations or fan directors do not necessarily make for a better or more successful film, as the case studies of such films as Dick Tracy (1990) and The Spirit (2008) will describe. To assume a fan-made product would be automatically successful with critics and the box office would merely embrace an intentional fallacy, glossing over the complex reception these films experience.

In the majority of cases, this high-fidelity trend manifests itself in the adaptation of tone and particular storylines (for instance Batman: Year One and Batman: The Long Halloween in Batman Begins), concerned more often with fidelity to the original content than the form. However, at its most extreme, this high-fidelity approach, which is often a product of technology, respect for a given property, and fear of negative fan reaction, can also involve the remediation of style. While I acknowledge that it is problematic to fully segregate form and content in specific cases (and I engage with how they intersect in the following chapters), there does appear to be two separate trajectories in how filmmakers grapple with comic book form by either ignoring it or embracing it. In the case of Watchmen, which Rehak specifically analyzes, Warner Bros. and director Zack Snyder attempted to situate the film within the fan community as a faithful adaptation by playing up the stylistic linkages between the film and its source. Snyder repeatedly acknowledged using the comic as a storyboard for the film and Gibbons was hired as a creative consultant, which was highlighted both at San Diego Comic-Con (where Gibbons produced a teaser poster just for the event in 2007 and was a key participant at panels and the DC

¹⁹⁹ Bob Rehak, "Watchmen's Frames of Reference: Digital Production Tools and the High-Fidelity Comic Book Adaptation," presentation at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, 18 March 2010.

booth in 2008) and on the DVD's special features. A similar rhetoric surrounds the film Sin City. For instance, in the DVD documentary How it Went Down, Robert Rodriguez describes how he wanted to make "*Frank Miller's* [emphasis added] Sin City" by using green screen to "take cinema and try to make it into this book." Significantly, Rodriguez approached Miller with early footage not only to get his blessing but to bring him onboard as a creative talent, as green screen allowed the filmmakers to draw, not simply to film. This historically specific moment of the high-fidelity approach to stylistic remediation is the subject of the following chapter, thus making further elaboration here redundant.

Chapter III: Stylistic Remediation in Comic Book Films

Defining Terms: Filmic Adaptation, Remediation, and Stylistic Remediation

While I briefly alluded to the terms filmic adaptation, remediation, and stylistic remediation in the introduction to this endeavor, the focus of this chapter, stylistic remediation in comic book films (also known as adaptations) and the industrial factors both motivating and suppressing it, and the importance of it in outlining concepts mobilized in later chapters requires thoughtful dissection. Quite simply, filmic adaptation involves the transformation of both the form and content of a previous text from another art form onto film. These adaptations, when subjected to textual analysis, can occupy a spectrum of modification but the goal on behalf of the majority of filmmakers producing an adaptation is often fidelity to the original text.

Remediation, as examined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, is the representation of one medium in another. While adaptations can engage in the process of remediation if, in the words of Bolter and Grusin, the original medium is “appropriated or quoted” in the adaptation, remediations, unlike adaptations, do not rely on a previous text from another art form for material to translate.²⁰⁰ Rather, remediations translate the art form itself. Thus, while the vocabulary of adaptation theory (transformation, borrowing, etc.) could be used to describe remediations, it is ultimately confusing.

With regard to this analysis, I argue that remediation better describes the formal relationships between comics and film. While remediation undoubtedly occurs in adaptations of previous texts (be it Sin City the film or the graphic novelization of Batman), the focus of this chapter, an analysis of adaptations, only gives us a piece of the puzzle. This is because remediation, unlike adaptation, is often both artistically cyclical and a socioeconomic process.

²⁰⁰ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Remediation: Understanding New Media (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 44.

Film adaptation theory deals with the translation of an existing text (Frank Miller's Sin City comic) from another medium onto film (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez's Sin City film), remediation as a theoretical concept analyzes the translation of aspects of one medium not tied to a specific text (film noir lighting) into another medium (film noir lighting as remediated by Frank Miller's drawings in the Sin City comic) which can ultimately be reacted to by the original form (the remediation of Frank Miller's drawings inspired by film noir lighting in Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez's film). I have described this process previously as stylistic remediation, my own term, in order to emphasize my attention to the remediation of formal and stylistic attributes that are specific to one medium or the other and to distance the concept from adaptation, which often involves discussion of content as well as form.

To summarize, here are definitions in order to clarify the relationships between these concepts. I should note that stylistic remediation and its three sub-fields will be the focus of this chapter and while I offer a brief definition below for clarity, they will be fully elaborated upon throughout the chapter.

FILM ADAPTATION: The translation of both the form and content of a previous text from another art form into film. This process of translation is linear as described by this equation: Form and Content of the Original Text ~ Form and Content of the Film Adaptation. If the translation acknowledges the original medium in a conscious interplay, the adaptation is a remediation (as described by Bolter and Grusin).

REMEDIATION: The representation of one medium in another (Bolter and Grusin). Remediation differs from adaptation as a critical concept in two ways. First, remediation has a broader applicability, as it is not bound to describing the translation of a specific text, but a previous medium into another. This process can be either linear or cyclical, as

described by the following equations: Original Medium ~ New Medium; Original Medium ~ New Medium ~ Original Medium. The process of remediation can potentially go on indefinitely.

STYLISTIC REMEDIATION: The representation of formal or stylistic characteristic(s) commonly attributed to one medium in another. Like remediation, stylistic remediation differs from adaptation as a critical concept in the two aforementioned ways (it is not tied to a specific text, it can be both linear and cyclical). Moreover, with specific regard to the media forms of comic books and film, stylistic remediation can be further defined across four subcategories.

1. **GRAPHICAL REMEDIATION:** A form of remediation that addresses the difference between film's representational roots in photography and the comic's representational roots in the graphic arts.
2. **SPATIAL REMEDIATION:** A form of remediation that addresses the difference between the composition of space taken by film and comics. While both forms utilize sequential images, the frame, and the juxtaposition of different viewpoints to relay a narrative to an audience, film typically provides the viewer with one composition (the frame on the screen) to decipher while the reader of a comic must read several (multiple panels on a page, sometimes a viewer must even read one page against another page).
3. **TEMPORAL REMEDIATION:** A form of remediation that addresses the difference between film's correlation between time and movement ($1/24^{\text{th}}$ of a second) and the fluidity of time in the comic book (complicated by the individual panel not depicting an instant, the temporal translation between

panels, and the form of an active spectator who provides closure to the temporal sequence).

4. TEXTUAL REMEDIATION: A form of remediation that addresses the unique relationship between image and text in the comic. Specifically, comics often make use of captions to relay information regarding time and space (although their use can vary) and balloons to relay dialogue or internal thought. This is concerned with the containers for text and their relationship to the image, not the contents themselves. Sound is another aspect that could potentially fall under textual remediation. However, it is not being discussed here but in the final chapter of this study. I will later describe it as “aural remediation.”

With these terms defined and differentiated, let us begin examining the concept of stylistic remediation and its subcategories within the category of film adaptations based on comic books.

Part 1: An Early Attempt at Graphical Remediation in Dick Tracy (1990)

“Although there are ontological differences between cinema and comics, and it is not possible for a live-action film to replicate the formal properties of comics, Dick Tracy demonstrates how the cinema can adapt the conventions and characteristics of a comic.”-Michael Cohen.²⁰¹

“[Dick Tracy] is comic strip art, a flip-book of impudent images that is faithful in detail to [Chester] Gould’s boisterous graphics.”-Richard Corless.²⁰²

According to comic scholar Richard Marschall, adventure comic strips were a relatively new phenomenon in 1931 when Chester Gould placed a portfolio for a detective strip which was then titled “Plainclothes Tracy” on the desk of New York Daily News and Chicago Tribune

²⁰¹ Michael Cohen, “Dick Tracy: In Pursuit of a Comic Book Aesthetic,” in Film and Comic Books, eds. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 13.

²⁰² Richard Corless, “Extra! Tracy is Tops,” Time, 18 June 1990, 75.

publisher Joseph Patterson.²⁰³ According to Marschall, Patterson may have been inspired by the rise of gangster activity in Chicago to revamp the strip with Gould into the Dick Tracy (Gould's tenure on the strip went from 1931-1977) we are more familiar with today: hardened, gritty.²⁰⁴ Despite making its debut in the smaller Midwestern town of Detroit in the Mirror, "public interest and acceptance were swift...Dick Tracy soon became a national phenomenon" spawning radio shows (1934-1948), serials (1937, 1939, 1941), and feature films under RKO (1945-1947).²⁰⁵ As of 2011, with writer Mike Curtis and artist Joe Staton at the helm, Dick Tracy was still running as a syndicated strip distributed by Tribune Media Services.

A film based on Gould's Dick Tracy, like DC's Batman, gestated for a long period of time in Hollywood green light limbo. Originally optioned in the mid-1970s, the property remained in development hell for nearly a decade. Optioned by Paramount in 1977 while the Hollywood trades were buzzing about the upcoming Superman, the film started off in the hands of producer Art Linson and director Floyd Mutrux with a tentative start date of summer 1978, a start date that was not met.²⁰⁶ By 1983, John Landis was attached to direct, but was removed after his indictment for the involuntary manslaughter in the deaths of Vic Morrow and two children during production on Twilight Zone: The Movie (1983).²⁰⁷ Three years later, in January of 1986, Paramount president Ned Tanen dropped the film because the budget was "way, way too high."²⁰⁸ By the end of the year, producer Warren Beatty had moved the film to Disney.²⁰⁹ The film was finally green lit by Walt Disney Pictures in 1988, eleven years after the rights had been purchased. The film carried a rumored budget of \$30 million and Beatty served

²⁰³ Richard Marschall, America's Great Comic-Strip Artists (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 227.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 229.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Gregg Kilday, "Film Clips: Dick Tracy to Make Film Debut," The Los Angeles Times, 26 November 1977.

²⁰⁷ Unknown Author, "Film Clips," The Los Angeles Times, 29 June 1983.

²⁰⁸ Marilyn Beck, "Paramount Drops Dick Tracy Project," Daily News, 15 January 1986.

²⁰⁹ Unknown Author, "Insider," Los Angeles Magazine, October 1986.

as producer, director, and star.²¹⁰

While Hollywood budgets are normally kept secret under firm lock and key, making it difficult to surmise what precise factors had driven the costs of Beatty's film up so dramatically, it seems reasonable, given the budgets on the Superman films and many other contemporary examples, that special effects are a major factor in budget overruns. While Beatty's film did not draw upon CGI or teams of computer engineers to match the style of Gould's original strip, a large team of designers including prosthetic makeup technicians (John Caglione Jr., Doug Drexler), a cinematographer (Vittorio Storaro), a production designer (Richard Sylbert), and visual effects technicians (Michael Lloyd and Harrison Ellenshaw) was assembled by Beatty to ensure that the film drew upon "Chester Gould's original strips as a 'bible,' ...[giving everything] a generic look," a costly endeavor in itself.²¹¹ This analysis, following the lead of Michael Cohen's thoughtful essay "Dick Tracy: In Pursuit of a Comic Book Aesthetic," will specifically analyze the mise-en-scène produced for the film by Beatty's design team with regard to how filmmakers began to grapple with the ontological difference between the comic image and the film image.

In order to simplify this relationship for the sake of a meaningful albeit brief discussion, I will be ignoring several nuances that the other examples analyzed in this chapter will illustrate. Chiefly, I am not considering the difference between comics and film with regard to their presentation of the image, be it the spatial difference between the singular frame that films draw upon or the multiframe that comics utilize (see The Hulk), the temporal difference between moving and static images (see 300 and Watchmen), or the relationship between text and image that is present in the comic but not film (see American Splendor). This analysis is purely

²¹⁰ David Ansen, "Tracymania," Newsweek, 25 June 1990.

²¹¹ Dick Tracy Press Kit, 14.

focused on the graphical representation of the *mise-en-scène* contained in the film frame and the comic book (in the case of Dick Tracy, comic strip) panel and how the filmmakers have grappled with this one subtype of stylistic remediation.

The differences between the comic and the film image began with the historical roots of their present day forms. Film, born out of advances in photography, often has the unique ability, even when manipulated, to provide the viewer with an indexical tie to reality. As André Bazin notes in his famous essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” photography and film both have an essential “objective character” due to the fact that “there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent” between the originating object and its reproduction.²¹² For Bazin, photography and film form an image of the world “automatically, without the creative intervention of man.”²¹³ While Bazin’s analysis ignores that a photographer or filmmaker manipulates the objects before they are photographed and sometimes after with post-production techniques, the filmic image strikes the viewer as being naturalistic. Even if we become aware of the manipulation of the image, that only lends itself to the acknowledgement of a reality beyond the diegetic world presented: the reality of the film production. Comics, on the other hand, are rooted in the parodic tradition and often draw upon deformation and caricature in the rendition of even the everyday, providing the reader with a feeling of artifice. This presented artifice, like painting, is translated by the viewer as being the product of a living agent who forms an image that, to comic theorist Pascal Lefèvre, has “subjectivity...built into the work.”²¹⁴

²¹² André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in What is Cinema? Volume I, trans. Hugh Gray. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 13.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Pascal Lefèvre, “Incompatible Visual Ontologies?: The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images,” in Film and Comic Books, eds. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 8.

Essentially, live-action film is photographic while comics are iconographic.²¹⁵

As noted in the introduction, comic book theorist and practitioner Scott McCloud's map of the pictorial language of the comic proves useful here. McCloud, utilizing the form of the pyramid, constructs his pictorial map on a two-axis system.²¹⁶ The horizontal axis, which he dubs "The Representational Edge," is marked by "Reality" at the far left while "Meaning" stands at the far right. Thus, at the extreme left of the pyramid would be film while icons in their purest sense would stand at the far right.

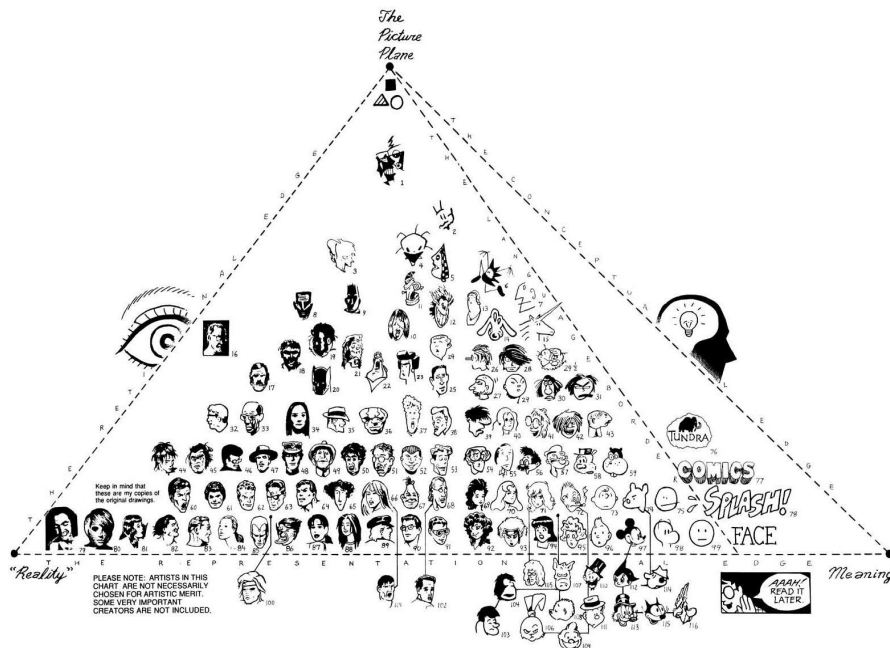


Figure 3.1: McCloud's Pyramid of Representation.

Essentially, as images ascend the pyramid, they become more abstracted, rendering them neutral on the "Representational Edge." The filmmaker of a live-action comic book (or strip) has a choice to make. He or she can completely ignore the iconographic qualities inherent in the specificity of the comic medium (for example, Christopher Nolan's Batman films) or he or she

²¹⁵ See also Scott McCloud's "The Vocabulary of Comics" in Understanding Comics.

²¹⁶ For simplicity sake, I am ignoring the second axis, "The Retinal Edge," and the three-dimensional quality of McCloud's pyramid by simply dealing with the Representational Edges, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 50-51.

can attempt to translate the graphical style of the original comic, compromising the two modes of representation. Beatty's film falls into the latter category by, in the words of Michael Cohen, deploying "a combination an 'aesthetic of artifice' ...[and] 'cartooning.'"²¹⁷

For Cohen, the film's "aesthetic of artifice" is derived from "exteriors [that] are noticeably clean and do not display the deterioration expected in a real environment, and the *mise-en-scène* of the interiors is also devoid of all surplus details and decoration beyond the denotation of the basic set dressing." As Cohen goes on to outline, Beatty and his production team utilized matte paintings, animation, and colored lighting to abstract the sets built on the studio back lot. The result, as the following three screenshots exemplify, is a stripped down world environment (in stark contrast to a film like Burton's Batman) that attempts to displace the photographic with the iconographic.



Figure 3.2: The Generic Quality of Warehouse Mise-en-Scène in Dick Tracy (1990).

²¹⁷ Cohen, 13.



Figure 3.3: *The Lack of Detail of Tracystown in Dick Tracy (1990).*



Figure 3.3: *“Police” Cars in front of the “Police Station” in Dick Tracy (1990).*

There are specific qualities worthy of analysis in the above screenshots. First, notice the aforementioned “stripping down” of the detail in the mise-en-scène. The scene from featured in figure 3.1 is set in a warehouse. Yet, the only visual markers that we’re provided with to clue us into the type of setting the film is presenting us with are a bunch of wooden crates (lacking any sort of label painted or burned into the wood such as “Acme Exports”) and the exposed structure of the building, most notably the steel girders running along the ceiling. The warehouse lacks

any sense that it has been inhabited; we do not see any spilled crate contents spread across the floor, oil or grease stains on the wood, nor even a forklift crammed into a corner of the room. The setting is dressed generically, the crates are iconographic and used in an almost metonymic sense, all of which encourage a certain paradox: the set design of Dick Tracy grabs our attention because it is nondescript.

The same quality marks the mise-en-scène of figures 3.2 and 3.3. In figure 3.2, we are presented with one of the film's key settings: the Club Ritz, owned by antagonist "Big Boy" Caprice (Al Pacino), who has coerced "Breathless" Mahoney (Madonna) into becoming the center of his musical entertainment roster. Yet, compared to the other buildings on the block, the Club Ritz is given few external distinguishing marks (aside from a neon sign that remains unlit in the darkness). Figure 3.3 portrays one of the film's other key settings: the police department where Dick Tracy (Beatty) works. Yet, the cars, station, and lamp post are simply decalated with the word "Police" (or "Police Station"). Unlike real police cars and stations, the setting does not provide us with the name of the city the film is set in. Opposed to Bazin's formulation of photography and, by extension, film, our ontological view of the world of Dick Tracy does not affect us as the product of a non-living agent. Compare the above film stills to a strip of Chester Gould's vision of Dick Tracy (figure 3.4).



Figure 3.4: *The Iconographic Qualities of Gould's Dick Tracy (1951).*

In this strip, we notice the roots of the film style Beatty and company embraced. The truck in the second to last panel, like the crates, lacks any form of identifying marks. Notice the background of the two final panels as well. Like the *mise-en-scène* of the film, they have been abstracted. Moreover, the color pattern of the industrial flatbed (yellow and red) matches that of the crates in the warehouse in figure 3.1. Gould, needing to produce episodes of the strip on a daily basis, could not afford to spend his time detailing the world of *Dick Tracy*.

For Cohen, the “aesthetic of artifice” involves both the stripping down of the *mise-en-scène* of any unnecessary details as well as the manipulation of the film’s color palate. Comic strips and books were originally defined by their colors (hence one reason why Richard Outcault’s “The Yellow Kid” became the known title of *Hogan’s Alley*). The color of comics in the late 1800s was a novelty in the otherwise black and white pages of the newspaper, yet it was also limited by printing processes available at the time, most notably the four color process. According to McCloud, the four color process “restricted the intensity of the three primaries [red,

blue, and green] to 100%, 50%, and 20%, using black ink for the line work....To counteract the dulling effects of newsprint and to stand out from the competition, costumed heroes were clad in bright, primary colors and fought in a bright primary world!”²¹⁸ Similar to their philosophy of directing the level of detail in the *mise-en-scène*, Sylbert, Storaro, and company also embraced the color palate that had defined Gould’s strip. Sylbert restricted the palate to six colors (red, blue, yellow, green, orange, and purple) in addition to black and white, all of which were held at the same shade. Thus, Dick Tracy’s signature coat would be the exact same color as a passing Yellow Cab. According to Michael Lloyd, one of heads of the Buena Vista Visual Effects Group at the time, “Warren was pushing a non-comic book look originally. Our problem was that we had something that was supposed to have somewhat of a comic book feel to it, yet with real live people and real physical things. In an ordinary picture, we would paint a real surrounding; but what we had to come up with for Dick Tracy was a stylized look that not only worked with reality but blended into a stylized world. We bent the rules in the use of color and architecture.”²¹⁹

While Beatty and his production team graphically remediated the minimalism of Gould’s panels and the color palate the writer/artist was bound to because of printing processes, they also attempted to remediate the graphics of Gould’s caricatures, with particular attention to the peanut gallery of villains, through the extensive use of makeup and prosthetic devices. Cohen describes this process as “cartooning” and that it “complements the ‘aesthetic of artifice’....[through] filming effects, such as sped up footage, or the outrageous behavior of the characters themselves....[including their] design.”²²⁰ Focusing just on the design of the characters, let us

²¹⁸ McCloud, 186-188.

²¹⁹ Glenn Campbell, “Crimestoppers Textbook,” *Cinefex* 44 (November 1990), 32.

²²⁰ Cohen, 20.

return to McCloud's pyramid in figure 3.1 for just a moment. Gould's Dick Tracy is featured on the pyramid, occupying the fourth line from the bottom in roughly the middle of the "representational edge," not abstracted the point of just being lines and colors on a page but far from a realistic representation. Tracy's face is defined by a series of rigid lines: chiseled jaw, nose like the beak of an eagle, and a clean cut head of hair. Yet, for the film, Beatty did not utilize Gould's visualization as a guide for his own character. In the film, Dick Tracy was simply Warren Beatty in a yellow coat and hat. Perhaps this was due to vanity, as actors and actresses as well as studios are sometimes reluctant to undermine the qualities of what makes an actor or actress a star. On the other hand, Gould's design of his hero stands in stark contrast to how he portrays his villains. Compare Gould's depiction of Dick Tracy in figure 3.4 to the chart of villains below (figure 3.5).



Figure 3.5: *The Villains of Gould's Dick Tracy (1941-1945).*

Compared with his depiction of Tracy which, despite the emphasis of the jaw and nose, is fairly naturalistic, Gould's design of the villains owes more to caricature. Their evil nature has manifested itself on their physical form. Unlike Tracy, who is untarnished by unnatural flourishes and superfluous detail, Flattop is marked by his deformed trademark cranium, droopy eyes, fish lips, and a spackling of freckles. Similarly, Pruneface's eyes and mouth blend into the disgusting crevices of his face, nearly hiding the two openings that serve as his nose. Moreover, unlike Tracy, Gould's physical depiction of the villains provides them with the source of their identities. The Brow has a large forehead; Flattop's skull looks like a deflated football. Essentially, if Beatty was following the lead of Gould's character design, it is fitting that Tracy

be portrayed naturalistically while the villains provide an opportunity for stylistic exaggeration.

Now, take a look at this summer 1990 cover of Entertainment Weekly, featuring the main Tracy villains from the film (figure 3.6).

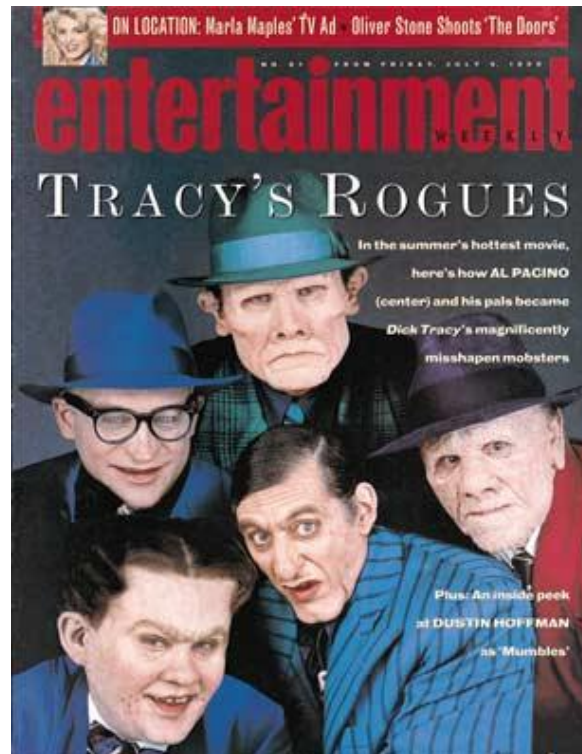


Figure 3.6: *The Villains of Beatty's Dick Tracy (1990).*

Keeping with our analysis of Gould's villains, on the bottom left of the page, we see Flatfoot (William Forsythe) and, on the far right, is Pruneface (R.G. Armstrong). Forsythe's makeup, designed by John Caglione Jr., nearly matches the abstract caricature of Gould's strip. Forsythe dons the signature crown of the character, the strange, three-part, eyebrow has been translated over, even the freckles around the bottom of the mouth, around the nub of a chin, have been retained in the character design. Similarly, the canyons of Pruneface's face and his slicked back hair, not visible in the above picture, have made the transition to celluloid. While Caglione's makeup does not quite match Gould's elongation of the character's face and the lack of definition of eyes and nose that comes with it, it is admirable work all the same and effectively

abstracts Gould's gallery of villains from the reality that Tracy's character brings to the film. Beatty's film, through the use of color palates, general art direction, and make up design, attempts to graphically remediate both the personal style of Gould (his caricatures and the generic approach to setting) and the general, media specific style of the comic at this time (the four color printing process).

Despite Sylbert's public proclamation to the industrial trade the Hollywood Reporter that the remediation was a "very inexpensive way to do the picture" and that the film did not have the \$60 million budget of Batman (which was actually budgeted at \$35 million), Variety reported a very different story.²²¹ According to another industrial trade, the production budget of the film was disclosed to be nearly \$101 million, initially leaving Disney with a momentary \$57 million dollar loss.²²² After a lukewarm domestic opening weekend of \$22 million (Batman had grossed \$40 million on its opening weekend one year earlier), Disney studio head Jeffrey Katzenberg later expressed disappointment with the film's box office grosses, writing in a memo that the film "made demands on our time, talent and treasury that, upon reflection, may not have been worth it."²²³ The film would eventually gross a total of \$162 million, including both domestic and international territories, perhaps turning a small profit after print and advertising costs are factored in. Unlike the Batman and Superman films that may have inspired the executives at Disney to grant the green light, Dick Tracy would not become a franchise; a sequel would not be made.

In charting stylistic remediation between comics and film and the establishment of the cultural and industrial contexts it functions within, it is essential not to indulge a critical blind

²²¹ Ray Bennett, "Showing Off: The Unique Look of Dick Tracy," The Hollywood Reporter, 28 January 1991.

²²² Claudia Eller, "Tracy Cost Put at \$101 Mil.," Variety, 22 October 1990.

²²³ Larry Rohter, "Hollywood Abuzz Over Cost Memo," The New York Times, 2 February 1991.

spot of engaging with just critical and box office successes and or failures. In retrospect, it seems strikingly self-destructive that Disney would allow Dick Tracy to go so far over budget with the expectation of producing a film to rival Batman. Admittedly, both films are based on pre-established comic book properties, but that is a rather superficial analogy when we consider the place of both texts in the American cultural sphere. Quite simply, the two properties could not be further apart (I am not attempting to argue for quality of one property over another here, I am simply trying to illustrate the difference between the two properties culturally). While Dick Tracy began his run in 1931 and Batman debuted in 1939 and both comics had been visible into the 1980s and 1990s, I would argue that Dick Tracy lacks the quality and extent of visibility that Batman has. Admittedly, Dick Tracy remains, to this day, a weekly syndicated comic strip. On the other hand, Batman appears in a handful of books that are published on a monthly basis, has a large fan base, and, as previously argued above, helped contribute to the cultural re-evaluation of comics. Tellingly, in contrast to Batman, I was unable to find any reports of angry Dick Tracy readers reacting to Beatty's casting choices.

Finally, in the New Hollywood era of films that Tracy and Batman are a part of, many feature high tech gadgets (which are very helpful in selling toys and other merchandise) and either contemporary or fantastic/futuristic settings with the objective of roping in a youth audience. Dick Tracy is set in the 1930s and, despite the cool two-way radio watch, retirees probably identified with the period more than American youth. Oddly, Beatty seemed to acknowledge this rift in demographic appeal in his personal correspondence. In a response letter to a Ms. Broeske, Beatty writes that "I like [the strip] because it takes me back to a time in my

childhood when...values seemed clearer.”²²⁴ Essentially, the casting of Beatty (who was 45 at the time) and setting of the film seemed to be aimed at an adult audience while the story and style of the film was aimed at children. How could such a schizophrenically toned film attract a wide audience?

While the film’s reception at the box office and general critical opinion of the film could be described as lukewarm at best, there was a significant amount of praise for the production design of the film. As Roger Ebert noted in his review of the film, “This is a movie in which every frame contains some kind of artificial effect. An entire world has been built here, away from the daylight and the realism of ordinary streets....[The film] reflects the innocence of the comic strip....[and] is one of the most original and visionary fantasies I’ve seen on a screen.”²²⁵ Similarly, Vincent Canby noted that he preferred Beatty’s film to Batman because the style of Tracy, in his opinion, was deployed for a greater purpose.²²⁶ The film would be nominated for Best Cinematography, Best Costume Design, and Best Sound, going on to win Academy Awards for Best Art Direction, Best Makeup, and Best Original Song. Essentially, film critics and trade organizations (like the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) are receptive to stylistic remediation and, in some cases, try to place it into larger discussions regarding film form for readers and potential viewers. Yet, it is normally the economic success, not the critical success, of these endeavors that spurs further exploration. For instance, as of this writing, Dick Tracy, followed by The Dark Knight, has the honor of being the comic book film with the most Oscar wins, an odd distinction considering, in the words of critic Keith Phipps, it has “become at best a

²²⁴ Letter from Warren Beatty to Ms. Broeske, dated October 11th 1988, found in the Dick Tracy clipping file at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ Margaret Herrick Library.

²²⁵ Roger Ebert, “Dick Tracy Movie Review,” RogerEbert.com, 15 June 1990, <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19900615/REVIEWS/6150301/1023>> (21 June 2010).

²²⁶ Vincent Canby, “A Cartoon Square Comes to Life in Dick Tracy,” The New York Times, 15 June 1990.

hazy memory.”²²⁷

Part 2: The Remediation of the Multiframe in *Hulk* (2003)

“[Hulk] opening acknowledges its roots in the comics....its heavy use of split screens is especially effective as a sort of allusion to (though not really a recreation of) the look and feel of the comics, whose pages are divided into multiple panels.”-M. Keith Booker.²²⁸

“Okay, earlier Roger [Ebert] gave his thumbs up to Hulk, and I’m giving it a strong thumbs-up. Much of the credit has to go to director Ang Lee for giving the story a dark elegance and, as Roger noted, jazzing it up with those dozens of creative cuts, wipes, split-screens, and dissolves. This is a superhero movie that really captures the essence of comic book pop art.”-Richard Roeper.²²⁹

Under the shadow of the Comics Code, Marvel and DC Comics solidified their position at the apex of American comic book publishing. According to comics historian Roger Sabin, “no American publisher was more adaptable to the new conditions than Marvel....In a move intended to take on DC Comics at their own game, a new line was masterminded by editor-writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby: between them, they decided that an interesting new direction would be to make the personalities of the heroes more of a focus than the plots.”²³⁰ Their first creation, The Fantastic Four (1961-), was a huge success, becoming Marvel’s top seller and “an unprecedented barrage of fan mail.”²³¹ Lee and Kirby followed up Fantastic Four with the creation of The Incredible Hulk (1962-), which, despite being a “damp squib at first” slowly became one of Marvel’s most popular characters.²³² By the mid-60s, Hulk was ranked by an Esquire poll alongside Bob Dylan and Che Guevara as a favorite revolutionary icon; he would

²²⁷ Keith Phipps, “Remember Dick Tracy?” Slate.com, 21 June 2010
<<http://www.slate.com/id/2255746/pagenum/all/#p2>> (29 June 2010).

²²⁸ M. Keith Booker, May Contain Graphic Material: Comic Books, Graphic Novels, and Film (Westport: Praeger, 2007), xxxi.

²²⁹ Roger Ebert and Richard Roeper, “Transcript of Hulk Review,” Ebert & Roeper, 11 June 2003.

²³⁰ Roger Sabin, Comics, Comix, & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art (New York: Phaidon, 1996), 69.

²³¹ Bradford Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 207.

²³² Sabin, 74.

eventually inspire a television series starring Bill Bixby (1977, 1978-1982).²³³

After lukewarm box office receipts on Dick Tracy and the backlash against Joel Schumacher's formally flamboyant Batman & Robin (1997), stylistic remediation in comic book films seemed to be thrown to the wayside until the release of Ang Lee's Hulk in the summer of 2003. The film, like Dick Tracy before it, spent several years in pre-production limbo. In 1996, Variety reported that producer Gale Anne Hurd was attempting to get the film made for approximately \$100 million dollars.²³⁴ One year later, the trade reported that Joe Johnson was attached to direct as soon as Jonathan Hensleigh completed the screenplay.²³⁵ A few months later, Hensleigh replaced Johnson at the helm and Universal, faced with the actuality of a \$100 million budget, pulled the plug. According to Variety, CGI was to blame, as the "inherent...demands and subsequent costs have slowed" production.²³⁶ Moreover, according to Kevin Feige, head of production at Marvel Studios, the temporal rift between films based on DC Comic properties (Superman, Batman) and Marvel properties (X-Men, Hulk) was partially a result of poor licensing moves, as Marvel was not affiliated with a studio like DC was, and due to technological demands. As Feige notes, "The technology hadn't been there."²³⁷ In 1999, after dumping Johnson and Hensleigh, the studio went back to the drawing board.²³⁸ In the winter of 2001, director Ang Lee, coming off his successful film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000), officially signed onto the project, a rather odd choice. When asked why she was drawn to Lee, producer Hurd replied that "Between the character work that is at the core...and the ability to create something visually that we've never seen before, there are not a lot of people who bring

²³³ Wright, 223.

²³⁴ Army Archerd, "Just for Variety," Variety, 3 April 1996.

²³⁵ Unknown Author, "From Hulk to Rocket," Variety, 8 July 1997.

²³⁶ Chris Petrikin, "U Has Hulk Take a Seat," Variety, 2 March 1998.

²³⁷ See the Starz documentary Comic Books Unbound.

²³⁸ Steve Brennan, "Universal is Hulking Up," The Hollywood Reporter, 10 May 1999.

that to the table.”²³⁹ Budgeted at \$137 million, the film went into production in spring of 2002.

As the above epigraphs from M. Keith Booker, a comic book scholar, and Richard Roeper, a prominent film critic, testify, one of the defining stylistic devices of Lee’s film is his remediation of what comic book theorist Thierry Groensteen (drawing off the concept of Henri Van Lier) has described as what is “essential about comics”: the multiframe, or the grid of the page that links together individual panels.²⁴⁰ For Groensteen, who is reluctant to provide a formal definition of the comic (he declares that it is impossible to establish a definition that takes into account the varied forms that comics can take), the multiframe represents two fundamental characteristics. First, that comics are composed of interdependent images (or, as McCloud has written, sequential images). Secondly, that the first relationship that panels have with one another is that they share space within the multiframe.²⁴¹ This formal attribute tends to be underestimated by some media studies scholars and industrial personnel, such as the chief creative officer at Marvel, Avi Arad. For Arad, “Comic books are basically...highly detailed storyboards.”²⁴² However, as Maus author Art Spiegelman has been quick to note and my subsequent analysis will confirm, “Comics are not storyboards for movies at their best.”²⁴³

While both film and comics rely on sequential images as a means of shaping a narrative, they are both presented by the filmmaker/author and engaged with by the viewer/reader in significantly different ways. The sequential images of film take the place of one another on a presented surface. Unless a filmmaker utilizes a split-screen, we are never presented with two separate compositions within the same space. Moreover, as David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger have documented, the prevailing stylistic norms of both Classical Hollywood

²³⁹ Zorianna Kit, “Lee Crouching with Uni Hulk,” The Hollywood Reporter, 12-14 January 2001.

²⁴⁰ Groensteen, 28.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² See the Starz documentary Comic Books Unbound.

²⁴³ Kerry Lengel, “Graphic Novelist Art Spiegelman Keeps the Faith,” The Arizona Republic, 29 January 2006.

Cinema (1928-1960) and contemporary Hollywood cinema (as outlined by Bordwell in his subsequent volume, The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies) reflect a desire for continuity of space and time. For Bordwell and his associates, through analytical editing techniques like the 180 degree rule and establishing shot patterns, Hollywood practices a form of filmmaking that “conceal[s] its artifice” and relays a “comprehensible and unambiguous” story that “possesses a fundamental emotional appeal.”²⁴⁴ Essentially, when the system of classical norms is functioning at its best, the jarring effect of juxtaposing a new shot on the same space where an earlier one appeared is negated.

The multiframe of the comic and the multiplicity of images it presents make that sensation impossible to the comics reader. Admittedly, a similar set of classical norms – many of which have been drawn from Western reading habits and the visual arts at large – and have been described by Will Eisner in his manual Comics & Sequential Art. However, as Eisner notes, “The most important obstacle to surmount is the tendency of the reader’s eye to wander.”²⁴⁵ The reader of the comic, unlike the spectator of a film, is entered into the role of a collaborator (that is not to say that the spectator of a film is passive) with regard to digesting the panels individually, placing them into a sequence, and inferring the spatio-temporal relationship between them. For instance, the 180 degree rule (and spatio-temporal continuity in general) is often neglected in comics due to the fact that comics, unlike film, define such relationships via space rather than time. Quite simply, if a comic book artist religiously followed the classical norms Bordwell and his colleagues have outlined, the industrial norm of thirty-six pages would quickly balloon to hundreds, if not thousands of pages.

²⁴⁴ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 3.

²⁴⁵ Will Eisner, Comics & Sequential Art (Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1985), 40.

The reader's role as a collaborator who provides continuity to discontinuous, sequential images intersects with Scott McCloud's definition of comics. For McCloud, the reader takes the individual panels, separated by the gutter, arranged into sequences and performs an act of closure. As he writes, "If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar."²⁴⁶ While McCloud is careful to note that film sometimes relies on the same techniques (the Kuleshov effect being a key example of closure), closure provides the glue to every multiframe of panels. In order to illustrate these stylistic principles a bit more concretely, I have provided five panels (figure 3.7) from the first page of writer Stan Lee and penciler Jack Kirby's *Incredible Hulk* #1 (1962).



Figure 3.7: Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Incredible Hulk* (1962).

In the above five panels, Lee and Kirby essentially give us a dialogue scene that introduces three major characters: the hero, Bruce Banner, one of the title's antagonists, General Thunderbolt Ross, and the hero's love interest, Betty Ross, the daughter of the General. Moreover, we are given the conflict between Banner and General Ross: Bruce is ambivalent to test the gamma ray

²⁴⁶ McCloud, 67.

bomb, which the General scoffs at. Because the sequence takes place in the same setting, the break between the panels in the multiframe is largely temporal. We notice these temporal breaks both by how General Ross crosses a room during the transition from panel one to panel two and how the dialogue progresses. If we are to assume that cinema has an engrossing quality for the viewer, as suture theory has gone on to explore, comics are fundamentally different from both formal and phenomenological standpoints. We are not folded into the action; there is no camera to align our identification with. Rather, it is our role, as the reader, to fill in those temporal gaps from panel to panel via the act of closure, which provides continuity where there is none. On the topic of the classical continuity system, if we are putting the sequence in dialogue with cinematic norms, it is fitting to note the norms that Lee and Kirby ignore. While they start the sequence with the equivalent of an establishing shot before moving closer to the characters, the entrance of Betty in panel four catches us by surprise (we do not see her in the first panel!) and there is a jarring break in the 180 degree rule, apparent in the transition from panel one to panel two. As noted above, strict adherence to the classical norms of cinema is not feasible in comics due to a shortage of space.

When Ang Lee was hired to direct Hulk, he attempted to match each unique device of the comic with a cinematic means of expression. As he notes at length in an interview with Brent Simon, this fundamental stylistic difference between the media forms of film and comics was not an artistic obstruction but an opportunity. Lee states that “The comic books give me a good excuse to try something I’ve always wanted to without being distracting. I think the time is right---especially for kids, the way they grow up with television, cartoons, the Internet, and video games....The principle is very similar to when you open up a comic book: your eyes go somewhere, you choose what you see---not necessarily like a regular movie-viewing experience

in which filmmaker's editing mandates that you watch it a certain way."²⁴⁷

It is odd, considering Lee's statement when placed alongside his remediation of the multiframe in Hulk, how much of the final presentation is the product of a media specific, formal, compromise. While the technique is glimpsed in an early montage of young David Banner (Paul Kersey) experimenting with genetic modification, we are given its first prolonged use when Banner, in a fit of rage, causes an explosion that ultimately kills his wife. Lee's use of the multiframe, in this instance, is limited to the two separate panels, as exemplified by the images below (figures 3.8-3.9).



Figure 3.8: David Banner Starts the Reactor in Two "Panels" of the Hulk (2003).

²⁴⁷ Brent Simon, "The Monster Within," Entertainment Today, 20-26 June 2003, 6.



Figure 3.9: David Banner Hears Alarm Bells Across the Multiframe of Hulk.

As you can see, particularly in figure 3.8, Lee's use of the multiframe is illusory, at least with regard to how it functions spatiotemporally in the narrative. Rather than giving us two images portraying separate instances of time (or space) as a comic book would, Lee gives us two images of one space (at least, in figure 3.8) that are taking place simultaneously. As he cuts from the same diegetic space (the laboratory) in figure 3.8 to two separate spaces in figure 3.9, the same temporal rule applies: the announcement Banner hears on the right side of the screen is in sync with the one being delivered on the left side. Essentially, Lee is not drawing upon the unique aspect of the comic panel, "encapsulation," in which each panel represents a separate moment in time to which the multiframe provides the structure. Rather, he is providing us with an embellished use of the split-screen: a glimpse of two separate spaces at the same time.

This example of Lee's use is indicative of all the uses of split-screen (and its less graphically-defined instances, such as the scene in which Bruce Banner experiments on the frog

in the opening fifteen minutes of the film).²⁴⁸ Even when Lee adds additional “panels” to the multiframe in the film, they take place simultaneously rather than sequentially (see figure 3.10).



Figure 3.10: A Barrage of Simultaneous Panels Inhabiting the Multiframe of Hulk.

The act of closure, which to McCloud is the grammar of comics, is performed for the viewer by the soundtrack. Of course, the viewer may momentarily need to initially compromise the two frames but, as Bordwell notes in his latest study, the overall style of Hulk (Bordwell is analyzing breaks of the 180 degree rule, not Lee’s use of the multiframe) can be categorized as “intensified-continuity.”²⁴⁹ Following Bordwell’s implied argument, Lee’s stylistic flourishes are both generically motivated (the multiframe is a formal attribute of the comic book and given that Hulk is based on a comic, it is fitting that it looks like one) and function within the normal practices of the continuity style (the multiframe is used infrequently and sound provides the continuity between spaces). This may be an odd conclusion, given Lee’s ambition to move beyond “a regular movie-viewing experience in which filmmaker’s editing mandates that you

²⁴⁸ In the majority of the cases explored in this volume, the scenes and formal attributes under analysis are not atypical for the film as a whole. To draw on an elementary analogy, they are not the formal equivalents of oases in a vast, classically defined, desert.

²⁴⁹ David Bordwell, The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 173-174.

watch it a certain way.”²⁵⁰

While Bordwell’s analysis is often considered monolithic and overreaching and, in some cases, it can be, his analysis of Hulk is re-enforced by the direction Lee gave his creative team. Garson Yu, the visual designer for the film, noted in an interview that Lee “wanted me to develop a new visual language incorporating multiple cameras to tell a story. In film, it’s difficult to show multiple events simultaneously on one screen. Ang wanted to develop a concept that incorporated how we normally read comic strips. He wanted to present the film in one giant comic page.”²⁵¹ As Yu notes, Lee drew upon the design of the multiframe and its facility for presenting multiple images for multiple, *simultaneous* events. Quite simply, as the film’s editor Tim Squyres observed, it simply is not stylistically feasible to remediate both the form and the function of the multiframe on film. As Squyres notes, “You can’t just take the layout of a comic book and put that on a movie screen. It just doesn’t work... You’d end up wasting all your screen.”²⁵² Like the impossibility of comics mimicking the continuity system, media specificity still proves an obstacle when the relationship between the two forms is inverted, at least in the case of the multiframe. Not even the big media conglomeration of NBC Universal, funding a leading special effects firm, George Lucas’s Industrial Light & Magic, with a \$1.5 million production budget for the comic book transitions alone can alter that.²⁵³

For digital theorist Lev Manovich, comics and its formal attribute of the multiframe represent a type of montage that was neglected by the cinema when the temporal montage of the continuity system became the norm: spatial montage. Manovich, writing in 2001, sees the

²⁵⁰ Simon, “The Monster Within.”

²⁵¹ “Hulk,” The Art of the Title Sequence, 11 May 2009, <<http://www.artofthetitle.com/2009/05/11/hulk/>> (23 August 2010).

²⁵² See The Unique Style of Editing Hulk documentary on the special edition DVD.

²⁵³ David Bloom, “Hulk Edit Nails Feel of Comics,” Variety, 23 June 2003.

possibility of a return to spatial montage thanks to the evolution of two factors. First, the development and refinement of computer effects technologies, which he believes will make live-action cinema just a “raw material” that will become one of the many elements of a “digital cinema,” which are held together via the tools and techniques of “animation.”²⁵⁴ Secondly, screen culture has evolved thanks to computers (which present the user with multiple windows). As Manovich writes, “I believe that the next generation of cinema---*broadband cinema*, or *macrocinema*---will add multiple windows to its language. When this happens, the tradition of spatial narrative that twentieth-century cinema suppressed will reemerge.”²⁵⁵ While Manovich’s conclusions are, in retrospect, suspect (for instance, television could be argued to have pre-dated digital spatial montage, a connection he does not explore), his theories serve as a main tenet of digital cinema theory and cannot be ignored. The question I would like to briefly explore here, as noted in the hypotheses guiding this dissertation, is, given the case of Ang Lee’s use of the multiframe in Hulk, are we there yet?

Initially, given my stylistic analysis of the multiframe and its differing functions in both the comic and the film, the answer would appear to be no. Lee’s use of the multiframe not only follows the norms of continuity established by a cinematic device, the split-screen, but it is drawn upon briefly and infrequently. Yet, does the spatial montage of Manovich’s *broadband cinema* or *macrocinema* need to completely adhere to the norms of either form (film or comics) in order to have emerged? When he later describes spatial montage in depth, Manovich writes that “The logic of replacement, characteristic of cinema, gives way to the logic of addition and coexistence. Time becomes spatialized, distributed over the surface of the screen. [Guided by

²⁵⁴ Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 302.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 324.

the principles of the computer's graphical user interface (GUI), spatial montage] follows the logic of simultaneity.”²⁵⁶ Given this elaboration, it seems in the case of Lee's Hulk that spatial montage is present to a degree, particularly in the presentation of simultaneous spaces that Manovich links with the GUI. However, the passage of time is not spatialized in the multiframe sequences of the film; the device functions as a capsule for spatializing two separate spaces. The beginning stages of an exploration of spatial montage may be present in Hulk but it has yet to take root.

While Lee's film may have established some important groundwork regarding the practice of spatial montage, one could also argue that it crippled its development by being such a financial disappointment. While Universal had embraced Lee and his unique stylistic approach by providing him with a production budget of \$137 million which, factoring in prints and advertising costs probably bumped the film closer to \$200 million (According to Lee, “In a smaller movie you cannot afford that kind of freedom in creating images.”), the film grossed just \$245 million worldwide.²⁵⁷ To put that in perspective, the previous summer Sony Pictures released Spider-Man (2002), which carried a comparable budget, and took home nearly \$822 million dollars worldwide.²⁵⁸ While the film had a laundry list of factors that undoubtedly contributed to its lackluster opening, most notably that Lee's approach is too artsy (both in terms of form and content) to be popular and too superficial to appease his art cinema audience (there is an exhausting desert action sequence that seems to add a half an hour to the 138 minute film), his attempts to stylistically remediate the comic were put to blame by the industry's trade

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 325-326. Note that the financial disappointment of the film could also be attributed to a bootleg of the film that made its way onto the internet two weeks before the film's release.

²⁵⁷ Ang Lee, director commentary on Hulk DVD.

²⁵⁸ Unless otherwise noted, I've taken the production budgets listed at Box Office Mojo, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com>>.

presses. Following the film's opening weekend, Variety editor Peter Bart wrote an editorial stating that the industry at large was ambivalent to engage with this type of formal exploration. As Bart noted, "I've talked to several of the studio production chiefs about all this and find myself empathizing with their reasoning. They know they have to deliver 'event pictures' but they dread sitting through dailies each afternoon that look like a series of comicstrips [sic]."259

Lee's innovations, like those of Warren Beatty and his team on Dick Tracy (1990), were noted by critics. As Andrew Sarris wrote in his review, "I myself didn't particularly mind these ["editing tricks of simultaneity"]...because at the very least, they kept the movie from becoming tedious and turgid, a fate from which its recent rivals in the genre do not entirely escape."260 Unlike Dick Tracy however, the creative team behind Hulk would not be recognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; the visual effects designers were not even recognized in any of the three categories the film was nominated in for the Visual Effects Society Awards. Like Beatty's film thirteen years earlier, Ang Lee's Hulk would not spawn a sequel. When the character was re-visited in 150 million dollar budgeted The Incredible Hulk (2008), sans stylistic remediation and under the direction of Louis Leterrier, the financial result was almost identical: \$263 million dollars worldwide. Given this result, perhaps Bart was wrong when he blamed stylistic remediation the first time out. After all, the next film to be analyzed in this chapter, Zack Snyder's 300 (2006), did quite well at the box office regardless of looking "like a series of comicstrips [sic]."261

Part 3: The Remediation of Time and Space in 300 (2006) and Watchmen (2009)

²⁵⁹ Peter Bart, "Is 'Brainy' a Box Office Turn Off?," Variety, 23 June 2003.

²⁶⁰ Andrew Sarris, "Ang Lee's Angst-Ridden Hulk: The Not-So-Jolly Green Giant," The New York Observer, 6 July 2003.

²⁶¹ Bart, "Is 'Brainy' a Box Office Turn Off?"

“Not only do these [comic book] adaptations seldom please the critics, they seem to have little automatic appeal for comics readers.”-Pascal Lefèvre.²⁶²

“Maybe we're being stick-in-the-mud fuddy-duddies (fancy talk for “assholes!”) for rolling our eyes at a fully-realized fantasy world that can accommodate so many outlandish visuals. But the last decade of CGI seems to have welcomed a horrific breed of nerd-service filmmaking, intent merely on replicating the sights and sounds of comic books and animation.... There's nothing wrong with using these concepts and visuals as springboards, but [it can feel] more like Xeroxing ideas we've seen already in other media, and [Zack] Snyder, whose previous films are a remake and two comic book adaptations [300 and Watchmen], doesn't seem to be in the business of fueling his inspirations with added meaning.”-Gabe Toro.²⁶³

To recall Mark Rogers' helpful distinction between industrial and artisan comic book publishing, Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's 300 (1998), published by Dark Horse, would fall firmly into the latter. A limited series spread across five issues, the volume is noteworthy for featuring a shift away from the superhero genre to the historical epic and for its exploration of the comic book form. Miller, frustrated by the newspaper format of comics, wanted to push the form. In conversation with Will Eisner, Miller noted that 7X10 format “makes no sense. It's only tradition that keeps it alive....I found when I did 300 that there was something that felt so much more organic about it, because as humans we tend not to look up and down as much as we do side to side. The horizontal image, I find, is much better for capturing landscape and detail.”²⁶⁴ Favoring page formats that are twice as wide as a typical comic, 300 also boasts a unique combination of ink and watercolor that has come to define its style (the book also spawned a new, industry wide, publication form entitled the “widescreen format”).²⁶⁵

²⁶² Lefèvre, “Incompatible Visual Ontologies?: The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images,” in Film and Comic Books, eds. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 1.

²⁶³ Gabe Toro, “New Sucker Punch Trailer Confirms Zack Snyder Needs to Back Away from His Anime Collection Sloowly,” The Playlist, 27 July 2010, <<http://theplaylist.blogspot.com/2010/07/new-sucker-punch-trailer-confirms-zack.html>> (24 August 2010).

²⁶⁴ Charles Brownstein, Eisner/Miller (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2005), 12-13.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

The first issue of 300, listed at \$2.95 opposed to the usual \$1.99, sold 48,986 copies when it was released in May of 1998.²⁶⁶ The title was ranked 42nd on the Diamond Comic Distributors sales figures for the month, compared to that month's top ranked title, Uncanny X-Men, which sold 142, 959 copies.²⁶⁷ While its initial sales were fairly modest, the title would go on to win the prestige of numerous Eisner Awards (Best Limited Series, Best Writer/Artist, and Best Colorist). Moreover, once the series was collected into a hardback volume, the title sold an additional 88,000 copies (the success of the film prompted an additional printing of 40,000 copies, retailing at \$30.00 a copy).²⁶⁸

Drawn to the title was filmmaker Zack Snyder who, like so many members of the post-New Hollywood generation of filmmakers such as Michael Bay, Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze, David Fincher, and McG, cut his teeth in music videos and commercials before making the transition to Hollywood with his debut, a remake of George Romero's seminal horror film Dawn of the Dead (2004). Snyder's debut, budgeted at a modest \$26 million, went on to not only gross \$102 million worldwide but to attract fairly positive reviews, considering its dubious cultural status as both a horror film and a remake. The success of the film prompted Snyder to return to the graphic novel as his next project. Despite the legitimacy that came with Miller's name and the slew of Eisner Awards that the title won, Hollywood was ambivalent.

As Snyder noted, "No one was really interested in making it into a movie. They just didn't get it. It was late 2002, and Troy was just in preproduction....They had everything they needed [and] they said, 'Oh, what? You're going to come around with your crazy graphic

²⁶⁶ Unknown author, "May 1998 Comic Book Sales Figures," The Comics Chronicles, publication date unknown, <<http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/1998/1998-05.html>> (27 May 2011).

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Kevin Melrose, "Sales Skyrocket for Miller's 300 Graphic Novel," Newsarama, 16 November 2006, <<http://blog.newsarama.com/2006/11/16/sales-for-skyrocket-for-millers-300-graphic-novel/>> (27 May 2011).

novel?’ I didn’t know how hard it is to make a movie.’²⁶⁹ Despite the box office misfires of Troy (2004) and Alexander (2004), the studio, Warner Bros. and one of its associated production companies, Legendary Pictures, began to change their outlook towards the property when Snyder’s Dawn of the Dead and another film based off a Frank Miller book, Sin City (2005), performed well. As Jeff Robinov, head of production at Warner Bros. noted, “The movie is all about Zack Snyder. Until he showed us his storyboards, I had no idea what the movie was. We already had our share of sword-and-sandal movies. Another one was not an obvious choice. But that’s not this movie.”²⁷⁰ The film entered production in the fall of 2005 with a rumored production budget of \$60 million.²⁷¹

Describing the spatiotemporal dimension of the comic book panel versus the film frame is perhaps the most difficult form of stylistic remediation to describe, simply because so much of it depends, at least with regard to the former, on the sensory experience contingent on the personalized techniques that each reader approaches the text with. With regard to time for instance, the reader can take a couple hours to read 300 or an indefinite amount of time. Time in comics, unlike film which progresses at a rate of twenty-four frames a second regardless of the viewer’s presence (unless, of course, he or she is watching it on a VCR, DVD Player, or other piece of hardware in which they can control the experience), is defined by the reader. To complicate this even further, the comic book panel does not exhibit a pre-defined amount of time. The time portrayed both within the panel and through the progression of panels, as McCloud has noted, can vary greatly. With this noted, I’d like to briefly focus on two aspects of spatial remediation in 300 before turning to a temporal analysis of Watchmen.

²⁶⁹ Susan Wloszczyna, “An Epic Tale, Told 300 Strong,” USA Today, 7 March 2007.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Pamela McClintock, “Warners Bets a Bundle on Swords-and-CGI 300,” Variety, 10 October 2005.

The first aspect of spatial remediation of 300 that I would like to engage with involves movement through space. Returning to Avi Arad's proclamation for a moment ("Comic books are...greatly detailed storyboards."), we once again realize how misleading this analogy is. First, the comic book panel, unlike the storyboard, does not contain any movement vectors. Storyboards often contain arrows and notes regarding camera placement and movements whereas movement in an individual panel can only be portrayed via devices like action lines (the next chapter will define and engage with action lines in more detail). This dynamic between space and time, articulated via movement, is complicated in Miller and Varley's comic. First, Miller alternates between single panels that take up the space of an entire page, which eliminate the multiframe altogether, and pages that include panels that take place in two separate time periods (the central story is bookended by a flashback). Secondly, as discussed in the analysis of Hulk, due to the lack of a comic book system of norms to that of the Hollywood continuity system, it can be incredibly difficult to gauge where characters are in space. As Pascal Lefèvre writes with regard to the construction of space in comics, framing can limit "the scope for the viewer and therefore the available information, the artist can cause a reader to make wrong inferences" regarding the diegetic space.²⁷²

An illustrative example of this from Miller's 300 is evident in young Leonidas' battle with the wolf. Miller portrays the battle in ten panels across the span of three pages (which, incidentally, includes nineteen panels total). Yet, the details of the environment that the man and beast are fighting in are at first a mystery to us. Miller alternates between panels depicting enclosed (the first panel shows the young hero surrounded by what looks to be a cave with the wolf entering a small chasm in front of the boy) and wide open spaces (the subsequent panel

²⁷² Pascal Lefèvre, "The Construction of Space in Comics," in A Comics Studies Reader, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 158.

portrays the two of them in what looks like a snow swept void). As the sequence progresses, Miller narrows the frames of his panels as Leonidas lures the wolf into another, previously un-established chasm. Finally, the wolf gets stuck between the narrowing rocks and nimble Leonidas deals him a death blow via his spear.

Despite being described as a “shot-for-shot adaptation of Miller’s graphic novel,” it is illuminating to hear Snyder describe his approach to compromising the differing formal grammars of film and comics in this instance.²⁷³ After photocopying panels from the book, Snyder planned the preceding and succeeding shots to the original panel (filling in the ruptures of time and space left by the multiframe). As Snyder noted, “If you look at the book, it’s a montage, right? It’s not a moment-to-moment experience, like a film is. So the challenge for me is to...get into [Frank Miller’s moments].”²⁷⁴ While Miller portrayed the battle in ten panels, interrupting the movement of the sequence with interlaced flashback panels, Snyder uses over thirty shots without cross-cutting between time frames. Moreover, Snyder and his director of photography, Larry Fong, use both statically framed compositions (roughly half of the shots in the sequence) and a combination of what appears to be dolly and steadicam shots along with minor tilts and pans. While both storytellers portray the same event, the boy killing the wolf, using the same images in a visceral, thrilling fashion, the way in which the artists structure the images are extremely different. Miller uses the disruptions in time that the flashbacks bring and an ambiguous sense of space, compounded by the narrowing aspect ratio of the panels, to elicit suspense. Snyder, on the other hand, utilizes camera movements and fast-paced editing to similar effect.

²⁷³ Stax, “Attila Leads the 300,” IGN.com, 15 August 2005, <<http://movies.ign.com/articles/641/641893p1.html>> (2 September 2010).

²⁷⁴ “300 Matches Miller’s Style,” Sci Fi Wire, 27 July 2006, <<http://web.archive.org/web/20080610062645/http://www.scifi.com/scifiwire/index.php?category=0&id=37328>> (30 August 2010).

While Miller and Snyder's approaches to depicting movement in space are incredibly different when analyzed structurally, there is still a spatial quality to Snyder's remediations that affect the viewer in a similar fashion as Miller's work. Essentially, the reader of the comic is continually reminded of the constructed nature of comics, their artificiality. This quality stems from both comics being rooted in a parodic tradition and, it could be argued, the self-reflexive nature of the multiframe as well. With regard to Miller and Varley's style, the collage of techniques that the two artists bring to the material is both what makes the text both memorable and artificial. According to Miller's artistic philosophy, "Doing realism in comics is really saying we are the poor man's film....As time goes by, I find myself more and more in love with stuff that's closer to bigfoot cartooning. I want people's sweat to be *flying* off their heads when they're upset. It's something comics can do."²⁷⁵ While sweat may not be a defining element of Miller's anti-realism in 300, another bodily fluid, blood, certainly is.

Specifically, when hell is unleashed in the concluding chapter of 300, the bloody carnage is rendered in splashes of ink and watercolor (the effect is also evident in the title page to the fifth and final chapter, "Victory"). The effect of the blood on the space flattens the image. The blood is not buried behind characters, horses, or grit; the application of ink does not involve any use of spatial perspective. The absolute reds of the drizzled gore feel as if they are the product of a filter placed over the image. Miller and Varley's rendering of blood became a defining element in the film's marketing campaign, as seen in the below marketing still (figure 3.11), and the film itself.

²⁷⁵ Charles Brownstein, Eisner/Miller, 38-39.



Figure 3.11: Miller's Two Dimensional Blood Becomes Marketing Iconography.

With regard to the film itself, Snyder distributed a “style guide” to ensure continuity across the film’s various effects teams (which included ten vendors across four countries), including the element of blood.²⁷⁶ According to the blood entry in the style guide, “2D Blood needs to be designed and rendered in a way that audiences can clearly identify that what they’re seeing is a deliberate exercise in style, rather than a mistake. It needs to be simultaneously brutal and beautiful. In the graphic novel, Miller and Varley depict blood with a spattered ink effect, a technique that is carried over to the film in all the live-action battles.”²⁷⁷ In order to match this quality, the filmmakers went so far as to scan blood splatters from the Miller and Varley’s book, incorporating them into the film.²⁷⁸ These effects, again, flatten the space of film. The film, which was explored on the z-axis via camera movements, has been equated to the two-dimensional aspect of the comics by Snyder’s remediation of Miller’s stylization.

Snyder and his team furthered this effect of artificiality by similarly repurposing Miller and Varley’s water painted skylines. The comic book continually juxtaposes the stark pencil work that defines the characters with vaporous, textured skies. To best visualize this concept, below is a panel of the comic placed aside its corresponding film frame (figure 3.12).

²⁷⁶ 300 Press Kit.

²⁷⁷ Tara DiLullo, 300: The Art of the Film (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2007), 14.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

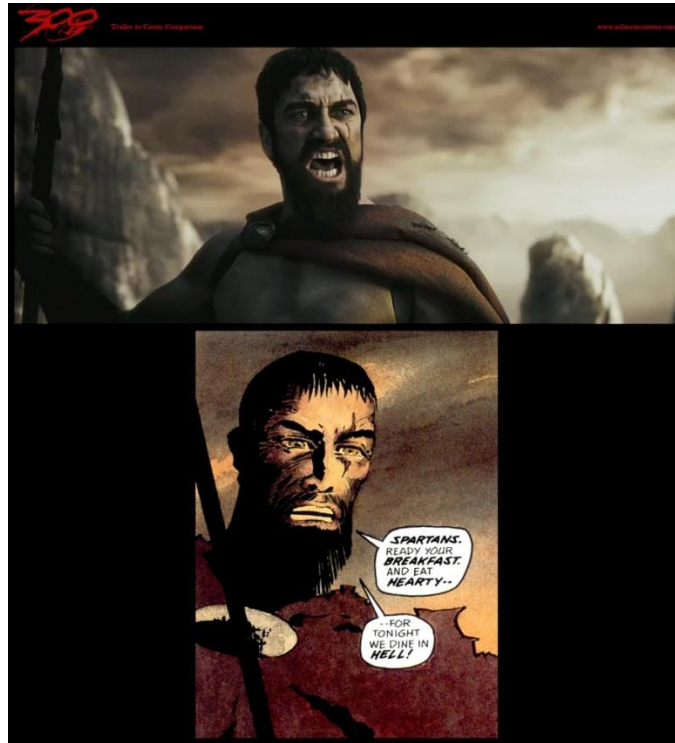


Figure 3.12: *Clashes in Representation in 300 the film (Above) and the Comic (Below).*

In the above images, we can see how Leonidas clashes with the background in both pictures. In the comic, Miller's pencils define the character in a series of rigid lines (exemplified by his beard and hair especially) in contrast with the water colored skies. In the film, the photographic representation of the character stands in opposition with the unearthly skies behind him. As the film's visual effects supervisor Chris Watts and visual effects art director Grant Freckelton noted, "Our skies are created using a blend of photographic and watercolor elements, giving the backgrounds a uniquely textured feel without being entirely painted."²⁷⁹ The juxtaposition of styles in both works affects the reader both as being artificial but, in line with the comic's roots in caricature, something also tactile and attributable to an authorial personality (which again, brings us back to the idea of graphical remediation and Lefèvre's notion that subjectivity is inherently built into comics).

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 23.

Leading up to the film's release, there was an abundance of ink spilt on Snyder's graphical approach to the material and how similar it was to Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller's adaptation of Miller's own Sin City (2005) two years earlier. The Los Angeles Times made specific note that Snyder "uses actors on spare sets altered digitally in post-production. Only one shot in the entire movie...was actually filmed outside, and even then...[it was] digitally enhanced."²⁸⁰ Fittingly, the story is complemented by a sidebar, pointing the reader to go online to access a feature entitled "The Match-Up," which tracks how closely "the movie follow[s] Frank Miller's graphic novel."²⁸¹ Building off of the buzz the film has created at the 2006 Comic-Con and such news stories, Warner Bros. attempted to financially capitalize on the public's awareness of the film's unique style. On January 26th 2007, roughly six weeks before the film was to be released, the studio announced that the film would debut simultaneously in the IMAX format.²⁸² Four days later, Robinov announced to Variety that Snyder's visual style had prompted Warner Bros. to write up a two-year, first-look production deal with Snyder's production company, Cruel & Unusual Films. It was announced that their first project would be the long-languishing adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' Watchmen (1986).²⁸³

When 300 hit theaters, to say it hit big would be an understatement. Despite the film's uncomfortable allegory that equates the battle of the Thermopylae with the war on terror (Iranian president Maumoud Ahmadinejad, without explicitly referring to the film, stated that America was "trying to tamper with history by making a film and by making Iran's image look savage."), worldwide box office figures were staggering.²⁸⁴ Opening on 3,100 screens domestically, the film became the third top-grossing R-rated ever, taking in \$70 million dollars in its opening

²⁸⁰ Mark Olsen, "An Epic Battle is Pumped Up," The Los Angeles Times, 14 January 2007.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² "Imax in Day-Date Plan for Warners' 300," The Hollywood Reporter, 26 January 2007.

²⁸³ Pamela McClintock, "An Unusual WB Deal," Variety, 30 January 2007.

²⁸⁴ Ali Jaafar, "Iran President Disses 300," Variety, 22 March 2007.

weekend alone, \$5 million more than its disclosed production budget.²⁸⁵ By the time worldwide box office figures were taken into account, the film grossed \$456 million. The film split critics, many of whom lamented the film's metheaded approach to the story while praising Snyder's graphical style. In a quote that was provided Warner Bros.' marketing and publicity department with some prestigious ammunition, film critic Richard Roeper (who was co-hosting At the Movies at the time) described the film as "the Citizen Kane of cinematic graphic novels."²⁸⁶ Obviously, Snyder's visual style was drawing some favorable attention.

Hoping to ride Snyder's status as a box office winner and as a filmmaking "visionary" (as the Watchmen trailers describe him), Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures, Legendary Pictures, DC Comics, and Lawrence Gordon Productions gave Snyder a \$130 million production budget and rushed the much-awaited adaptation (it had been optioned throughout the 1980s and 90s by various studios, most of the time the plug was pulled due to incredibly high production costs) of perhaps the most iconic graphic novel ever written, Watchmen, into production in the fall of 2007, roughly six months after the release of 300. In fact, Warner Bros. intentionally planted a single-frame image of a Watchmen character, Rorschach, in a 300 trailer virally unleashed around the time of the latter film's domestic release.²⁸⁷ To say the film was "anticipated" would be an understatement.

Watchmen, written by Alan Moore, penciled and lettered by Dave Gibbons, and colored by John Higgins, was a twelve issue, limited series that, like Miller's The Dark Knight Returns (published the same year), offered a critique of the superhero myth by offering a cynical, revisionist story based upon the comic book heroes from the Golden Age. Moore and Gibbons's

²⁸⁵ Ian Mohr, "B.O. Hits Greek Peak: \$70 Mil," Variety, 12 March 2007.

²⁸⁶ Richard Roeper, "300 Movie Review," RichardRoeper.com, 9 March 2007, <<http://www.richardroeper.com/reviews/300.aspx>> (31 August 2010).

²⁸⁷ Borys Kit, "Watchmen Feeding Off 300 Spoils," The Hollywood Reporter, 13 March 2007.

title, while now considered a classic of the comic book form (named one of the 100 greatest novels of the 20th century by Time magazine in 2005, ranked 13th on a listing of the fifty best novels of the past twenty-five years by Entertainment Weekly in 2008), was one of the first titles to cross-over to a larger audience. As Roger Sabin writes, “Unprecedentedly for direct sales comics, they [Watchmen and Dark Knight Returns] received a great deal of critical attention outside fandom, and were even reviewed seriously in broadsheet papers.”²⁸⁸

To give the reader a sense at how readership of comic books has shifted over the past decades, the debut issue of Watchmen, shipped in May of 1986, sold 34,100 copies through the direct market distributor Capital City (there were several distributors at the time, so this number is only a small piece in a larger, unknowable puzzle) and was ranked fifth in their list of shipped monthly titles.²⁸⁹ It is significant for the time period that Watchmen sold “at a price point twice the going rate for the best-selling comics of the day: \$1.50.”²⁹⁰ Moreover, the title did not feature franchise characters like Batman or Spider-Man, making it moderately successful given the alteration of these two significant variables. The larger influence of Watchmen has been gradual, building over the years as its cultural status as one of the pioneering titles of a new age of comics became solidified in conjunction with the issues being collected into paperback and hardcover editions.

To put this in a bit of perspective, when I attended the 2008 San Diego Comic-Con panel for Watchmen (it was slated to begin sometime in the mid-morning) at 7 a.m., I was politely asked to find the back of the spiraling Hall H line that had not only tightly weaved its way through a grassy space the size of a football field but had ended up crossing the street and going

²⁸⁸ Sabin, 162.

²⁸⁹ John Jackson Miller, “Watchmen Sales Rankings in its Initial Release,” The Comics Chronicles, publication date unknown, <<http://www.comichron.com/special/watchmensales.html>> (1 June 2011).

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

down about a block past the facilities. Given the capacity of the hall, there were roughly 6,500 people in line with hundreds, if not thousands, more turned away (I, somehow, made it in). As Snyder later noted, “We loved the book and we loved the images, and we really cared to make them come to life as much as we could, and make it respectful.”²⁹¹ As Snyder’s co-producer and wife, Deborah, also noted, “We feel a *great responsibility* [when it comes to the film’s treatment of the book].”²⁹² Snyder attempted to put fan fears to rest in multiple ways: citing the graphic novel as a storyboard, attempting to earn the blessing of the book’s anti-Hollywood scribe, and finally bringing artist Dave Gibbons onto the project to both promote it and serve as an advisor.²⁹³ Gibbons not only provided his endorsement of the film publically (“[the screenplay was] as close as I could imagine anyone getting to [the book].”) but “signed” the film’s mise-en-scène: his trademark “G” is legible as a piece of graffiti littering the film’s version of New York City.²⁹⁴

One of Snyder’s goals in achieving a favorable fan response was not only to attempt to adapt nearly every narrative event onto the screen (the most heated topic of contention was the film’s altered ending, which was thematically similar to Moore and Gibbons’s original book while being executed differently) but to use the graphic novel as a set of storyboards, similar to his approach on 300, and to remediate Moore and Gibbons’s compositions spatiotemporally.²⁹⁵ As noted at the beginning of this section, describing the remediation of the spatiotemporal aspect

²⁹¹ Peter Aperlo, Watchmen: The Film Companion (London: Titan Books, 2009), 119.

²⁹² Geoff Boucher, “Now All Eyes Are On that Watchmen Guy,” The Los Angeles Times, 1 March 2009.

²⁹³ More fan servicing came when Snyder realized he couldn’t fit the entire narrative of Moore and Gibbons’s 416 page novel into the space of a three hour film. Seemingly prompted by fears that the treatment would be deemed “unfaithful,” Snyder and Warner Brothers produced the animated film Watchmen: Tales of the Black Freighter (2008) that portrayed the comic within the comic narrative of Moore and Gibbons’s book. The short film, clocking in at just under thirty minutes, was later edited into Watchmen: The Ultimate Cut (2009), a DVD and Blu-Ray only release that followed the initial home video release of the “Director’s Cut” by a few months.

²⁹⁴ Jeff Jensen, “Watchmen: An Oral History,” Entertainment Weekly, 21 October 2005.

²⁹⁵ Note that I’m attributing the comic’s visual style to both the writer and the artist, as Moore’s original scripts are so meticulous with regard to the composition of space that it seems unjust to simply describe the visual style as being Gibbons’s.

of the comic is difficult because so much of it, specifically with regard to time, is contingent on the practices of the reader. To put this into perspective, I have read Watchmen three or four times. The first time I read it, I finished it in three days, carried along by Moore's mystery plot and its eventual resolution. The second time I read it, I finished it in a week. Despite being more familiar with the plot during the re-read, I started paying more attention to the book's visual motifs and how they intersected with the content (the fifth issue, entitled "Fearful Symmetry," exhibits a sprawling symmetrical multiframe layout structure). My general experiences as a comic book reader have followed this formula: the first time I read quickly, drawn into the narrative, the second time I read slowly, digesting the compositions and placing them in conscious dialogue with the content.

Time in the comic is further complicated by the fact that, unlike cinema and its predecessor, the photograph, the individual frame of the comic does not capture a single moment in time. As theorist Scott McCloud usefully describes comics in contrast to film, comics define time spatially and "The problem is there's no conversion chart!"²⁹⁶ Unlike cinema, the comic frame does not capture a fraction of a second; the duration of the actions of the comic is both vague and subject to ellipsis. Yet, to say that comic time is a fluid vector and unquantifiable is not to say that it cannot be manipulated by the writer/artist. For theorist Thierry Groensteen, the sequential panels of the comic perform what he describes as "the rhythmic function." As Groensteen describes, comics obey "a rhythm that is imposed on it by the succession of frames--- a basic heartbeat that, as is seen in music, can be developed, nuanced, and recovered by more elaborate rhythmic effects stressed by other 'instruments' (parameters), like those of the distribution of the word balloons, the opposition of colors, or even the play of the graphical

²⁹⁶ McCloud, 100.

forms.”²⁹⁷ Groensteen, never one to make generalizations, is reluctant to go as far as McCloud with regard to the conversion chart between the dimensions of the panel and the length of time they represent (“All normative propositions do not do justice to the diversity of the expressive techniques and to the aesthetic of the authors”), but the common belief is that the bigger the frame, the longer amount of time is being expressed.²⁹⁸

Yet, and this is perhaps a prime case against making such a generalization, the connection between panel size and time is not quite so simple in Moore and Gibbons’s book. A worthy case study is the book’s opening sequence, which chronicles a pair of police officers investigating the death of a former costumed hero, the Comedian. The sequence, told over the course of eight pages, is rendered in nearly identical multiframe, alternating between seven, eight, and nine panels per page with the sole exception being the introductory page (“At Midnight, All the Agents...,” the sixth page of the issue). The third multiframe in the sequence, composed of seven panels, depicts a flashback of the murder, intercut and attributed to two detectives investigating the crime scene (figure 3.13). The first six panels of the page are all roughly the same dimension, whether they cover the duration of an assailant kicking the Comedian (panel one), lifting him off the ground (panel three), and picking him up (panel five) or a couple lines of dialogue from the detectives discussing the case (panels two, four, and six). The multiframe is punctuated by the largest panel on the page: the Comedian being tossed out a plate glass window, en route to his death on the pavement below. Yet, consider the concept of the correspondence between panel size and the expression of time now. Does it take a shorter amount of time for two men to hypothesize how the Comedian went out the window than it took to actually throw him out? Does it take the same amount of time for the detectives to discuss the

²⁹⁷ Groensteen, 45.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

Comedian's identity as it did for his assailant to land a kick? My answer to both questions would be an overwhelming "No."



Figure 3.13: *The Fluidity of Time as Expressed by Panel Size in Watchmen.*

Essentially, the progression of panel sizes (small to large) in the opening of Watchmen do not express increasing periods of time. The layout of the page is not motivated by the expression of time but by the expression of an experience binding the senses to the narrative information: the final panel is the largest because it expresses the inciting incident to the story, the murder of the Comedian. Moreover, the layout of page three echoes that of the first page, which features six identically sized panels that provide a zoom or dolly up the side of the building to a larger

panel at the bottom of the page, picturing the two detectives looking out the window. The first page asks a narrative question (Why is there blood in the gutter? It appears that a man has jumped out the window of his apartment.) while the third page answers it visually (The man was attacked and thrown out the window.). This compositional technique is what Groensteen describes as “braiding,” a unique formal property of the comic which prompts the reader to put separate multiframe panels in dialogue with one another. For Groensteen, the size of the panel may be used to express time, but that is only one of its many possible functions.

Despite Snyder’s rhetoric about making a respectful (faithful) adaptation and his obsessive attention to doing so, it is surprising that his remediation of time in the film’s opening sequence loses Moore and Gibbons’s braiding. The opening of the film features a similar shot as the comic (a zoom out of the Comedian’s smiley face pin) yet the last framing produced by the zoom does not reveal two detectives looking out a broken window. Rather, we see the Comedian working over a fuming teakettle, watching television, in a few moments before being attacked. Snyder abandons the cross-cutting of the book between past and present in the opening sequence, deciding to focus on the murder in the first sequence, provide a credit sequence, and then re-visit the scene of the crime from the detectives’ point-of-view. Moreover, his interpretation of the Comedian’s murder is drawn out. Occupying only ten frames in the book, the murder takes place over the course of five minutes in the film. To quantify this spatiotemporally, the sequence takes up less than .38% of the comic (32 pages an issue X 12 issues X an average of 7 panels per page=2688 panels / 10 panels) while it takes up 1.5% of the film (2.5 minutes out of 162 minutes), an increase of nearly four times.

Despite this difference in narrative construction and emphasis, Snyder does capture the phenomenological temporal experience of reading a comic book via his manipulation of

cinematic time. In the brief sequence, he provides shots photographed with varying shutter speeds. Aside from “real-time” shots (24 frames a second), the fight occasionally takes on a slow, poetic quality, reminiscent of Sam Peckinpah’s style. For instance, when the Comedian is thrown across the room, it takes nearly nine seconds for his body to make it from point A to point B. At other times, Snyder decreases the shutter speed, making a knife fight feel as if it is taking place at superhuman speed (a point of frustration for many of the book’s fans, as the Comedian and his assailant do not possess any superpowers). Finally, there are individual shots that include varying shutter speeds (also called “speed ramping”): a vicious punch landed on the Comedian’s face begins in slow motion before getting progressively faster. One such shot, a mimic of the final panel on page three, is the longest of the sequence (16 seconds). Thus, while the action contained may be one of the shortest in the sequence (a man falling a few dozen stories to his death), both the comic and the film give the action an added formal emphasis due to its narrative relevance.

While Snyder and Warner Bros. hoped that winning over fans of the novel would translate into greater awareness of the property (The New York Times reported that early reaction to the film’s trailer encouraged the printing of an additional 900,000 copies of the graphic novel), the film failed to duplicate the incredible success of 300.²⁹⁹ Carrying a production budget of \$130 million and undisclosed P&A costs, the film grossed just \$185 million worldwide, perhaps the by-product being both an R-rated superhero film and clocking in at nearly three hours.³⁰⁰ To make matters worse, the film’s worldwide total became even smaller

²⁹⁹ Julie Bloom, “Arts, Briefly: Film Trailer Aids Sales of Watchmen Novel,” The New York Times, 14 August 2008.

³⁰⁰ The one self-acknowledged problem this volume’s financial analysis has is the absence of concrete economic data for ancillary (DVD, Blu-Ray, digital download) media forms. Precise figures for this revenue stream, which can contribute greatly to a film’s gross is, like most economic data in Hollywood, difficult if not impossible to attain.

for Warner Bros., Paramount, and the other production companies involved when Twentieth Century Fox filed a lawsuit that resulted in an upfront payment (rumored to be between \$5-10 million) and a percentage of the film's worldwide gross (rumored to be between 5-8.5%, in addition to any grosses from sequels or spin-offs).³⁰¹ Critical reaction, like that towards 300 two years earlier, was mixed but its effects were compounded when even fans of the film began to turn against it (the film carried an exit poll score of a "B").³⁰²

One Warner Bros. marketing executive proposed his or her own theory as to why the film failed:

Alan Moore always said that Watchmen the graphic novel couldn't be made into a movie. So, at the end of the day, Zack Snyder's slavish attention to detail in making this a literal translation is what ultimately doomed the film. He cared more about the appeasement of the fanboys than [about] a cohesive, coherent movie meant for everyone.³⁰³

Yet, I would argue that the failure can be strongly attributed to over-budgeting what is essentially a niche-audience film. While the graphic novel sold nearly 1 million copies in 2008, it sold 100,000 the year before. I realize these numbers are an estimate, but if the title sold 100,000 copies a year from 1986-2007 (2.1 million) and an additional 1 million copies in 2008, that means only 3.1 million people are really well-versed in the world of the property. Compare that level of awareness with J.K. Rowling's book Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, which sold 9 million copies in its first twenty-four hours of release.³⁰⁴ The result is far from surprising; the film based on Rowling's book, budgeted at \$250 million, became the second highest grossing film of 2009 with \$933 million worldwide. Watchmen did not even crack the top twenty-five when it came to worldwide, box office grosses. Stylistic remediation may be a method of

³⁰¹ Dave McNary and Michael Fleming, "WB, Fox Make Deal for Watchmen," Variety, 15 January 2009.

³⁰² Nikki Finke, "Deadline Hollywood: Watchmen Postmortem," L.A. Weekly, 13 March 2009.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ "New Potter Book Topples U.S. Sales Records," MSNBC.com, 18 July 2005, <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8608578/>> (31 August 2010).

appeasing a property's fan base and it can occasionally encourage wider-awareness (300, Sin City), yet the costs, many of which are tied to CGI, must be kept in perspective, even when it comes from under the roof of a financially established multimedia conglomerate that can try to milk the property synergistically.

Part 4: Textual Remediation in American Splendor (2003)

"American Splendor....precisely because it draws so self-consciously from both comic and film elements, allows for a foregrounding of a complex commentary on the distinctive nature of each of these forms of media."-Craig Hight.³⁰⁵

"The writer-directors enliven their picture with devices that supplant the stream-of-consciousness narration that came in the comics. They surround the screen with comic-book frames and boxed text....[providing the contrast they] use to explain exactly what separates Mr. Pekar's comics from regular super-hero stuff."-Elvis Mitchell.³⁰⁶

In contrast with the previous case studies presented in this chapter, Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini's American Splendor (2003), based on Harvey Pekar's comics (1976-2008), stands as a strong contrast. While the three films of the previous case studies were budgeted at an average of \$110 million each and were released on thousands of domestic screens in their first week of release, Splendor had an unconfirmed budget of \$2 million dollars and was released to just six theaters (272 theaters during its widest release). Directed by two documentarians, produced by Good Machine (which, in 2002, had recently merged with USA Films at Vivendi SA to form Focus Features), and distributed by HBO Films and Fine Line Features (both part of the Time Warner conglomerate at the time) after winning the 2003 Sundance Film Festival's Grand Jury Prize, Splendor is an independent film. In the post-classical era of Hollywood that is often simply defined by two modes of filmmaking, art house indie and blockbuster, Splendor is one of the few films based on a comic book to be classified as

³⁰⁵ Craig Hight, "American Splendor: Translating Comic Autobiography into Drama-Documentary," in Film and Comic Books, eds. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 198.

³⁰⁶ Elvis Mitchell, "A Comics Guy, Outside the Box," The New York Times, 15 August 2003.

the former (Ghost World would be another prime example).

Like the film, the American Splendor comics are essentially an independent production or, to return to Rogers's binary, an artisan production. Throughout its thirty-two year run, the title went through three publishers beginning with Pekar publishing the title himself then to Dark Horse Comics before finally landing at Vertigo, an imprint at DC Comics in 2006 (after the success of the film). Moreover, given Pekar's self-professed inability to draw, the title went through a long roster of artists including Robert Crumb, Joe Sacco, Eddie Campbell, and Gilbert Hernandez. According to Pekar, he sold "very few comic books and lost money at it."³⁰⁷ Looking at the titles sales charts from 1997 to 2008, the title averaged roughly 4,800 issues a month, going a Diamond Comic Distributor ranking of 287 (4,086 copies at \$2.95 an issue) in 1997 to 270 (5,397 copies at \$2.99) in 2008, a slight increase, perhaps due to the success of the film adaptation.³⁰⁸

One might ask that if the production context of Splendor is so radically different from the other films analyzed here, why include it? First, the film is one of the few to remediate the relationship between text and image of the comic, thus its inclusion is justified from the stylistic criteria outlined in the introduction. Secondly, I believe that the production companies behind independent films like American Splendor and Sin City (2005) are also concerned with appeasing a property's fan base, which stylistic remediation is very much a manifestation of. As the filmmakers note in the production notes for the film, "We really saw this as an adaptation of the comic books.... We tried to find a vehicle that was as rebellious as the way Harvey puts his

³⁰⁷ Chris Schillig, "Comic Book Chronicler Harvey Pekar Speaks at Mount Union," The Alliance Review, 22 February 2008, <<http://www.the-review.com/news/article/3343481>> (1 June 2011).

³⁰⁸ See The Comics Chroncles sales figure search for American Splendor, <<http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicsales.html>> (1 June 2011).

comics together....It wasn't random; we owed it to American Splendor to work like that.”³⁰⁹

Essentially, it is necessary to include Splendor both from a stylistic standpoint, rounding out this taxonomy of remediation, and from an industrial standpoint, as stylistic remediation appears in both New Hollywood modes of filmmaking.

The role of text in the definition of comics is subject to much debate in comic studies. For historian David Kunzle, the definition of a comic strip includes “a preponderance of image over text.”³¹⁰ Likewise, historian Bill Blackbeard notes in his definition that comics regularly feature enclosed “ballooned dialogue or its equivalent and generally minimal narrative text.”³¹¹ Finally, for theorist David Carrier, the defining characteristic of modern comics is the speech balloon. As Carrier writes, “The speech balloon is a defining element of the comic because it establishes a word/image unity that distinguishes comics from pictures illustrating a text.”³¹² On the other hand, for theorist Thierry Groensteen, the central element of comics is “iconic solidarity” or “interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated.”³¹³ Essentially, Groensteen argues that the classical view that the text and the image are equal in narrative status is no longer the case and that the sequential image does not necessarily need “any verbal help.”³¹⁴

I agree with Groensteen in principle that it is not necessary for a comic writer/artist to utilize text to present a comprehensible story to the reader and that comics are essentially defined stylistically by the presentation of sequential images juxtaposed in space (a sentiment also shared by Scott McCloud). However, I would suggest the use of text is an artistic norm utilized by the

³⁰⁹ American Splendor Production Notes, 15.

³¹⁰ David Kunzle, The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 2.

³¹¹ Bill Blackbeard, “Mislabelled Books,” Funny World 16 (1974), 41.

³¹² David Carrier, The Aesthetics of Comics (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 4.

³¹³ Groensteen, 18.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

bulk of practitioners. For a personal example, looking across my bookshelf of graphic novels and comic book trade paperbacks, I cannot find one volume that contains more than a couple pages of text-less panels. Even the largely “silent” tenth chapter of Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell’s From Hell (1999), “The Best of All Tailors,” features text on seventeen of its thirty-four pages (or 50% of its length). Alas, just as the case with dialogue in film, text may not be one of the medium’s defining elements but it is the pragmatic norm.

Berman and Pulcini’s film is one of the richest examples of the stylistic remediation of comics onto film. As Craig Hight writes in his essay “American Splendor: Translating Comic Autobiography into Drama-Documentary,” the film is “a hybrid of drama-documentary combining conventional aspects of this form with elements of the graphic style of comic books.”³¹⁵ Hight argues that the film’s focus on mundane vignettes matches the structure of Pekar’s originals. Furthermore, the film commonly incorporates panels from Pekar’s books at transitional moments, a notable example being the graphically inspired credit sequence. Moreover, Hight writes that the film, like Pekar’s comic (which was drawn not by Pekar, but by a series of artists), represents the author in five different forms. While Pekar himself appears in the film via a set of interviews (some archival, some produced for the film), he is represented in the re-enactment sequences by Paul Giamatti in the re-enactments. Moreover, Donal Logue portrays the author (or, to be more specific, he portrays Giamatti portrayal of Pekar) in a stage play based on the comic, and, finally, the writer is represented “within graphic and animation sequences derived from...the comic.”³¹⁶

For the focus of this study, I’ll be focusing my analysis on two elements: the film’s use of thought balloons and the film’s use of captions. With regard to the filmmakers’ use of thought

³¹⁵ Hight, 180.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 188.

balloons, I'll be focusing on one sequence: the "Standing Behind Old Jewish Ladies in Supermarket Lines" scene (taken from the strip of the same name, art by Robert Crumb) that prompts Pekar to venture into writing comic books. As he suffers in line behind the old woman who happens to be "penny-wise," Pekar's quick stop at the grocery turns into an episode out of Homer's The Odyssey. Next to his head, a thought balloon forms (thought balloons are different from dialogue balloons insofar as they normally have a cloud-like texture, do not have the point near the character's mouth, and are placed near the head instead of the mouth). The balloon goes from being filled with text to manifesting an animated Pekar that provides a scathing critique of the social situation. Finally, the animated Pekar breaks out of the balloon via a two-step process that puts his imaginary form next to Pekar's stranded body in line. In order to better illustrate the scene under analysis, I have provided a few screenshots for the sake of clarity (Figures 3.14-3.18).

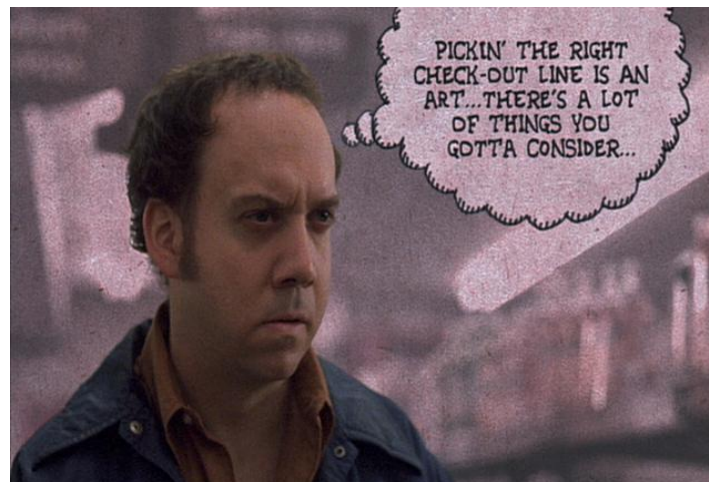


Figure 3.14: *The Thought Balloon Freeze Frame in American Splendor (2003).*

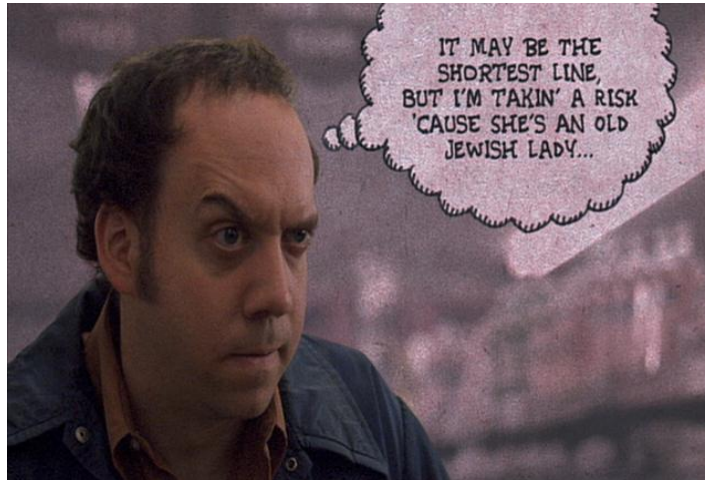


Figure 3.15: The Thought Balloon Freeze Frame in *American Splendor* (2003).



Figure 3.16: The Thought Balloon in *American Splendor* (2003).



Figure 3.17: The Transition from Balloon to the Frame in *American Splendor* (2003).



Figure 3.18: *Giamatti's Pekar vs. Animated Pekar in American Splendor (2003).*

Now, compare and contrast the film sequence (figures 3.14-3.18) with the actual Pekar and Crumb story below (figure 3.19), the first page of which has been provided. The Pekar strip, unlike the film, involves a flashback device. In panel one, Pekar's character addresses the reader personally, beginning his story with a proclamation: "Man, I really hate t'shop for groceries... Especially when the store is crowded!"³¹⁷ These panels, differentiated from the supermarket sequences graphically by the spotlight effect around Pekar, turn him into an active character. He's speaking to us, he's emotional, and he's controlling the story. In contrast, the supermarket sequences feature a largely "silent" Pekar. While he whistles, quietly suffering in line, and curses when he goes back to the supermarket, the flashback is not relayed through thought balloons in the moment but through captions (see panels two, three, and four of figure 3.19).

³¹⁷ Harvey Pekar and Robert Crumb, "Standing Behind Old Jewish Ladies in Supermarket Lines," American Splendor: The Life and Times of Harvey Pekar (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), page number not given.



Figure 3.19: Pekar and Crumb's "Standing Behind Old Jewish Ladies..." (1986).

Essentially, the film weaves the two separate spaces (Pekar telling the story and Pekar at the market) of the original story into the one setting of the supermarket. Instead of captions, Berman and Pulcini go through a range of representational strategies to remediate the unique textual experience of the comic. First, the filmmakers provide us with freeze frames and thought balloons. In contrast to the comic, as Pekar suffers in line his anger is captured within the same space. The freeze framed thought balloons (figures 3.14-3.15) give way to a non-freeze framed thought balloon that becomes filled with an incensed, animated Pekar (figure 3.16) whose emotions drive him into a neighboring frame (3.17) before finally settling behind Giamatti's

Pekar (3.18).

Berman and Pulcini's representational evolution of Pekar's thoughts is unique in that they use film language quite innovatively to try to capture both the tone of the writing and the experience of reading a comic book. While the sequence, animated by John Kuramoto and Gary Leib, does not graphically remediate Crumb's dirtier portrayal of Pekar (the dark rings around the eyes, the hairy arms, the wild hair), the text in the first two thought balloons and the dialogue that the animated Pekar delivers is abridged from the original comic. Not only do his observations remain intact, but Pekar's tendency to clip the endings off of words does so as well.³¹⁸ More significant to this study, Berman and Pulcini use the freeze frame to turn the constant motion of film into the static image of the comic. We, along with the film, are forced to pause to digest both the composition (which has also been digitally altered to carry the texture of newsprint) and Pekar's thought bubble. The filmmakers, instead of transposing the text into voice over narration, acknowledge the mediation of the balloon in comics.

Yet, Berman and Pulcini's remediation of the thought balloon significantly changes as the sequence segues into its live-action/animation hybrid. Balloons in comics, according to Carrier once again, are unique insofar as they "bridge the word/image gap" because they are words presented within (and sometimes as) pictures.³¹⁹ The nature of this presentation is that balloons, unlike other elements depicted in the frame graphically such as the *mise-en-scène*, are only "visible" to the reader, not the characters inhabiting the frame along with him or her. The surrounding characters sharing the frame may hear dialogue and/or may consider what the character producing a thought balloon is thinking about but they are not aware of the stylistic

³¹⁸ There is a slight change in the significance of the encounter however. In the comic, Harvey goes back to the market a second time and has a pleasant run in with an older Jewish woman and the cashier is inconsiderate. In the film, the unpleasant encounter ends with animated Harvey encouraging himself to do something with his anger, which inspires him to write a comic book.

³¹⁹ Carrier, 28.

device, much like characters in a film are oblivious to voice-over narration. For Carrier, this produces a paradox in the image. In the schema of “reading” a comic, we often find ourselves grappling with the image first, the text of the balloon secondly, and finally the shape of the balloon. However, this process does not mean that the form is completely neutral from a graphical standpoint, as its stylistic qualities can denote tone or its use (does it indicate speech or thought?).

Berman and Pulcini’s use of the balloon from containing text to animation changes this dynamic. Once it makes that transition, the balloon no longer acts as the bridge between text and image; it acts as a visual container for the film’s voice-over. Moreover, once animated Pekar breaks out of the container and the balloon disappears, the traditional role of the balloon as not being an element of the physical *mise-en-scène* becomes challenged. Animated Pekar physically confronts Giamatti’s Pekar (figure 1.5), which forces him to acknowledge not only the thoughts being expressed by his animated id but, by extension, the formerly “invisible” element of the balloon as well. Essentially, the filmmakers originally engage with the passive qualities of the balloon in the freeze frames and text of their textual remediation. However, perhaps realizing that such a faithful remediation is not exactly cinematic, the filmmakers shift towards animation, producing a more dynamic form of interaction.

Thought balloons are not the only textual form of the comic that Berman and Pulcini remediate in the film. Throughout the film, beginning with a dazzling credits sequence that takes the form of the grid of the page with each panel presenting a new title card (some animated, some live-action, some photographs of the film’s actual subjects), the filmmakers utilize the caption to inform the viewer of the time and the setting. For instance, one caption is superimposed on an establishing shot and reads “And the next thing, it’s the 80’s.” While these

captions match the presentation of most comics, including Pekar's own, by taking the form of a square box that hugs a boundary of the frame, normally the upper portion, they differ significantly in their contribution to the narrative. Specifically, as Groensteen writes, the caption is "equivalent to the *voiceover*, encloses a form of speech, that of the explicit narrator (who can be the principal narrator or the delegated narrator, intra- or extra-diegetic, etc.)."³²⁰

In Pekar's work, such as the "Standing Behind Old Jewish Ladies in Supermarket Lines," the caption is often linked to him as the explicit narrator. For instance, in "Standing Behind..." the captions serve as the bridge between the present tense panels of Pekar addressing us and the flashback panels depicting his interactions at the supermarket. Essentially, the captions of Pekar's work are subjective and tied to Pekar (both the character and the writer) as narrator. They serve, as Groensteen notes, as the equivalent to the voiceover. The captions of the film, however, are not subjective, as they are not attributed to any of the seven presented versions of Pekar. They do not belong to an explicit narrator; they simply serve as the filmic equivalent of captions as used in most bio-pictures, presenting objective information that helps the viewer situate him or herself in the time and place of the story.

Berman and Pulcini's film was incredibly successful by independent film standards. As aforementioned, the film carried an unconfirmed budget of approximated \$2 million and went on to gross nearly \$8 million worldwide. Oddly, according to HBO Films President Colin Callender, who purchased the distribution rights, their distribution focus was not the theatrical market. The film was purchased with the intent of simply providing content for HBO's premium network.³²¹ When the festival prizes and positive word of mouth rolled in after the Sundance Film Festival, HBO gave the film a modest release with the hopes of increasing exposure. Not

³²⁰ Groensteen, 128.

³²¹ Gregg Kilday, "HBO Finds Splendor in Sundance Selections," The Hollywood Reporter, 24 January 2003.

only were audiences and critics pleased with the film (Ebert named the film his third favorite film of 2003 and the film was nominated for the best adapted screenplay Oscar) but so were the Pekars. According to an interview with Harvey's wife Joyce Brabner, the most important benefit of the whole experience was that "it gives Harvey an opportunity to do more work."³²² When Harvey was asked what he thought about the film, he gave a characteristically short report: "I think the film did a good job at capturing the spirit of my work."³²³

Conclusions

Given the breadth of time (1979-2009) and analysis (ranging from stylistic, industrial, and technological) covered in the previous two chapters it is worth teasing out some general conclusions and re-visiting the three hypotheses guiding this study. First, allow us to reconsider the role that horizontal integration and multimedia conglomerates have played in the process of stylistic remediation. First, as noted above in the introduction to the analysis of American Splendor, the average budget of the films analyzed in this chapter was roughly \$110 million (not including P&A costs). According to the film industry website The Numbers, the average production budget on most contemporary films is \$65 million.³²⁴ As we have seen, particularly in the cases of Superman (1978), Dick Tracy (1990), Hulk (2003), and Watchmen (2009), there appears to be a direct correlation between rising production budgets and the extensive use of physical and computer generated special effects. In the case of Hulk, Universal even went as far to allot an additional \$1.5 million dollars to allow director Ang Lee to experiment with stylistic remediation, as noted in the above analysis of the multiframe. Obviously, multimedia conglomerates stand at a better position to capitalize on these properties by often owning them

³²² Jenelle Riley, "There's Always Hope," Back Stage West Drama-Logue, 21 August 2003.

³²³ Daniel Schweiger, "An American Family: The Pekars Talk about Their Splendor," Venice, August 2003, 57.

³²⁴ "Glossary of Movie Business Terms," The Numbers, publication date unknown, <http://www.the-numbers.com/glossary.php#production_budget> (29 September 2010).

outright (as had been the case with Warner Bros. and Batman) and having a diverse holding of assets that, in turn, gives the conglomerates the amount of capital needed to back a large blockbuster.

To quantify this, a comparison between the number of comic book films released prior to 1989, the year the merger between Time Inc. and Warner Communications was announced which forever changed the industrial landscape of post-Classical Hollywood, and after is useful. According to a keyword search for “based on comic books” on the Internet Movie Database, 154 titles were released prior to 1989 while 472 have been released since (this includes television shows and international productions, so it is not an exact number but it still illustrates the point).³²⁵ The reason for this rise is probably obvious by now: media conglomerates benefit by the added visibility and cultural capital of a property thanks to the rental or utilization of licensing rights. Returning back to the case of Batman, film industry scholar Douglas Gomery writes:

There were more than 100 licensees for Batman products for 300 different items....About a quarter of Batman's 100-plus licenses were newly issued and covered goods specifically based on the movie, as opposed to the comic character....The winner in the merchandising boom was clearly Warners, which in addition to reaping prodigious publicity benefits received a percentage of merchandising revenues.³²⁶

We also saw this trend with Watchmen, as DC Comics, a subsidiary of Time-Warner Communications, sold an additional one million copies of the graphic novel when the film was announced. Essentially, to put a turn on the Spider-Man phrase “With great power comes great responsibility,” with great investment comes the potential for great return.

Now, what role does stylistic remediation play in this investment? You may be asking

³²⁵ “Based on Comic Book Titles,” The Internet Movie Database, publication date unknown, <http://www.imdb.com/keyword/based-on-comic-book/?sort=release_date> (29 September 2010).

³²⁶ Douglas Gomery, The Hollywood Studio System: A History (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), 247.

yourself why the studios behind the titles analyzed in this chapter would even bother remediating the stylistic devices of the comic. Why wouldn't they, like Sam Raimi on the Spider-Man films or Christopher Nolan on the Batman films, cast aside any attempt to grapple with the particular formal attributes of the original source material and just focus on the story? First, most comic book fans, the main demographic for films based on comics, are just as interested in the art of the comic as they are in the story. This is particularly evident at San Diego Comic-Con, as fans flood "Artist's Alley" for both autographs from their favorite artists and original sketches. The sentiment from filmmakers practicing stylistic remediation acknowledges this interest, as evident in Zack Snyder and Warner Bros.' use of Dave Gibbons in the marketing of Watchmen. To produce a comic book film without dealing with its unique formal devices is like adapting a musical and neglecting to include the music; it may work but it also fails to realize what is fully unique about the original form.

Yet, while Twentieth-Century Fox's Chief Marketing Officer John Hegeman continually pushes the philosophy of appeasing the core demographic (in this case, comic book fans), we have seen that, particularly in the case of blockbuster budgeted films, this fan service does not necessarily work out economically. Dick Tracy, Hulk, and Watchmen were all disappointments for their respective studios and the reason for this is telling: comic book readers make up but a small percentage of the audience. They may be the most visible, knowledgably rabid demographic but they are also in the minority. As Neil Rae and Jonathan Gray write, "While comic book adaptations such as Spider-Man and X-Men have grossed up to \$820 million, and attracted millions of viewers worldwide, it is unusual for the global sales of the most popular

American superhero comic books to rise above 150,000.”³²⁷ The Hollywood studios still seem to be figuring out this harsh reality, even at the time of this writing in the fall of 2010 (see the final chapter on Scott Pilgrim vs. the World for further examination).

Addressing the final hypothesis, which asks whether the remediation of comic book stylistics into films is fundamentally a by-product of technologies and an indication of a Manovichian shift from cinema to digital cinema, we have perhaps our most tentative conclusion. Given the role that CGI compositing software has played in many of these films, most notably Hulk and 300, the answer to the first question is an obvious yes. However, as explored in the use of the multiframe in Hulk, despite a filmmaker’s desire to remediate comic book form within the confines of cinema, even a cinema freed by relative economic restraint and representational constraint, the multiframe of the film owes more to the Classical Hollywood style than it does to either the definition of digital cinema proposed by Manovich and, in turn, its source material. I will return to this question again in the future in order to complicate it with further examples.

³²⁷ Neil Rae and Jonathan Gray, “When Gen-X Meets X-Men: Retextualizing Comic Book Film Reception,” in Film and Comic Books, eds. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 86.

Chapter IV: Remediation Beyond Comic Book Films and an Initial Consideration of Transmedia from a Stylistic Perspective

A Brief Prelude

In the study of the stylistic remediation between comics and cinema, comic book films (i.e. film adaptations of comic books) are a logical place to begin the conversation. They provide case studies with a one-to-one correspondence; we are able to compare an artist's style as interpreted by a filmmaker with regard to the formal differences between film and comics: the presentation of sequential images, the correspondences between the comic book panel and the cinematic frame (sometimes down to direct quotations), and the transposition of the word/image binary. Yet, an analysis concerned with stylistic remediation that defines its boundaries via the subcategory of adaptations misses the larger context surrounding this formal interchange. As I will analyze in this chapter, specifically through an analysis of "bullet time" in The Matrix (1999) and graphic and spatial presentation in The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger Born (2007), the integration of stylistic attributes from one medium into another has significant cultural and industrial implications.

Part 1: Action Lines Become Bullet Time in The Matrix (1999)

"Industrially, bullet time became a celebrity in its own right from 1999 to about 2003, organizing commercial, critical and technical discourses around The Matrix....As shorthand for the visual excitement of its parent text, it anchored a blockbuster advertising campaign....Seemingly overnight, its distinctive brand of slow motion spread to other movies, making guest appearances in Shakespearean tragedy...a high-concept television remake...a caper film...a teenybopper SF... and a cop/buddy film."-Bob Rehak.³²⁸

"What I think of as the "Matrix" shot, a lone figure frozen while the camera travels around him, has traveled quickly from novelty to cliché."-Anthony Lane.³²⁹

The Wachowski brothers' film The Matrix has become one of the defining film texts of generations X and Y. Spawning everything from two film sequels, toys, video games, and an

³²⁸ Bob Rehak, "The Migration of Forms: Bullet Time as Microgenre," Film Criticism 32, No. 1 (2007): 27-28.

³²⁹ Anthony Lane, "City of God Movie Review," New Yorker 20 (2003).

anime release, the immense economic and cultural popularity of the science fiction film almost immediately invited comparisons to George Lucas's Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (1977), which had been released more than twenty years earlier and was, at the time, on the eve of its fourth theatrical title: The Phantom Menace (1999). As science fiction author David Gerrold describes the Wachowskis' film in an introduction to one of the many academic volumes published in its wake, "The Matrix hit the film-going public by surprise, much like Star Wars a generation earlier, and for many of the same reasons. It had a breathless pace, astonishing eye-candy, a sense of mythic adventure, and an acid-tinged sensibility."³³⁰ As Bob Rehak's above epigraph also notes, the film's "eye-candy," specifically its scenes featuring the film's heroes Neo (Keanu Reeves), Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), and Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) performing the impossible by gracefully dodging bullets in slow-motion (bullet time sequences), became one of the film's defining characteristics both for spectators and for the Warner Bros. marketing department.

Before delving into an analysis of the film's bullet time sequences in the context of the comic book stylistic convention of action lines, it is essential to note the tangled web of stylistic remediations that the visual technique has at its foundation. First, the technique evolved from less-refined manifestations in music videos and advertisements throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Secondly, as Joshua Clover argues in his monograph on the film, the roots of bullet time can be found in martial arts and shooter genre video games. As Clover writes, "We recognise [sic] it as an explicit immersion effect. Shot from our point of view, the optical perspective swoops through a three-dimensional space, fully-rendered, 360 degrees, without ever revealing the apparatus of filmmaking; we could be inside the synthworld of Zelda, except that the graphics

³³⁰ David Gerrold, "Introduction," in Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy, and Religion in The Matrix, ed. Glenn Yeffeth (Chichester: Summersdale Publishers Ltd., 2003), 6.

are incomparably higher resolution.”³³¹ Finally, as visual effects supervisor John Gaeta explains the roots of the technique, the Wachowski brothers were inspired by “literary SF, Japanese *manga* and *anime*, as well as kung-fu movies whose signature use of slow-motion, wire-based martial-arts,” the latter of which Rehak describes as “the dominant link in bullet time’s chain of aesthetic kinship.”³³² Essentially, bullet time is a form of stylistic remediation that is not only unable to be attributed to a single adaptation but unable to be attributed to a single medium; it is the product of a collage of remediations.

Long before Gaeta and his visual effects crews were assigned the task of finding a technologically feasible way of capturing bullet time both photographically and with the aid of CGI technology, the Wachowski brothers decided to have the entire film storyboarded in order to better explain the style they had in mind for the action sequences. “No one really understood the level of the action or the level of detail that we wanted in the action sequences,” Andy Wachowski notes in a rare interview in the documentary The Matrix Revisited (2001) to which his brother, Larry, adds, “[The inspiration came from] comics and graphic type storytelling where you can freeze a moment, make an image sort of sustain, you can’t really do that in a film.” Having started their career as writers for the comic book title Ectokid (1993-1994), published under Marvel’s Razorline imprint, the Wachowskis approached their artistic partner on the title, penciller Steve Skroce, to aid them in visualizing bullet time (Hard Boiled artist Geof Darrow was also hired as a conceptual designer on the film, contributing to mechanical design of the ships and technology in the film). Skroce and Darrow allegedly storyboarded the entire first film and up to 80% of the film’s sequels, The Matrix Reloaded (2003) and The Matrix

³³¹ Joshua Clover, BFI Modern Classics: The Matrix (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 25.

³³² Gaeta is quoted in Rehak, 33-34.

Revolutions (2003).³³³

From Skroce and Darrow's meticulously designed storyboards and the Wachowski brothers' pastiche of inspirations, Gaeta created a rig that featured a combination of over one hundred still cameras and a handful of motion picture cameras, organized in a circular fashion (within a green screen environment) that could easily be reshaped, depending on the sequence being choreographed. Essentially, the rig can be considered a descendant of Eadweard Muybridge's system taken to the extreme. As Gaeta states in The Matrix Revisited, "Bullet time was really the technical hurdle...[The Wachowskis] showed their [story]boards [to a few effects houses]. Each time they [the brothers] had done that, they [the effects houses] tended to have a similar reaction. Faces turned white [because of the complexity of the special effects needed]." Gaeta, rig in hand, turned to Manex Visual Effects to refine bullet time in post-production. The result of the collaboration, both conceptually and technologically, is a hybrid of the graphic remediation of comic book's articulation of movement via the stylistic device of action lines and cinema's inherent ability to capture movement through the progression of time.

Comics, once again a medium constructed out of frozen, sequential images, have what Scott McCloud describes as "the problem of showing motion in a static medium. How do you show this aspect of time in an art where time stands still?"³³⁴ While motion can be deduced by the reader via the process of closure (as described and analyzed in depth in the previous chapter), such a representation of motion is problematic from a pragmatic standpoint. Once again, comics are limited with regard to the space of the page and the space of the book. If an artist relied only upon the process of closure to depict motion, the comic would be structured as a Muybridge strip

³³³ See the featurettes on Darrow and Skroce included on The Burly Man Chronicles DVD of the The Ultimate Matrix Collection box set.

³³⁴ Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 110.

and the spatial real estate offered by the page would be squandered on capturing subtle, temporal transitions. Moreover, as McCloud also notes, such a representation of action would lack dynamism. Given the medium’s reliance on the superhero genre, viewing action sequences, frozen in time, would grow both tedious and rather boring to the reader (not that it cannot be used as an effective contrast). The solution to this limitation, produced by the unique formal attributes specific to the comic, action lines and their decedents, the use of multiple images and, in some cases, photographic streaking, became an “American specialty” of representing motion in a static image (figure 4.1).³³⁵



Figure 4.1: McCloud’s Discussion of Action Lines in Practice.

As exemplified by the above figure, motion lines (specifically exemplified by panels one

³³⁵ Ibid., 112.

and two), are a form of visual-metaphor. Unable to represent the temporal progression of movement and actions physically, comics represent such actions through the abstracted iconography of the lines, which suggest both a momentum and a trajectory of the force being depicted. Yet, the comic book artist can also underline the function of the lines with text or, in the case of the above example, other aspects of the panel's mise-en-scène. For instance, in the first panel of McCloud's example, the four or five thick parallel lines projected by McCloud's representation of himself are paired with three other notable aspects of the setting. First, the lines intersect with McCloud's form, which is posed as if he is running towards right, towards the end of the panel's depiction of space. Secondly, the speed is suggested by the ferocity of the action lines; at their furthest point away from McCloud, we are able to see the space "behind" them (the man with the papers is a clear example of this). As the lines converge closer to McCloud's running form, the space behind him becomes a void, unknown to us because the speed of McCloud's avatar is that intense. Finally, the two other men in the panel, the man with the hat and the man with the papers are affected by McCloud's mad dash---both men lose their belongings due to the blast of air caused by the running author.

The stylistic devices of multiple images and streaking function similarly. In panel three, McCloud shows us multiple images, emphasized by the use of motion lines. The images spell out the previous locations of his figure (noted in the fainter, less detailed depictions of himself), again voiding the background at the source of the motion. The similarities to Muybridge's motion studies are obvious as we are shown small, sequential movements, albeit within the space of one panel. Streaking, as McCloud notes in his exemplary final panel, is more photographic in nature. The artist does not render himself in detail; we are only given a haze of abstracted movement prior to his concurrent position.

The special effect technique of bullet time draws upon all three methods of depicting motion lines. One of the film's most noteworthy instances of the bullet time technique comes when Neo, who has recently discovered that the space of the film's matrix is a simulation that can be spatially and temporally manipulated at his will, is drawn into a gun fight with the film's sinister agents on the roof of an office building. Neo begins unloading on one of the agents, whose supernaturally fast movements are rendered via a combination of streaking and multiple images (figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2: Streaking and Multiple Images as Motion in The Matrix.

When Neo is fired upon, bullet time is inverted; we experience time slowly, seemingly inspired by his subjective point of view, as he manipulates the matrix. The bullets, moving at their proper velocity, mark the air around him through the motion lines of ripples in the air (figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3: Bullet Trajectories Marked by Motion Lines in The Matrix.

Despite both shots reliance on comic book stylistic conventions, they are rendered

completely differently in the film. The first shot, a static shot taken from Neo's point of view, draws its inspiration more from the static framing of the motion studies and the comic book. The progression of time, despite the agent's manipulation, is represented as passing before the eyes of both Neo and the viewer at twenty-four frames a second. While the film may be deemed "subjective," as it originates from Neo's point of view, we are not experiencing time subjectively within the space of the matrix. The Agent's behavior is business as usual. The filmmakers formally contrast the shot exemplified in figure 4.2 with the shot of Neo engaging in the same behavior (moving faster than the bullets). The camera rotates in a circular motion around the character as he acrobatically dodges the bullets in a ten-second shot. Rather than being experienced at the "natural" frame rate, time is slowed, the space simultaneously dissected. Essentially, the second shot is the dynamic inverse of the first. We are presented with a utilization of comic book style that has been modified to fit the technologically evolving cinematic apparatus.

For comic theorist Robert C. Harvey, filmmaking that manipulates the essence of the medium in the service of remediating comic goes against the nature of medium specificity. In his discussion of how the formal attributes of film and comics differ, Harvey discusses the depiction of unnatural motion (the Spirit is able to place a chair underneath a falling adversary before he hits the ground) using speed lines in Will Eisner's The Spirit (1940-1952). Harvey subsequently asks, "Could film do as much? In slow motion, perhaps? Not likely. The camera would slow both movements....It could be done on film through the use of special effects. Special effects in film can presumably accomplish anything. But special effects are just that---

special; they are not the stuff of ordinary live action committed to celluloid.”³³⁶ For Harvey, as with André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer before him, cinema’s inherent ability to capture action and motion via the mechanism of the automated, photochemical process of photography places it at a debt to reality. According to Harvey, it is unnatural for a filmmaker to infringe on those specific properties.

Yet, even Bazin noted that cinema, in its silent period, had realized two oppositional stylistic paths: the tendency of directors to either put their faith in reality or their faith in the image (artifice).³³⁷ For Bazin, the latter tendency disappeared with the advent of sound and the ability to stage in depth, producing “a much higher degree of realism.”³³⁸ Yet, for most new media scholars, the refinement of special effects technology has begun to swing the stylistic pendulum in the other direction. Whether it be in the form of what Manovich described as “spatial montage” (see the previous section on Hulk) or Garrett Stewart’s analysis of the shifting temporal sands of what he describes as “postfilmic cinema” or “digital cinema.”³³⁹ For Stewart, “we have watched a filmic medium’s original serial imprint yielding to computerized adjustments at every level, from the generation to the editing of projected images. Increasingly, the temporal transit (mechanical) of the image, frame by frame, gives way to its temporal transformation (electronic) within the frame.”³⁴⁰ In other words, digital cinema has given rise to an experience of time that no longer is beholden to the norm of twenty-four frames a second.

While Stewart’s overall conclusions are somewhat problematic (despite technological evolutions, film prints are still the norm for theatrical exhibition and both film and digital

³³⁶ Robert C. Harvey, The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 187.

³³⁷ André Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” in What is Cinema? Volume 1, trans. Hugh Gray. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 24.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

³³⁹ Garrett Stewart, Framed Time: Towards a Postfilmic Cinema (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 3.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

cameras feature variable shutter speeds), his conclusion that such technologies have given filmmakers the ability to manipulate time more precisely is a fair assessment. Moreover, Stewart goes on to tie this tendency in Hollywood filmmaking to the fantastic tales of sci-fi and ghost stories, one notable example being The Matrix.³⁴¹ While it is curious that Stewart does not directly engage with bullet time in the film, I would only supplement his analysis (published in 2007, in the midst of the superhero boom of the 2000s) by noting that the manipulations of time he dissects commonly occur in one sub-genre of sci-fi films: comic book films (see the section on 300 and Watchmen in the previous chapter). Moreover, the change in representation not only owes its manifestation to the software Stewart alludes to (Adobe Premiere and Final Cut Pro) but to the comic books as well, as this analysis of bullet time has illustrated.

The Matrix franchise is commonly used as a seminal text in the critical literature of Cinema and Media Studies, most notably by Henry Jenkins, in addressing the industrial and narrative phenomenon of “transmedia storytelling” or “stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world, a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products.”³⁴² As Jenkins describes the franchise specifically:

Its sequel, The Matrix Reloaded (2003), opens without a recap and assumes we have almost complete mastery over its complex mythology and ever-expanding cast of secondary characters. It ends abruptly with a promise that all will make sense when we see the third installment, The Matrix Revolutions (2003). To truly appreciate what we are watching, we have to do our homework. The filmmakers plant clues that won’t make sense until we play the computer game. They draw on back story revealed through a series of animated shorts, which need to be downloaded off the Web or watched off a separate DVD.³⁴³

³⁴¹ Ibid., 87-121.

³⁴² Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (New York: New York University Press, 2006) , 293.

³⁴³ Ibid., 94.

For Jenkins, building off of Ivan Askwith's notion that The Matrix franchise is best described as "synergistic storytelling," transmedia storytelling is a multifaceted phenomenon that intersects with the social (collective intelligence), the technological (the evolution of production and distribution software and hardware), the aesthetic (world building) and yet is also strongly motivated by economics. As Jenkins quotes Mike Saksa, senior vice president of marketing at Warner Bros., "This [The Matrix] truly is Warner Bros.'s synergy. All divisions will benefit from the property.... We don't know what the upside is, we just know it's going to be very high."³⁴⁴

In retrospect, Saksa's evaluation of the property's potential seems sorely optimistic. While the first film, budgeted at \$63 million, grossed more than \$463 million dollars worldwide, the economic success of the sequels was strong, albeit viewed with criticism upon post mortem.³⁴⁵ Reloaded, carrying a production budget of \$150 million, grossed \$742 million worldwide. Yet, Revolutions, also budgeted at \$150 million, dropped to \$427 million dollar worldwide return, a 43% drop in comparison with its direct predecessor and slightly less than the original film. In both Jenkins' assessment and those of prominent film critics at the time, the economic downturn of the franchise was tied to its ambitious narrative construction, demanding too much from casual viewers and providing little return for diehard fans.³⁴⁶ Tellingly, during a transmedia panel put together by Jenkins and Denise Mann, comic book and television writer Javier Grillo-Marxuach (Lost, The Middleman) was asked for his views on transmedia storytelling, in which the scholar posing the question used The Dark Knight (2008) Alternate-Reality Game (ARG) "Why So Serious?" as an example. Grillo-Marxuach noted, with a laugh,

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 104.

³⁴⁵ Unless otherwise noted, I've taken the production budgets listed at Box Office Mojo, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com>>.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 126-127.

“If I had to do homework to understand Batman, I’d punch someone in the head.”³⁴⁷

Not to digress too far off topic, but The Matrix franchise’s failure to connect with a broader audience appears to have caused Warner Bros. to ease off on the transmedia throttle. For instance, with The Dark Knight, the ARG and the accompanying release of a straight-to-video animated film Batman: Gotham Knight (2008, released a week and a half before the feature) do not provide any information necessary to understanding the plot of the film. Any extra narrative information delivered by the other platforms is either commented upon in the film in its opening moments or inconsequential. For instance, the public sentiment regarding Batman, which is a main topic of discussion in the Gotham Times newspapers distributed via “Why So Serious?” campaign, is delivered in the film in the scene in which Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) dines with girlfriend (Beatrice Rosen), Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), and Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Similarly, in the Gotham Knight short “Crossfire,” Batman encounters a character from The Dark Knight, the policewoman Ramirez, who fails to mention the matter in the film. Despite the fact that these narrative events may take place in the same diegetic world, the separate media forms of the ARG and the animated film do not make distinctive contributions to the narrative. They may be transmedia texts, but they do not participate in transmedia storytelling. Warner Bros. appears to have learned the hard way that transmedia is in its own way a gamble and a risk that is not necessarily worth taking (particularly when the production budget of your franchise’s “mothership,” the film, is \$185 million).³⁴⁸

What most theorization of transmedia storytelling fails to account for – Jenkins has begun to complicate his analysis with an added emphasis on “world building,” a form of “transmedia

³⁴⁷ From the 2010 SCMS panel “Transmedia Studies: The Hollywood Geek Elite Debates the Future of Television,” co-chaired by Denise Mann and Henry Jenkins.

³⁴⁸ The term “mothership” is used to describe the source of driving the narrative by industrial practitioners, most notably Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, the showrunners of ABC’s transmedia franchise Lost (2004-2010).

entertainment” that is less defined by character and plot – is the importance of style and how sensory experiences can, in their own way, encourage active forms of fandom that involve deeper analysis of the texts under investigation, both narrative and formal.³⁴⁹ For instance, the Star Wars video game Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II (1997) was released when I was thirteen years old. My friends and I were all excited to play a first-person shooter with one major addition to the weapons arsenal---a lightsaber. You can imagine a similar reaction when we found out about a cheat code which allowed players to fly the Millennium Falcon in Star Wars: Rogue Squadron (1998). These thrills had nothing to do with narrative and everything to do with engaging in an experience we had all held dear to our hearts: fighting like Luke Skywalker and flying like Han Solo.

Needless to say, this thrill of the sensory is also tied to stylistic remediation in all the forms analyzed here (comic book films, beyond comic book films, and the cyclical process of remediation). During an opening day screening of Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2010, discussed in the final chapter), I overheard a fan telling his girlfriend “It’s perfect! It looks just like the book!” This pleasure taken in the stylistic also gives way to one of the cornerstones of transmedia storytelling: collective intelligence. As Jenkins describes, quoting Pierre Lévy, collective intelligence can give way to an environment in which “distinction between the authors and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpreters will blend...[to form a] circuit,” which will spur the involvement of others.³⁵⁰ A prime example of this involvement with regard to the stylistic can be seen in Solace in Cinema’s “300 Comic to Screen Comparison.” The story is essentially a series of screenshots chronicling similar frames from the comic and the film (no

³⁴⁹ Henry Jenkins, “The Pleasure of Pirates and What It Tells Us About World Building in Branded Entertainment,” Confessions of an Aca-Fan, 13 June 2007, <http://henryjenkins.org/2007/06/forced_simplicity_and_the_crit.html> (24 April 2012).

³⁵⁰ Jenkins, 95.

analysis, just presentation), a device which the author of the story claims to have stolen from a similar project he or she encountered on Sin City (2005).³⁵¹ The story, in turn, inspired nearly 100 comments, some of which discussed the film's similarities to the graphic novel. Essentially, collective intelligence and pleasure in a transmedia property need not be bound to narrative.

To take this back to bullet time and The Matrix, an analysis of the reception to the video game Enter the Matrix (2003) is enlightening. The review site IGN.com gave the game a lukewarm review (7.2 out of 10 for the Playstation 2 incarnation of the title), lodging a major complaint not at the story but at the experience of the game's form (its ludic properties). Most notably, the player's avatar takes the form of two supporting characters, Niobe and/or Ghost. Essentially, the player is not given the chance to play as one of the film's three lead characters. As reviewer Chris Carle writes, "It's nice that Enter the Matrix does not follow the same tired license formula of recreating a mini version of the movie within the game, but damn! It would have been cool to take off through the city as Neo, or shoot it out with agents as Trinity. How about giving Morpheus that samurai sword and seeing what he can do?"³⁵² More significantly, Carle adds in his conclusion, "That said, it's worth a play to see the extra footage and experience the bullet-time and focused hand-to-hand combat.... This effect is not new to video games.... but it was often more than a gimmick than anything."³⁵³ Oddly enough, Carle barely mentions the story and how it relates to the film series. For the reviewer of the video game, one of the seminal pieces of the transmedia universe established for The Matrix, the sensory experience of not getting to play as Neo in bullet time sequences holds greater value than connecting the narrative dots.

³⁵¹ "300 Comic to Screen Comparison," Solace in Cinema, 4 October 2006, <<http://www.solaceincinema.com/2006/10/04/300-comic-to-screen-comparison/>> (4 October 2010).

³⁵² Chris Carle, "Enter the Matrix Video Game Review," IGN.com, 20 May 2003, <<http://ps2.ign.com/articles/403/403749p1.html>> (4 October 2010).

³⁵³ Ibid.

This brings us back to the Bob Rehak quote that introduced this case study. As Rehak notes in his analysis of bullet time, the technique appeared in a range of films, spanning genres, for a four year period. One might make the argument that it was not transmedia storytelling that was the real cultural gift The Matrix franchise bestowed upon the film industry but the stylistic visual device of bullet time, developed by two comic book artists and a special effects technician. After all, as noted in the analysis of the “Why So Serious?” campaign, there still appears to be ambivalence around the embrace of transmedia storytelling. Yet, let us begin to think of the style as a characteristic capable of uniting multiple platforms, without running the risk of alienating a casual consumer (transmedia style can still alienate, as I will later describe in the Scott Pilgrim case study, so it is not a consequence-less option, but it seems to have more pros than cons as long as budgets are kept in check). One could call the formal migration of bullet time “transmedia style,” particularly when limited to Enter the Matrix and The Matrix Comics (2003-2005): narratives delivered across multiple platforms that are united by stylistic devices.

Part 2: Spaghetti Western Style in The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger Born (2007)

“Many of the [Spaghetti Western] films...relied on cutting effects derived from comic-strip graphics.”-Christopher Frayling.³⁵⁴

“[The Dark Tower’s] world shows many influences. On the surface, Mid-World seems a cross between classic Spaghetti Westerns like The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly and popular Arthurian legends, with a dash of Lord of the Rings thrown in. King’s world is even more complex than that, borrowing from many facets of pop culture.”-Jesse Schedeen.³⁵⁵

Novelist Stephen King has sold more than 500 million novels over the span of his thirty-year plus career, making a name for himself in the genre of horror with such titles as Carrie

³⁵⁴ Christopher Frayling, Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), vii.

³⁵⁵ Jesse Schedeen, “Why The Dark Tower Matters,” IGN.com, 17 September 2010, <<http://movies.ign.com/articles/112/1121704p1.html>> (12 October 2010).

(1974), It (1986, winner of the British Fantasy Award), Misery (1987, winner of the Bram Stoker Award), and Under the Dome (2009). Yet, one of King's most noteworthy literary achievements has come in the form of his fantasy-Western series The Dark Tower (1982-Present). The Dark Tower series, which launched with The Gunslinger (1982), has become a linchpin in the mythological universe King has spread across all his titles with re-occurring characters like Randall Flagg (the antagonist of The Stand) and the Crimson King (who makes a guest appearance in Insomnia) and locations like Derry and Castle Rock making appearances both in the Dark Tower books and in other, only tangentially related titles. Essentially, the structure of King's literary universe owes much to the comics. There are titles that form the basis for separate, ongoing series that draw a reader in and are later exploited by the author for cross-over titles (think of Batman and his appearances in both monthly Batman titles and Justice League titles). King's mythological world, as writer Jesse Schedeen notes in the above epigraph, owes much to other media forms both with regard to narrative content and stylistic approach.

King's multi-textual inspired approach to writing and structuring his fictional worlds, in addition to the massive commercial success that he has enjoyed, has made his titles all the more lucrative for transmedia ventures. Throughout the past thirty years, there have been countless films and television miniseries based on his most popular novels. Yet, one of the longest gestating works was an adaptation of his Dark Tower series. Throughout the 2000s, the books, including the secondary titles that King co-wrote with Peter Straub (The Talisman and Black House) were reportedly optioned for either film or television treatment. Allegedly, J.J. Abrams and his Lost co-creators Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof optioned the books in 2007 for \$19 dollars. King sold the rights to their production company, Bad Robot, for such a small sum due

to his love of their television series.³⁵⁶ Yet, The Dark Tower, as of this writing, has yet to make the transition to any kind of screen.

The only “adaptation” it has found, perhaps due to King’s distaste for other adaptations of his work (“[I don’t] give a shit about movies.”) came in 2007 when Marvel Comics acquired the rights to the series. The publisher turned the universe of the series into a comic book prequel to King’s books, under the guidance of the author (who serves as Creative and Executive Director on the project), Marvel editor Ralph Macchio, writer Peter David, and artists Jae Lee (pencils) and Richard Isanove (color).³⁵⁷ The title had an astonishing debut, selling 172,116 copies, ranked second by Diamond for the month of February 2007, behind the seventh issue of the Marvel “event” title Civil War (2006-2007), which pitted Capt. America against Iron Man (Civil War sold 265,886 copies but had a lower cover price of \$2.99, compared with the steep \$3.99 price tag Dark Tower carried).³⁵⁸ The title would become the 23rd bestselling comic book of the 2000s, no small feat considering that the series does not feature the members of the DC or Marvel stable of superhero stars.³⁵⁹ The title would fall into 3rd place upon its conclusion, selling 124,601 copies of the seventh issue.³⁶⁰

For King, the comic book form was a natural home for The Dark Tower. He noted in an interview that “The four-color world...has always had a strong influence on my work.”³⁶¹ As already noted, King’s world of The Dark Tower owes much to other titles and media, both

³⁵⁶ Nisha Gopalan, “Stephen King Reveals Long-Awaited Tower Scoop at Comic-Con,” Entertainment Weekly, 26 February 2007, <http://popwatch.ew.com/2007/02/26/with_toothpick_/> (12 October 2010).

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ “February 2007 Comic Book Sales Figures,” The Comics Chronicles, publication date unknown, <<http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2007/2007-02.html>> (1 June 2011).

³⁵⁹ “Top Comic Books of the 2000s,” The Comics Chronicles, <<http://www.comichron.com/vitalstatistics/topcomics2000s.html>> (1 June 2011).

³⁶⁰ “August 2007 Comic Book Sales Figures,” The Comics Chronicles, <<http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2007/2007-08.html>> (1 June 2011).

³⁶¹ David Colton, “Q&A with Stephen King,” USA Today, 18 December 2006, <http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2006-12-18-king-qa_x.htm> (12 October 2010).

narratively and formally. This analysis, engaging with the first comic in the series, The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger Born (2007) will focus on just King, Lee, and Isanove's mobilization of Spaghetti Western visual style (as exemplified by Sergio Leone's The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly) while posing questions regarding transmedia that cannot, as of this writing, be answered.

For Spaghetti Western and Leone scholar Christopher Frayling, Leone's films already exhibit a visual style based upon the conventions of what he calls the "comic-strip."³⁶² This sentiment regarding Leone's stylistic preoccupations has been seconded by scholar Adrian Martin, who writes in his monograph on Once Upon a Time in America (1984) that the gangster film differs from the filmmaker's Westerns insofar as "it is not as purely comic book-like."³⁶³ Unfortunately, both scholars leave these conclusions drifting, without a proper analysis to ground them. Leone's films are often described with the adjective or the noun "comic," but this is normally directed towards his use of violence as a means of producing a comic or absurd effect. In this light, the use of "comic" in describing Leone's work can be incredibly vague. Are Frayling and Martin describing the use of the gag in comics as a structuring mechanism or the actual style of the medium?

The first visual aspect worthy of analysis in the stylistic overlap between The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (1966) and The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger Born is how the Western landscape physically and morally marks the characters (King did, after all, base his protagonist on Clint Eastwood's "Man with No Name").³⁶⁴ Specifically, both texts are linked insofar as the deserts wrecked by world-ending events have left physical marks on the characters, which in turn serve as iconography for their positions on the moral compass. As McGee once again writes, "In

³⁶² Frayling, Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone, vii.

³⁶³ Adrian Martin, Once Upon a Time in America (London: BFI Press, 2008), 4.

³⁶⁴ Stephen King, The Gunslinger: Revised and Expanded Edition (Toronto: Signet Fiction, 2003), xxvii.

the opening sequences of the film, each character is labeled by a moral or aesthetic term that appears on the screen over a freeze-frame of his image. The last to be identified is the Good, Eastwood's character; and it can be inferred from his role in the film that the word 'good' applied to him can be read as both an aesthetic and a moral category and probably is meant to represent the confusion of the two in the modern Nietzschean world."³⁶⁵ The ugliness of Tuco is foregrounded not only by a similar titled, freeze-frame, as he dives out a window with a mischievous grin on his face, but by his character's facial features as well. Most notably, he has a discolored, perhaps even dead, tooth that stands out at the front of his smile. Moreover, Leone often directs and shoots Wallach as if he were a rabid dog. For instance, when Tuco is first caught and tried from his crimes against humanity (including "raping a virgin of the white race"), he shoots a devilish sneer at an elderly woman, causing her to audibly gasp. Furthermore, Tuco's ugliness is frequently commented upon (often ironically) and linked to his career as a criminal. As one bounty hunter informs him while holding a wanted poster with his image on it, "Hey, amigo! You know you have a face beautiful enough to be worth \$2000?" The characters of The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly represent their own moral worth, much like the caricatures of Chester Gould's Dick Tracy comic-strip, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Lee and Isanove's work on The Gunslinger Born also draws upon caricature to the point that the characters almost literally wear their morals on their sleeves. Roland, the book's protagonist, is iconographically similar to Eastwood's Blondie. Both men wear the same color duster and cowboy hat, which telling casts a mysterious shadow over their face. Yet, when you get to the person underneath the clothing, both men are physically flawless: they are both lean in form, unmarked (at least at the beginning of both texts) by the desert or from the resulting scars

³⁶⁵ McGee, 175.

of dastardly deeds, and have skin blazed in a healthy shade of tan. In contrast, the villains of Cort, Rhea, and Crimson King are all physically deformed. Cort, a physical threat to the young Roland, exerts his power via his obese form. He is bald; his is body baby-like, complete with fatty haunches. His face is scarred, wrinkled, and after he attacks the young protagonist, he is left with an eyeball plunked out of its socket. Similarly, Rhea, the witch who casts a malicious spell over Roland's love, Susan Delgado, is physically branded by her evil ways. Her face, best depicted on the cover of issue five and the final page of issue six, appears to be mummified, wrinkled by the tendons of muscle that lie underneath her paper-thin skin. The only part of her face that appears to have any "natural" qualities is her nose, which is represented as a deep rusty red, standing out like a beacon on her otherwise white-washed face. This is a fitting visible attribute, considering that Rhea is a brown-noser who attempts to use her gifts to solidify her position with the evil Coffin Hunters. Frayling's analysis of Leone's world can double for that of The Gunslinger Born: "They are brutal because of the environment in which they exist. And they make no attempt to change that environment. They accept it, without question."³⁶⁶

The most obvious example of caricature in The Gunslinger Born comes in the design of the Crimson King, the ultimate baddie in King's Mid-World. A hybrid of man and spider, the Crimson King is described by writer Peter David as being "the devil...the Antichrist...the Lord of Spiders" who, when he speaks causes "a slumbering, dreaming infant" to shudder and die in its crib.³⁶⁷ When the Crimson King is introduced in the second issue of the series, we watch as he sits on his throne, the remainders of a human body hanging from his dagger-like legs as he feasts (figure 4.4).

³⁶⁶ Frayling, 160.

³⁶⁷ Peter David, Robin Furth, Jae Lee, and Richard Isanove, The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger Born 2 (New York: Marvel Comics, 2007), 5-7.



Figure 4.4: *Caricature and the Crimson King in The Gunslinger Born (2007).*

Like Leone, the team behind The Gunslinger Born makes it abundantly obvious via the device of caricature what characters we are to align our sympathies with. The inhabitants of Civil War America and Mid-World have been physically branded by their deeds, good and bad. There is nothing subtle or naturalistic about such a presentation; it is a form of stylization taken to baroque heights.

Considering the roots of The Dark Tower in this mid-evil fantasy, the Westerns of Leone and, as King describes it, “the four-colored world,” it seems fitting that caricature plays such a large role in the presentation of The Gunslinger Born. E.H. Gombrich, art historian and scholar of the caricature, writes that the art form is “the conscious distortion of the features of a person with the aim of ridicule. . . . [it shows] more of the essential, is truer than reality itself.”³⁶⁸ Unlike the caricatures of Chester Gould, Leone and Lee’s depictions are not defined by the art of simplification. Yet, what unites both approaches is the desire on behalf of the artist to move

³⁶⁸ E.H. Gombrich, “The Principles of Caricature,” The Gombrich Archive, 25 May 1937, <<http://www.gombrich.co.uk/showdoc.php?id=85>> (1 November 2010).

away from a naturalistic representation of the human form towards a representation that links both external reality (the actual physical form of the person being depicted) with the internal reality of the subject or, as Gombrich describes it, “penetrating through the mere outward appearance to the inner being in all its littleness or ugliness.”³⁶⁹

Returning to Frayling and Martin’s description of Leone’s work as being comic book like, which we have already begun to investigate via his use of caricature, a brief consideration of Italian historical and cultural context is needed to move beyond circumstantial evidence to a more concrete argument. Born in 1929, Leone was a child during the 1930s when, as Italian comics scholar Simone Castaldi posits, “American adventure comics such as Flash Gordon, Mandrake, [and] The Phantom” were “especially successful” in Italy.³⁷⁰ As American comics took off in Italy, Castaldi observes that they appear to have:

“stimulated local production. In fact, Italian authors absorbed their form and content then reformulated them in an all-but-Mediterranean fashion (a similar trend emerged again in the ‘60s and ‘70s with the phenomenon of Italian genre cinema – especially with spaghetti westerns and crime movies)...Italian comics of the post-war years were mostly adventure comics, reflecting – and often – rewriting – many popular American genres, especially westerns [such as Tex Willer]...”³⁷¹

Oddly, despite the establishment of Italian western comic books, Leone appears to have been more interested in the American titles. According to Frayling, Leone found Italian comics “abominable” and once remarked that “Luckily, there was a thriving black market, where you could buy all that was forbidden. American novels and comics were sold under the counter, or

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Simone Castaldi, Drawn and Dangerous: Italian Comics of the 1970s and 1980s (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 12.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 12-13.

from suitcases.”³⁷² Frayling, in his biography on Leone, claims that the language barrier was not an issue for the filmmaker, as “the graphics were much more interesting in any case.”³⁷³

While we cannot be sure what American comics or what graphical aspects of those texts captured Leone’s attention, I would argue that the most illustrative example of his work’s debt to its sister medium in sequential images is in how the filmmaker subverts the classical conventions of spatial construction. To summarize Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger once again, the classical Hollywood mode of storytelling (which, of course, was not limited to Hollywood in terms of its practice---the classical mode was, as the authors argue, embraced as an international form as national cinemas felt the need to compete with Hollywood) presents space in a progression of long-shots to close-ups. The introduction of a new location normally begins with an establishing shot before providing a closer dissection of space. For example, if a filmmaker was introducing two characters at a coffee shop, he or she would normally begin with a shot of the coffee shop’s exterior, cut to a medium shot of the booth that the two characters are sitting at, and then segue into a close-up, shot/reverse-shot sequence of two characters involved in a dialogue exchange. This is done for the sake of narrative and spatiotemporal clarity; the classical system keeps ambiguity at a minimum in order to emphasize story over style.

Film and comics differ greatly with regard to their individual systems of norms, specifically in the presentation of space. While film and comics have many formal affinities (the use of sequential images to establish a narrative, the use of a frame or panel as a window into a world, the use of montage even), the differences in their physical form gives them medium specific differences. As discussed in the previous chapter, comics cannot engage with the classical Hollywood system’s presentation of space due to spatial limitations: a comic book that

³⁷² Christopher Frayling, Sergio Leone: Something to Do With Death (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 7.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 6.

tries to present space in such a way would burn through its industrial standard of thirty-two pages very quickly if a writer/artist decided to bow to continuity rules. Therefore, spatial discontinuity is simply inherent in the form, an additional variable that the consumer must seek closure for during the process of reading. The spatial reality that is presented in comics is, due to the limitations of the form and to the fact that it being completely fabricated by the artist, malleable.

As comic theorist Thierry Groensteen describes, “In cinema, the frame is, from the moment of shooting, the instrument of an extraction, of a deduction... The frame assigns limits to the profusion of the represented elements, and it elects a privileged fragment. The frame of a comics panel does not remove anything” due to the panel being composed within the frame, not composed around it.³⁷⁴ Groensteen is correct, if one limits film form to the classical system of spatial articulation. For Groensteen, the physical reality that is filmed as cinema is a limitation: any choice of framing is affected by reality, limiting the filmmaker’s compositional choices. However, as I will now analyze, the work of Leone owes more to the comic than to the classical mode, complicating Groensteen’s simplification and providing specific analysis to ground Frayling and Martin’s conclusions.

There are two specific instances of Leone’s undermining of the classical continuity system worth noting here. The first occurs in the film’s opening sequence. The film begins with a long-shot of a valley, encroached by a rocky ridge in the middle of the desert. The shot feels like an establishing shot, due to its scope, although we quickly realize that it establishes nothing: there are no buildings, no characters, and no distinguishing landmarks that mark the ridge. Suddenly, from off-screen left, the face of a man (Al Mulock) swoops into frame, changing the shot from a long-shot to an extreme close up (this shot is paid homage in the already discussed

³⁷⁴ Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 40.

opening page of Gunslinger Born). In the second shot, we are given what appears to be an establishing shot of a village from the man's point-of-view. The village appears to be abandoned with its sole inhabitant being an old dog that runs across the mid-ground of the frame. Slowly, two figures emerge from the horizon line. Yet, Leone holds them at such a distance that we are unable to notice any distinguishing characteristics. Again, the purpose of the establishing shot is undermined by Leone's staging of the action. When he cuts into the space to give us those details, he skips the long-shot to medium-shot progression and goes straight into a close-up. The space of the film is ambiguous to the point of being self-conscious.

As the sequence continues, the staging suggests that the three men will be engaging one another in a gunfight. The man from the opening frame is filmed as being at one end of town while the other duo approaches him through the village. It feels like a classic showdown set-up. Again, Leone films the approach in either extreme close-up or extreme long-shot, whose function is still undermined by the fact that we do not see the three men sharing a medium-shot frame until the last possible second: when they veer off and approach a building on the left side of the space. As the scene comes to its conclusion, Leone once again breaks with the function of the classical system. The three men storm the building and we hear gunshots as a gunfight ensues but do not see it. Instead, Leone keeps the camera outside the building the entire time, tracking away from the building's door towards the window from which jumps Tuco with a pistol and a ham hock in hand. We are surprised by his exit because Leone has kept the existence of Tuco a complete mystery to us until the last possible second when he, once again, introduces a character outside the formal norms of the classical system. The entire opening sequence works to subvert our expectations both in terms of the Western narrative (the potential duel becomes a one-way slaughter) and the embrace of spatial ambiguity.

A similar depiction of space occurs later in the film when Blondie and Tuco, following the already described shoot-out with Angel Eyes and his men, ride off in search of a cemetery where gold has been hidden. The duo rides towards the camera across a wood-lined trail, Ennio Morricone's score keeping pace alongside the horses. Suddenly, the music stops and the duo dismount their steeds. They walk towards the camera, Tuco with map in hand, as he states "Ah! Peace and quiet Amigo!" Tuco, consulting with the map, points to off-screen right, and says "There should be a bridge across that river." Again, Leone keeps the viewer from reading the space, allowing Tuco's assessment to perform the task for him and us. As they look out towards the space of the bridge, they continue to walk towards off-screen right, the camera tracking with them. Tuco boasts, when Blondie expresses his concern over a daylight crossing, "I've got a good sense of where I'm going!" As he continues to brag about his knowledge of the space of the crossing, a man with a rifle flanks them from the left-side of the frame and emerges behind them, quickly followed by two swords entering from the camera's position in space, directly in front of them. Realistically, Tuco and Blondie would have seen the men ahead: the swordsmen are on the path directly in front of them, uncovered by foliage. The spatial reality of the bridge, both Tuco's assessment of it and the classical system of editing, are further undermined when the camera reveals that there is an entire military encampment established at the bridge.

In these two examples, the reality of the space is treated by Leone as something malleable. The space does not limit or determine the camera's dissection of the geography; the camera limits the geography. As Roger Ebert writes in his essay on the film, "Leone established a rule that he follows through The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. The rule is that the ability to see is limited by the sides of the frame. At moments in the film, what the camera cannot see, the characters cannot see, and that gives Leone the freedom to surprise us with entrances that cannot

be explained by the practical geography of his shots.”³⁷⁵ Frayling makes similar note of Leone’s unorthodox composition of space, writing:

Objects appear from out of frame, originating *beneath* the camera’s field of vision. . . . The whole of The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly can be interpreted, or ‘read’, in terms both of the cinematic exploration of spaces or shapes, and of the experimentation with a form of pure iconography. . . . [He] uses space geometrically, operating in terms of the possibilities of the wide screen; in other words, he manipulates spaces *cinematically* – a technique which reveals a profound knowledge of the possibilities of cinema (and of the uses to which the wide screen can be put), at the same time as a *celebration* of the ‘codes’ of the Western. Often, the flattening effect of the wide screen image, and the emphasis on the geometry of spaces, rather than their depth, achieves a kind of unity with the action itself – where a set of cinematic mythologies are being acted out.³⁷⁶

While I believe that the adverb “cinematically” (given emphasis by Frayling) is perhaps ill-chosen, given how Leone is subverting the codes of classical cinematic spatial construction, I believe this may have been on the track he was alluding to when he (and Adrian Martin) noted the influence of the comic strip upon the Spaghetti Western. The frame in Leone’s world is not, to return to Groensteen’s contrast of space in film and comics, an instrument of extraction or deduction as the filmmaker is composing space within the frame rather than allowing the space without to dictate his presentation. In this sense, the films of Leone owe more to the plasticity of spatial construction taken by the comic artist than the adherence to reality furthered by the classical system.

Thus far, I have analyzed how Leone’s films remediate the style of comics with regard to the practice of unorthodox spatial construction and the embrace of caricature to define the characters of his Western universe. I have already begun to put Leone’s remediations in dialogue with those of The Gunslinger Born, analyzing how King, David, Lee, and Isanove paint

³⁷⁵ Roger Ebert, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly Movie Review,” [RogerEbert.com](http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20030803/REVIEWS08/308030301/1023), 3 August 2003, <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20030803/REVIEWS08/308030301/1023>> (1 November 2010).

³⁷⁶ Frayling, 175, 180.

a similar view of the West as a wasteland that physically and morally deranges its inhabitants. In completing this analysis, I will briefly turn to two final aspects of stylistic remediation present in The Dark Tower comic: the dimensions of the frame and the use of temporal duration and spatial abstraction in order to solicit suspense.

Leone's filmmaking style, particularly in his later Westerns, is often described, as Frayling does in the block quote above, as an exploration of the widescreen, cinematic canvas. He may, at times, use the scope of the widescreen to lull the viewer into a false sense of spatial security (as he does in the Tuco and Blondie scene described above). After all, we experience the widescreen image as something all encompassing, a cinematic supplement to our peripheral vision. At other times, Leone uses the widescreen image to focus in on incredibly small details, as he does in the shot which opens the film. Similarly, David, Lee, and Isanove have structured the multiframe of The Gunslinger Born around horizontally orientated images (with the few notable exceptions being panels that span an entire page). Most comics, to conserve space (the page is narrower than it is wide) feature multiframe which, like those in Watchmen (1986), feature panels that are composed vertically. All the panels of The Gunslinger Born are, unlike those of most comics, widescreen compositions. Moreover, as already discussed, the creative team's use of the frame in terms of continuity and suspense is similar to that of Leone's use of the widescreen image. The end result adds a final, cosmetic touch to David, Lee, and Isanove's remediation of Leone's style.

A final aspect of stylistic remediation in The Gunslinger Born is worth briefly discussing. Leone is often described as a filmmaker whose lead-ups to acts of violence are emphasized over the acts themselves. For instance, let us return to the opening sequence in The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. The sequence clocks in at three minutes, which feels like an incredibly grueling

and stress inducing amount of time (although, in comparison with the opening of Once Upon a Time in the West, it pales in comparison). The first two and half minutes of the sequence is composed of a long walk of preparation as the bounty hunters ready themselves to confront, as we soon find out, Tuco. As Hughes writes, “This scene [the opening ghost-town shootout] is a familiar Leone duel, but presented in an unusual way. Here the shots of boots, close-ups of eyes and guns being loaded add tension to the scene.”³⁷⁷ These graphical details, as already described, are abstracted from the larger space of the scene. We are unsure of their spatial relationship to one another and Leone’s emphasis is not put on spatial cohesion but on the actions as rituals. When Leone finally reaches the shootout, it takes place over the span of seven seconds, 3% of the sequence’s total running time. For Frayling, Leone turns the Western into an exercise in iconography, another stylistic attribute of the comic as Scott McCloud describes it.³⁷⁸ Obviously, the emphasis is placed on the preparation for violence, both spatially and temporally, not the act itself. This lends the sequence an incredible amount of suspense as the action becomes an inevitable conclusion. The only surprise, as already described, comes in the form of its result: the outgunned Tuco kills or wounds his assailants.

A similar method of constructing suspense is utilized by David, Lee, and Isanove in the sequence in which Cort and Roland face off with one another. Depicted over the course of nine pages and forty-three panels, the lead-up to the duel is given a similar amount of emphasis. The first page, prior to Cort’s arrival, is visualized over the span of four panels, each narrowing in dimensions as Roland prepares and Cort approaches. When Cort finally does emerge to face Roland on the second page of the sequence, the creative team gives us a page layout featuring the most panels in the sequence, twelve. The first eleven panels are extreme close-ups on the faces

³⁷⁷ Hughes, 118.

³⁷⁸ McCloud, 24-59.

of Roland and Cort as they announce their choice in weapons; it is not until the page reaches the final panel that we are given a medium shot of where the two figures are in spatial relation to one another. The following five pages (and nineteen panels) depict the battle between the two until Roland beats Cort into submission, which is relayed in the form of a full-page image of Roland standing over his fallen foe. In contrast with Leone's depiction of the showdown, David, Lee, and Isanove visualize the violence over the course of 62% of the sequence (if we are gauging it by the number of panels) in contrast to Leone's 3%. Yet, the fragmentation of the preparation across the smaller panels of the page takes longer to read in contrast with the larger compositions of the showdown and it structures time and space in a suspenseful fashion akin to Leone's. Leone, remediating the style of the comic, now is being remediated in comic form by David, Lee, and Isanove.

During my work on this dissertation, Universal Pictures (in conjunction with King, Akiva Goldsman's Weed Road, and Brian Grazer and Ron Howard's Imagine Entertainment) announced that pre-production had begun on a transmedia production of The Dark Tower. While details, including release dates, have been scarce, the project will involve Howard directing the first film in the series, based on a script by Goldsman. Yet, as Variety reported in a cover story, the franchise being built around the property is far more "ambitious---and daunting" than a simple film adaptation.³⁷⁹ Universal, perhaps inspired by AMC's cross-platforming of their adaptation of Robert Kirkman's The Walking Dead (2010-) or Marvel's awaited attempt at transmedia in the form of their forthcoming film The Avengers (2012), has decided that the property is large enough to encourage three films and a television series (which will serve as a narrative bridge between the films). In contrast with the 60s and 70s in which television and film

³⁷⁹ Dave McNary and Michael Schneider, "Towering Challenge," Variety, 9 September 2010, 1.

approached comic book adaptations with very different philosophies with regard to style and demographics, the relationships amongst the three media forms have been fluid and re-defined. With high profile series like The Walking Dead and the potential Dark Tower television show serving as connective tissue between texts, television has moved from the kiddie to the adult dinner table. While Marvel's involvement in the project and, along with it, any hint of whether or not stylistic remediation will occur, remain unclear, The Dark Tower franchise should provide another illustrative case study in the theorization of transmedia properties (Schneeden has suggested that the comics will provide the inspiration for the series).³⁸⁰

Conclusions

The initial purpose of this chapter was to engage in a discussion of stylistic remediation beyond comic book films and to look at the industrial practice beyond the mode of adaptation in its traditional sense (the adaptation of a text from one medium into another). In the case of The Matrix, I have traced how the stylistic flourish of bullet time drew its inspiration from a tangled web of inspirational sources (video games, anime), including comic books, and was subsequently developed via a partnership between comic book creative personnel and special effects artists. The case study of The Matrix not only served to exemplify how the norms of the comic have been ported over into the medium of film, but to also begin to discuss the phenomenon of transmedia storytelling with an attention to style. As the name of the concept implies, transmedia storytelling is often theorized with regard to world-building or separate but overlapping narratives, offered up by various, cross-platforming texts.

Yet, with all the discussion about The Matrix as being a key text in the development of transmedia storytelling, we tend to underestimate the stylistic influence that transmedia

³⁸⁰ Schneeden, "Why The Dark Tower Matters."

experiences can offer. For instance, as described in the reaction to the video game The Matrix Reloaded, a text commonly cited as being a milestone in transmedia storytelling, critics were not as quick to discuss the video game's narrative complexities as they were to discuss the disappointment at not being able to experience bullet time from the standpoint of Neo or one of the film's main protagonists. Investigations and alterations of a medium's style can lead to incredibly potent personal experiences. We have already begun to see this in the pleasure that comic book fans take in describing, comparing and contrasting comic book adaptations to their original sources. The difficulty of this line of investigation for us as scholars is that we need to begin to articulate our own pleasures and to begin to acknowledge the subjective experiences we bring to textual analysis.

In the second case study of this chapter, focusing on the stylistic intersection between The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly and the comic book adaptation of The Gunslinger Born, I have both analyzed how Leone's style may have been, as suggested by Christopher Frayling and Adrian Martin, influenced by the form of the comic while engaging in an analysis of how Leone's remediations have been subsequently remediated by the creative team behind the comic. This case study may raise more questions than answers to the phenomenon of what we can begin to describe as transmedia style due to the most recent industrial developments within the franchise (the film and television titles currently in pre-production). However, it does provide a relevant bridge to the next chapter that will further investigate transmedia from a stylistic perspective while also looking at stylistic remediation as being, unlike the bulk of adaptations, a cyclical process.

Essentially, a remediation does not end with one manifestation; it can be an ongoing, organic process. It is possible for the process of adaptation to also become cyclical, as the act of

adapting a previous text into another does not make a cyclicity an impossibility. A significant example to the contrary would be adapting a book into a movie and then producing a novelization based off the film, producing a cycle of adaptation. However, this tends to be incredibly rare (for instance, the film franchises of Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings did not spawn separate novelizations; the original books were released with tie-in jacket art) considering that it would involve additional labor to produce what is essentially a copy of a copy. Thus, the process of adaptation is not inherently incapable of cyclicity; it is just uncommon for it to be practiced.

Chapter V: Remediation as a Cyclical Cultural Process

In Michael Chabon's fictionalized account of the Golden Age of comics, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay (2000), Jewish writer Sammy Clay and his artist émigré cousin Joseph Kavalier create a successful comic book superhero dubbed "The Escapist" in 1939. During the beginning of their tenure, they use the American comic book form to take out their aggression on the antagonist of all the Jews of the world, the Nazis. However, after suffering editorial censorship, the duo shifts their objective, focusing on how further explore the form of the comic. Their inspiration for formal exploration does not come from the work of Winsor McCay, the titles being published by DC Comics, or the seminal work of Hergé. The reason Chabon gives for Kavalier and Clay's experimentation in Radio #19, which caused "nine million unsuspecting twelve-year-olds of America" to want "to grow up to be comic book men," is Orson Welles's Citizen Kane (1941).³⁸¹ As Kavalier tells his American cousin after coming out of the New York City premiere, "I want us to do something like *that*."³⁸²

For Kavalier, as Chabon writes, "Citizen Kane represented, more than any other movie Joe had ever seen, the total blending of narration and image that was-didn't Sammy see it?-the fundamental principle of comic book storytelling....Without the witty, potential dialogue and the puzzling shape of the story, the movie would have been merely an American version of the kind of brooding, shadow-filled Ufa-style expressionist stuff that Joe had grown up watching in Prague. Without the brooding shadows and bold adventurings of the camera, without the theatrical lighting and queasy angles, it would have been merely a clever movie about a rich bastard. It was more, much more, than any movie really needed to be. In this crucial regard-its

³⁸¹ Michael Chabon, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay (New York: Picador, 2000), 361.

³⁸² Ibid.

inextricable braiding of image and narrative—Citizen Kane was like a comic book.”³⁸³ Chabon’s version of Welles (or at least Kavalier’s interpretation of Chabon’s version of Welles) is vaguely inspired by comic book form and places that formal remediation into Kane. Kavalier sees the film and, inspired by what he perceives as Welles’s cinematic remediation of comics, decides to use comic book form to remediate Welles’s initial remediation of comics. Essentially, Chabon gives us a case study in formal remediation as being a potentially cyclical process.

While Chabon’s case study is beautiful, poetic, and rewarding for both the cinephiles and comic book fans who read his book it is, nevertheless, the work of fiction. Kavalier and Clay, just like their creation “The Escapist,” never existed in the historical moment of the Golden Age of comics.³⁸⁴ Welles may have been vaguely inspired by comic books but there is no historical basis for Chabon’s fun interpretation. Yet, while the case study is fictional, the concept of cyclical formal remediation is not. While I may not be half the character that Joseph Kavalier is, allow me to share a brief autobiographical anecdote. I, at the age of five, unknowingly uncovered the first instance of cyclical remediation that came to my mind when pursuing this topic for a dissertation. In 1989, as described in chapter one, Batmania had gripped much of America, young and old alike. I was obviously on the younger side of the equation and my extended family gently indulged my obsession with Batman with movie tie-in merchandise. While I had a Batmobile toy, a Batwing, Bruce Wayne’s Manor (which turned into a Batcave!), the Prince soundtrack (that didn’t last long, once my mother heard some of the lyrics), the only piece of Batman swag that survived the last two decades of my care is Dennis O’Neil, Jerry Ordway, and Steve Oliff’s Batman: A DC Movie Special (1989). The DC Movie Special is

³⁸³ Ibid., 362.

³⁸⁴ Chabon later edited a series of Escapist comics that are portrayed as being reprints of Kavalier and Clay’s work but are the creations of contemporary comic book writers and artists.

essentially a comic book adaptation of the Tim Burton film, which is a comic book adaptation in itself. While it is not unusual for such products to exist (my dust cloaked box of comic books reveals quite a few of them, ranging from Terminator 2: Judgment Day to Robocop), what continues to strike me about the DC Movie Special is how it remediates the style of both the film and the original comic.

The first image we are presented with is the cover (figure 5.1), featuring Ordway and Oliff's graphical remediations of Michael Keaton's Batman and Jack Nicholson's Joker. We are not shown versions of the two seminal characters taken from O'Neill's own history on the title. As this is an adaptation of the film, it is expected to look like the film...for the most part. An odd addition has been made to the lower left-hand corner of the cover: a black and white penciled Joker card. At the age of five, I was not "in" on the joke (pun intended) of what the card represented. Now, having immersed myself in Batman lore, spoken to Batman artist Jerry Robinson, and seen Robinson's exhibition at the Skirball Center, the oddity of the card stands out like a sore-thumb. It is a piece of Robinson's original concept artwork of the Joker, whom Robinson co-created. The card also appears on another important cover, Batman #1 (Spring 1940).

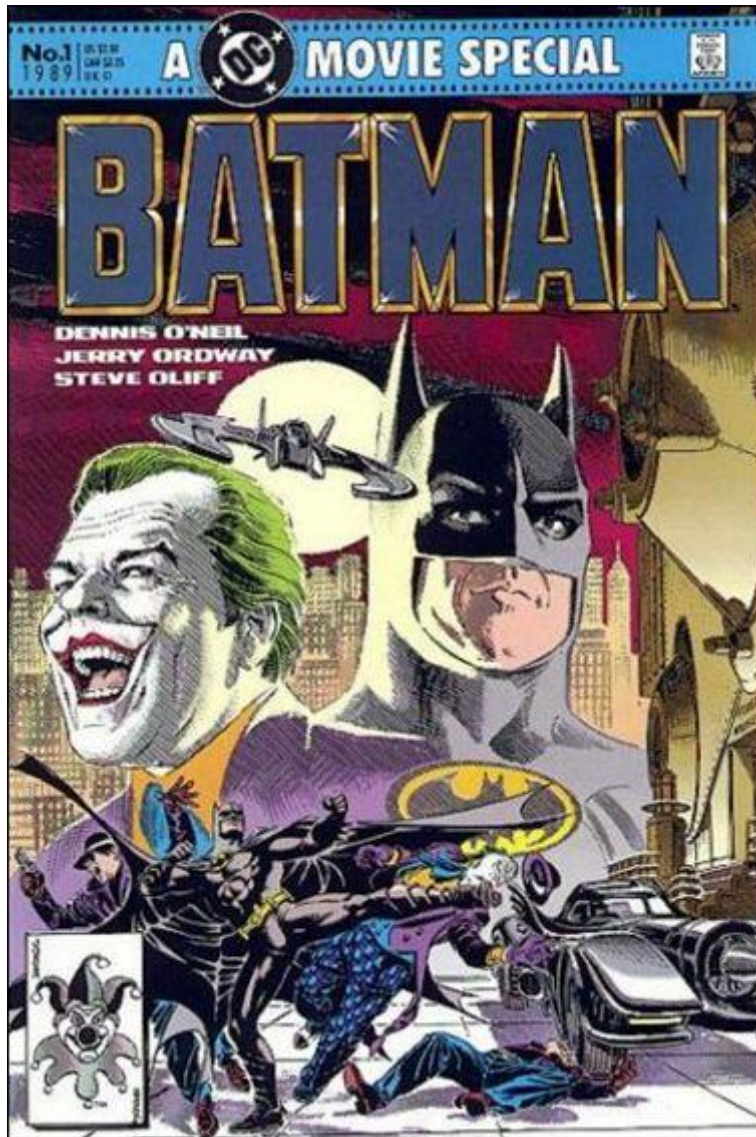


Figure 5.1: The Cover Art to *Batman: A DC Movie Special* (1989).

Yet, the stylistic remediation continues! The introductory page of the issue begins with a text block: “It’s just a movie, for Heaven’s sake.” The text block stands over a background of people watching a film in a movie theater (rendered in the blue, black, and white of the glow of the screen). The image of the audience is obstructed by an upper image layer featuring a vertical column of panels depicting the opening images of the film (figure 5.2). However, these panels are not presented in the usual grid of the page. The creative team behind the *DC Movie Special*

has embellished them in a particular fashion: the panels are actually individual frames on a spool of motion picture film.



Figure 5.2: *Cinematic Remediation in Batman: A DC Movie Special.*

The movie the audience is watching is Tim Burton's Batman; the book we're reading is akin to seeing the film. As writer Denny O'Neil informed me in a personal interview, "What I was trying to do is simply telegraph that this is not a comic book in the continuity. We're not going to play by all the rules of the comic books. This Batman is going to be a little different."³⁸⁵

³⁸⁵ Denny O'Neil, phone interview with author, 19 May 2011.

Thus, the comic book reader is equated with the cinemagoer and we expect both experiences to be roughly the same. This is not so much an early exercise in transmedia storytelling but an instance of a media conglomerate using two different forms to tell the same story and using the formal attributes of the culturally dominant medium (the film, in this case) to draw consumers to related ancillary products. As Eileen Meehan observes in her study of Warner Communications Incorporated, the average comic book reader in 1989 was a 20 year old male spending \$10 dollars a week on comics.³⁸⁶ The film, according to Meehan, stood as a means of widening the audience and providing a “basic infrastructure necessary for manufacturing a line of films, albums, sheet music, comics, and novelizations.”³⁸⁷

The focus of this chapter is on the cyclical aspects of stylistic remediation and how it has been used both historically and contemporarily to fuel the perpetual motion machine of further properties. In the section on Batman’s arch-nemesis the Joker, I discuss how graphical representations of the character have been altered in response to the success of other titles in the franchise. In the second section of this chapter, I analyze the career trajectory of comic book writer/artist Frank Miller towards a very successful film adaptation, Sin City (2005), and his follow up, the critical and box office debacle known as The Spirit (2008). The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the nuances of stylistic remediation, particularly in one area where it seems to differ from adaptation proper: by producing cycles rather than linear progressions of remediation.

Part 1: There is Nothing Funny about a Clown in the Moonlight: The Graphical Remediation of the Joker

³⁸⁶ Eileen R. Meehan, “‘Holy Commodity Fetish Batman!’: The Political Economy of the Commercial Intertext,” in The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media, eds. Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio (London: Routledge, 1991), 54.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

“You wanna know how I got these scars?”-The Joker (Heath Ledger) in The Dark Knight (2008).

“[The Joker] had a lot of mystery to him early on. We had no idea, of course, that we’d still be talking about him all these years later. When I think of the money from that movie – a billion dollars...I get a chill when I hear that. We should have copyrighted what we had done. But of course, we didn’t know. We were young and no one could have seen all this...it was a new industry and we were pioneering a new mythology. We had no past so we had very few rules. We also didn’t expect any of it to last.”-Jerry Robinson, Batman comic artist and rumored creator or co-creator of The Joker.³⁸⁸

As already noted in chapter one, DC Comic’s second hero in its stable of stars, Batman, made his comic book debut in Detective Comics #27 in May of 1939. The character, as Les Daniels notes in his study, Batman: The Complete History, was assembled by writers and artists Bob Kane and Bill Finger from a collage of inspirational sources including Roland West’s film The Bat Whispers (1930), allegedly one of Kane’s favorite films, which starred Chester Morris as a detective who would disguise himself as a bat in order to kill off treasure hunters. As Daniels notes however, West’s film was itself an adaptation of Mary Roberts Rinehart’s novel The Circular Staircase (1908), which had become a Broadway play entitled The Bat (1920).³⁸⁹ Another popular piece of entertainment produced in 1920 provided some additional touches, the Douglas Fairbanks film The Mark of Zorro (1920). According to Kane, the Fairbanks film “left a lasting impression...it gave me the dual identity [Bruce Wayne/Batman]. You’re influenced at one point by another character, but then you embellish and bring your own individuality to it.”³⁹⁰

Following the successful launch of the title, Kane and Finger decided it was time to flesh out their Batman production, both on and behind the panel. Additional artists were hired, such as Sheldon Moldoff and Jerry Robinson, while Batman’s sidekick, Robin, made his debut in Detective Comics #38 (April 1940). By spring of 1940, Batman had become such an attraction

³⁸⁸ Geoff Boucher, “Joker Creator Jerry Robinson Reflects on Gotham and the Golden Age,” The Los Angeles Times, 6 May 2009.

³⁸⁹ Les Daniels, Batman: The Complete History (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 20.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 21.

that DC Comics transitioned him from being one of the many characters featured in Detective Comics to his own title, Batman. The first issue of the title is also noteworthy for introducing Batman's most infamous villain, the Joker, a character who has not only become the cloaked hero's arch nemesis but also his antithesis as well.

In creating the Joker, an act which has become its own source of controversy as Kane, Finger, and Robinson have all claimed to have created the Clown Prince of Crime, the creative team behind the title followed the approach that had worked so well for creating their hero: homage. Jerry Robinson allegedly based his initial designs off of the playing card (as seen on the front of the DC Movie Special). According to Bill Finger's son, Fred, the graphic design of the character was inspired by a flyer for a Coney Island attraction, George C. Tilyou's "Steeplechase," located on Surf Avenue. According to Fred Finger, the "white-faced, evil clown" pictured in the flyers gave his father the idea for the character.³⁹¹ According to Moldoff, however, the Joker was based on Kane's own facial features (a lean face and mischievous smile). Yet, as Daniels notes (and, as illustrator Brian Bolland coyly notes in his introduction to Alan Moore's The Killing Joke), the undisputed source for the Joker came from Conrad Veidt's character in The Man Who Laughs (1928).³⁹² According to Robinson, when Finger saw Robinson's initial artwork, he said "That reminds me of Conrad Veidt in The Man Who Laughs," prompting him to bring in production stills from the film to show to Robinson as he continued his work.³⁹³

Looking at the work Kane and company present in Batman #1, the character of the Joker appears to owe more to Veidt's Gwynplaine than to Robinson's playing card. The playing card

³⁹¹ Ibid., 40.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Daniel Robert Epstein, "The Joker, the Jewish Museum, and Jerry: Talking to Jerry Robinson," Newsarama.com, 18 October 2006, <<http://forum.newsarama.com/showthread.php?t=88092>> (7 January 2011).

artwork, which also appears on the first page of the story and, as aforementioned, also makes an appearance on the cover to the DC Movie Special, pictures a heavy-faced clown dressed in red and black jester regalia, including a jingle bell hat.



Figure 5.3: Veidt as Gwynplaine (1928).

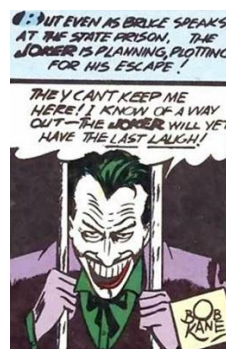


Figure 5.4: The Joker in Batman #1 (1940).

The final character, however, sports bushy green hair, slicked backwards. Dark circles run under his eyes, an elongated nose adds emphasis to his thin face, deformed by a grotesque grin, all leading down towards a violently pointed chin. As these two images present, the similarities between Gwynplaine (figure 5.3) and the Joker (figure 5.4) are particularly visible.

Coincidentally, Kane and his team seem to acknowledge the source of their homage in the final panel of the issue, in which the Joker proclaims “They can’t keep me here! I know of a way out – the Joker will have the Last Laugh!”

Throughout the subsequent decades, those initial designs of the Joker were solidified. The purple suit, the slicked toxic green hair, the bleached skin, and the chilling rictus remained fairly constant. Similarly, Batman’s suit would remain a graphically fixed commodity, grey with a black logo, until DC editor Julius Schwartz presented Carmine Infantino and Joe Giella’s “new look” in Detective Comics #327 (May 1964), which added a yellow oval behind the Bat emblem on the hero’s chest. Joker’s look, on the other hand, would remain consistent into the 1980s, where it would be briefly challenged by Frank Miller’s feminine portrayal in The Dark Knight

Returns (1986). In Miller's design, the Joker has the signature hair and skin tone but not the fixed grin. He is even shown, in one sequence, to be applying his own lipstick in order to complete the look.

Despite the already documented success of Miller's book, his "overly gay" depiction of the Joker was not as nearly influential on the subsequent films and books as his dark and fascist portrayal of Batman was.³⁹⁴ On the other hand, Alan Moore, Brian Bolland, and John Higgins' representation of the classical Joker in Batman: The Killing Joke (1988) gained a great deal of traction. The book, which tells one of the most cited origin stories of the character (the origins of Joker, unlike Batman, seemed to remain a mystery for the first eleven years of his appearances...a fact made light of by Heath Ledger's Joker), presents the Joker as a more elaborate version of Robinson's: the permanent grin, the pointed features, and the fang-like teeth (figure 5.5).



Figure 5.5: The Killing Joke Joker (1988).

³⁹⁴ Christopher Sharrett, "Batman and the Twilight of the Idols: An Interview with Frank Miller," in The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media, eds. Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio (London: Routledge, 1991), 37.

According to artist Brian Bolland, his inspirational source was the same as his predecessors. He writes, in the introduction to a reprint of The Killing Joke, that “I’d become a bit obsessed with the rictus grin of the character. I’d even recently been to see the wonderful 1928 film The Man Who Laughs...a film which, lawyers advise me to say, played no part in the creation of the Joker. I think I had been limbering up to draw the Joker for some time.”³⁹⁵

Moore’s one-shot, which features the Joker shooting a woman at point blank range in order to paralyze her, helped usher in the adult portrayal (along with Frank Miller of course!) of Batman that Tim Burton and Warner Bros. would find ideal for their film adaptation. According to Burton, who testified to not being a comic book fan, his admiration of Moore’s seminal title led to its influence on the 1989 film. As Burton notes in an interview, “[The Killing Joke is my] favorite. It’s the first comic I’ve ever loved. And the success of those graphic novels made our ideas more acceptable.”³⁹⁶

Yet, Burton’s film owed more to Moore’s book than the tone and graphic design of Bolland’s Joker. The script, written by Sam Hamm and Warren Skaaren (based on a story by Hamm) takes significant plot developments from The Killing Joke, most notably that the Joker was “created” by Batman during a heist gone awry at a chemical factory (Ace in the book, Axis in the film). There are significant deviations worth briefly noting: Burton’s Joker is tied to the creation of Batman in the act of killing Bruce Wayne’s parents, adding a poetic symmetry to the relationship, and Burton’s Joker is less a of patsy when compared with Moore’s, who is given a Red Hood disguise for the heist so that he can be framed by gangsters. However, the shootout in the factory and the aftermath shots of the newly created Joker are incredibly similar in both texts,

³⁹⁵ Brian Bolland, “On Batman: Brian Bolland Recalls The Killing Joke,” in DC Universe: The Stories of Alan Moore (New York: DC Comics, 2006), 256.

³⁹⁶ Burton on Burton, ed. Mark Salisbury (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 71.

making Burton's admiration of Moore's comic especially tangible.

The success of Burton's film and the Batmania it created during the summer of 1989 has already been touched upon in the first chapter of this study: the massive box office take, the licensing deals, and the revitalization of not only a property but an entire medium in American culture. While the fad eventually lost some steam in the hands of Burton, whose Batman Returns (1992) was deemed too dark for youngsters, and Joel Schumacher, whose entries into the franchise were seen by fans to be nothing but excuses for Warner Bros. to ramp up production on tie-in merchandise, the craze created by Batman and Batman Returns brought forth a beloved entry in the media franchise of Batman: Batman: The Animated Series (1992-1995). As television critic Leonard Pierce writes in his retrospective on the series, "Many people have (correctly) observed that Batman: The Animated Series defined the Batman of the '90s, in much the same way that Frank Miller's Batman: The Dark Knight Returns defined the character in the '80s and Christopher Nolan's films defined him in the 2000s. This carries special weight when you consider that it was Tim Burton's films that were meant to fulfill that purpose."³⁹⁷

Airing on Fox, the series found a balance between the best of the many incarnations of the superhero, including Burton's films, Miller's comics, and other sources. For instance, animators Bruce Timm and Eric Radomski decided to use black backgrounds (instead of the traditional white), in order to keep the settings in dialogue with Burton's film noir *mise-en-scène*. Moreover, the unique blend of 40s art deco and advanced technology that helped define Burton's vision (Timm and Radomski describe it as being "otherworldly timelessness") was a guide for the animators.³⁹⁸ Furthermore, the show's main musical theme was ported over from Danny

³⁹⁷ Leonard Pierce, "Batman: The Animated Series: On Leather Wings," AVClub.com, 29 November 2010, <<http://www.avclub.com/articles/on-leather-wings,48295/>> (15 January 2010).

³⁹⁸ See DVD commentary track for Batman: The Animated Series, "On Leather Wings."

Elfman's work on the Burton films. Finally, like Burton's film, Batman: The Animated Series aimed to attract both children and adults with its dark and fun approach to the superhero. Initially scheduled as an afternoon cartoon (I can remember rushing home from elementary school to catch the latest episodes), the show was later moved by Fox into the prime-time schedule. A success, the show would go on to win three Emmy awards (Outstanding Animated Program, Music Direction, and Sound Editing) over its three year tenure.

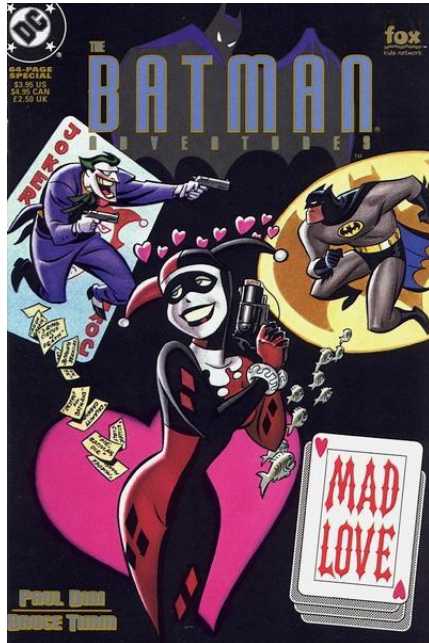
Yet, while the series defined itself with and in relation to the diegesis and tone of Burton's films, it also found itself on stable enough ground with fans and the Fox network to set out on its own path, which was of course drawn from the original comics. DC editor Denny O'Neil informed me that the show runner went into the DC library and "photocopied thirty years of Batman" for stylistic cues and, according to O'Neil, "we got paid for it! That had never happened before."³⁹⁹ As the series continued, producer and writer Alan Burnett hired writer Paul Dini. According to Les Daniels, "Dini eventually became so important to the show that he was promoted to co-producer."⁴⁰⁰

However, Dini's influence was not only felt behind the scenes. As the series established itself, it spawned its own tie-in merchandise ranging from toys, novels, video games and, perhaps most notably, The Batman Adventures, a comic book. The Batman Adventures is notable for multiple reasons, first and foremost because it mimicked the style of Timm and Radomski's series. According to Timm, when he was developing the look of the animated series, "One of the things I learned over the years... is that every time we were doing an adventure cartoon, there was always the drive to make the cartoons look more like comic books, and it really worked against what animation does best. The more lines you have on a character, the harder it is to

³⁹⁹ Denny O'Neil, phone interview with author, 19 May 2011.

⁴⁰⁰ Daniels, 181.

draw over and over. I knew that simplicity would be better.”⁴⁰¹



Figures 5.6 and 5.7: Joker in The Batman Adventures and The Animated Series.

As you can see best illustrated in this comparison between the Joker of the animated series (figure 5.7) and the Joker of The Batman Adventures (figure 5.6), the similarities in character design are indistinguishable, despite the shift from an animation team to comic artists. The sharp crests of the Joker’s hair, coupled with the same trademark grin (slightly yellowed teeth, vividly crimson lipstick) and taunting eyes (yellowed, but enclosed by thick black circles) is apparent in both representations. As Timm notes, both character designs of the Joker are stripped down to the bare essentials (compare the nearly featureless Joker of Batman Adventures and The Animated Series with Bolland’s above work).

The look of the series, in dialogue with Burton’s but also differentiated by its own stylistic attributes, became a bankable and defining characteristic of its tie-in comic book. Moreover, as the comic progressed, with the one-shot Mad Love (1994) winning an Eisner award

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

for the show's producers and comic book contributors Dini and Timm (who also penciled and inked the issue), characters were introduced in the comic and their appearances were built into the television show (the most notable example is the Joker's girlfriend Harley Quinn).

According to Timm, the fluidity between media forms aided his creative ambitions: "I always wanted to be a comic book artist. I figured I'd just work in animation until I got better."⁴⁰² As the comic and its contributions to the narrative presented in the television show gained traction, straight forward adaptations of story arcs introduced in print were brought to the television screen. Initially influenced by Burton's vision, the television series influenced the comics stylistically, only to reincorporate separate stylistic characteristics. Moreover, according to comics scholar Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Timm's style (influenced by Japanese *manga* as well) "gave birth to a 'school' of disciples" through the success of both the animated series and the comics.⁴⁰³

While the show drew to a close in 1995 and its comic book spin off followed suit a few years after, it did inspire alternate spin-offs (The New Batman Adventures on the animated series front, Batman: Gotham Adventures on the comic book front). Yet, the shows appear to have gone through the same tonal problems that Burton's films encountered. How does one compromise the appeal to an adult demographic, starving for a grim and gritty approach, with the lighter touch needed to appease the youth demographic? Eventually, the Batman franchise evolved into Batman Beyond (1999-2002), a futuristic take on the Dark Knight that featured Bruce Wayne only tangentially, as an aged mentor to the young Terry McGuinness. Yet, the series, according to most fans of the franchise, was too inconsistent and out of touch with the

⁴⁰² Ibid., 186.

⁴⁰³ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 105.

central mythos to gain a rabid following.

The classical representation of the Joker initially presented by Robinson, Kane, and Finger in 1940, while challenged by Miller's portrayal in The Dark Knight Returns, was not renovated until 2007-2008 with a triple-front revision beginning with Grant Morrison's run on the Batman tent-pole comic title, Heath Ledger's portrayal in Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight (2008), and Brian Azzarello's graphic novel Joker. When Warner Bros. and Christopher Nolan teased the audience with the forthcoming appearance of the Harlequin of Hate at the end of Batman Begins (2005), Detective Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman) tells Batman (Christian Bale) "Escalation.... We start carrying semi-automatics, they buy automatics. We start wearing Kevlar, they buy armor piercing rounds, and you're wearing a mask and jumping off rooftops. Take this guy: armed robbery, double homicide, got a taste for the theatrical, like you. Leaves a calling card," and presents the caped crusader with the signature playing card (a direct reference to Miller's Batman: Year One, which served as a guide for Nolan's first entry into the Batman universe). From that point on, fans were rabid for a fresh embodiment of the Joker, who had been disappointedly killed off in Burton's first entry into the series.

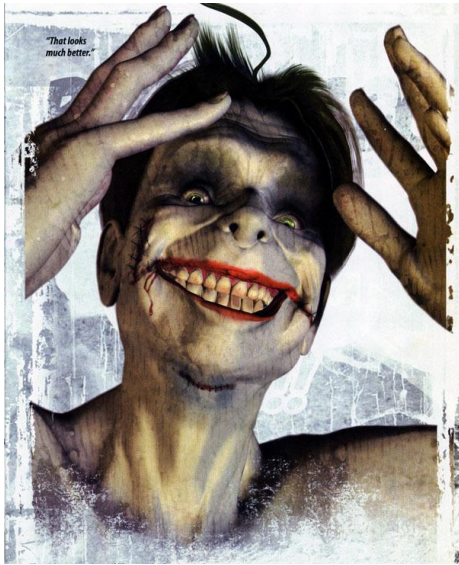
This new portrayal effectively began with Grant Morrison's tenure on the Batman comic title. Morrison, who had made a reputation for himself in the Batman universe in the 1980s with his cerebral and grotesque Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth (1989), was coming fresh off his successful miniseries All Star Superman (2006-2008). His first effort on the title, issue #655, began controversially with Batman shooting Joker in the face with a handgun, and eventually climaxed with Morrison's "Batman R.I.P." arc, which featured the long-publicized death of Batman, and comic legend Neil Gaiman's funerary tribute "What Ever Happened to the Caped Crusader?" in 2008. Yet, it is Morrison's ninth entry into the monthly

series, issue #663, that stands out for multiple reasons. Entitled “The Clown at Midnight,” #663 is an issue structured unconventionally for a comic book, let alone a mainstream superhero title. For issue #663, Morrison jettisoned the panel and grid format so elemental to the medium. Instead, Morrison’s issue reads like an illustrated prose manuscript. At the standard monthly issue length of 32 pages, the story is divided into ten chapters and told in blocks of text with the occasional illustration. As if this choice wasn’t unconventional enough, Morrison’s artistic collaborator, John Van Fleet, veered away from traditional pencils and inks with illustrations fully constructed on the computer. The issue, released in February 2007, ranked sixteenth for the month with 83,152 copies sold (Marvel’s Civil War once again won the month with 265,886 copies sold).⁴⁰⁴

Appropriately, the narrative of #663 centers on how the Joker redefines himself, both mentally and physically. After being shot in the head, Joker is shown recuperating in Arkham Asylum, fresh out of having facial reconstructive surgery. In one scene, the bandaged bandit meets with Batman and, according to his perceived differences in his nemesis’ body language, the Caped Crusader notes that “The Joker’s different.”⁴⁰⁵ A few pages later, when the Joker finally removes the facial bandages, he notes “There, that looks much better,” presenting his freshly altered grin for our enjoyment (figure 5.8).

⁴⁰⁴ “February 2007 Comic Book Sales Figures,” The Comics Chronicles, <<http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2007/2007-02.html>> (22 June 2011).

⁴⁰⁵ Grant Morrison and John Van Fleet, Batman 663 (New York: DC Comics, 2007), 8.



Figures 5.8 and 5.9: Grant Morrison's (2007) and Heath Ledger's Joker (2008).

The Joker Morrison would present is uncannily similar to the representation Nolan would utilize for Heath Ledger's depiction in The Dark Knight thanks to a very significant alteration of his facial appearance: the Glasgow grin.

Opposed to the Joker's portrayal in the bulk of the comics and The Killing Joke, the character's trademark grin, often portrayed as the result of his chemical bath, has been replaced by a Glasgow grin. The demented, artificially produced grin, sometimes called the Chelsea smile, is the product of bodily mutilation that is said to have originated through the particularly violent practices of British gangs. Essentially, and this is alluded to in The Dark Knight when the Joker kills the African-American gangster Gambol (Michael Jai White) by reenacting how he got "these scars," the Glasgow grin is produced by sticking a knife, utility blade, or glass into the victim's mouth, between the cheek and the gum, and extending the lines of their natural grin with a series of cuts.

When Warner Bros. and Nolan provided fans with a teaser image of the Joker character, available only after a photo scavenger hunt was completed via the alternate reality game

described in the previous chapter, it stirred quite a bit of controversy amongst fans. While Nolan's Batman Begins had been much beloved at the time for trimming away the excesses of the Schumacher films and bringing the hero back to a noir reality, fans, at the time, viewed the depiction of the Joker as artificial. The Joker was supposed to find actual joy in the sadistic torment of his victims. Thus, it felt like a betrayal to depict that joy as something artificially produced by cutting one's face open like a Jack-O-Lantern.⁴⁰⁶

A few months after the colossal opening of Nolan's Dark Knight which, budgeted at \$185 million, went on to gross more than \$1 billion dollars worldwide (the film was the biggest earner of 2008), DC Comics solidified the revamped depiction with its publication of Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo's Joker (2008). Like its textual predecessors, most notably Dark Knight and Morrison's work on the ongoing series, Joker characterizes itself by redefining the subject of the book, both in terms of character (he is more of a sociopathic gangster in Azzarello's book, which is in line with Nolan's world and prompted executives to rename the title after Joker: The Dark Knight was suggested) and his visual appearance.⁴⁰⁷ Like Morrison and Nolan's Joker, Azzarello and Bermejo's boasts a horrific Glasgow grin, a close-up of which conveniently stands as the volume's cover art.

While it would be tempting to read this as all part of a coordinated effort to use the marketing momentum and success of a primary text (The Dark Knight) to fuel the sales of ancillary texts (Joker and other reprints/reissues like The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told), the production context of Joker suggests that such a conclusion is not quite so cut and dried. While

⁴⁰⁶ See the reader comments on ReflectingHierophant, "Why So Serious?," Comic Book Movie.com, Publication Date Unknown, <http://www.comicbookmovie.com/fansites/MyCBMOpinion/news/?a=28648&t=Reflections_of_a_Hierophant_Why_So_Serious> (24 January 2011).

⁴⁰⁷ Peter Sciretta, "Brian Azzarello's Joker Graphic Novel," Film, 19 October 2008, <<http://www.slashfilm.com/brian-azzarellos-joker-graphic-novel/>> (24 January 2011).

the graphic novel appeared on bookshelves a few months after the release of Nolan's blockbuster and, like the special edition reprint of Moore's The Killing Joker, ranked amongst the top three sold trade paperbacks in 2008, Azzarello and Bermejo had been at work on the title since 2005.⁴⁰⁸ The team had been handed the project following their work on another villain themed title, Lex Luthor: Man of Steel (2005).⁴⁰⁹ Essentially, despite being the last title released, Azzarello and Bermejo's was in production one year *prior* to Nolan's film (2007), coinciding with Morrison's run on Batman. Moreover, Bermejo released sketches of his take on the Joker to the fan website Batman on Film while in Nolan's film was in pre-production.⁴¹⁰ The graphical remediation of the Joker appears to be less an instance of studio synchronized, transmedia marketing than the result of a cultural zeitgeist.

This interpretation comes to the forefront of the interviews performed with Azzarello and Bermejo. When asked about the similarities between the appearances of Ledger's Joker and Bermejo's and whether or not he consulted with the filmmakers at all during production, Azzarello notes "I think [the similarities are mostly a coincidence]. I mean they were so secretive with that film. So no, we had no idea what was going on with any of this. But it's a good coincidence. I don't think you can ask for a better project to follow that film than this. It's almost like a sequel."⁴¹¹ In other interviews, the questions became less about how Dark Knight influenced the look of Joker to suggestions of the exact opposite. When Bermejo was asked if he felt his concept art had been drawn upon in the design sessions for Ledger's character, he responded "I think that it's impossible to know these things unless you're Nolan and Co. I DO

⁴⁰⁸ "2008 Comic Book Sales Figures," The Comics Chronicles, <<http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2008.html>> (22 June 2011).

⁴⁰⁹ Dan Phillips, "The Joker's Wild Ride," IGN.com, 23 October 2008, <<http://comics.ign.com/articles/923/923283p1.html>> (24 January 2011).

⁴¹⁰ Bill Ramey, "Lee Bermejo, Part 2," Batman on Film, 23 May 2007, <http://www.batman-on-film.com/lee-bermejo_interview-2.html> (24 January 2011).

⁴¹¹ Phillips, "The Joker's Wild Ride."

think that there are some similarities but all in all, someone once told me (and I find this VERY true) that ideas tend to ‘float’ around at the same time. It depends on a lot of things...pop culture of the moment, social conditions, trends in fashion....All in all, I think that they probably would have done the same thing even if I hadn’t been drawing him this way....I’m proud of my interpretation of the character and IF it had any effect I can be nothing but flattered.”⁴¹²

According to Nolan, he and Ledger took inspiration from the paintings of Francis Bacon (whose art appears in Burton’s first entry into the series), the punk aesthetic, and the protagonist of Stanley Kubrick’s A Clockwork Orange (1971). They then informed make-up designer John Caligone (who also worked on Beatty’s Dick Tracy) to come up with a prosthetic device that would embrace those influences.⁴¹³ Nolan has never gone on the record about Bermejo’s concept art.

While it seems that the three projects, and their portrayals of the Joker, while similar in many ways, were developed independently of one another, The Dark Knight and Joker were marketed in a nearly identical fashion by emphasizing the change of appearance of the villain. As aforementioned, Ledger’s character overshadowed the hero in many of the marketing campaigns. Early promo photos, many released alongside the news that Nolan was shooting on IMAX cameras, featured the Joker behind clouded glass. After months of speculation, the viral “Why So Serious?” campaign disclosed the first image of the Joker (figure 5.9) after fans provided their e-mails to a dummy website. The second image of the Joker was released in a similar fashion, after fans completed a scavenger hunt. When Ledger passed away after an accidental drug overdose, the Warner Bros. marketing division started to tweak the campaign

⁴¹² Ramey, “Lee Bermejo, Part 2.”

⁴¹³ Rebecca Murray, “Writer/Director Christopher Nolan Talks About The Dark Knight,” About.com, Publication Date Unknown, <http://movies.about.com/od/thedarkknight/a/darkknight70408_2.htm> (24 January 2011).

away from Ledger, worried that a Ledger intensive marketing run would come across as exploitative.⁴¹⁴ The “Why So Serious?” campaign subsequently honored Ledger’s performance (with a black ribbon on the website and a statement) while shifting emphasis towards the character of Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart). Azzarello’s title, as aforementioned, also banks on the adjustment in Joker’s representation: the cover features a close up of his Glasgow grin, the back of the dust jacket features another close up of the grin, and the first two introductory pages offer two more extreme close ups.

With the Joker’s Glasgow grin, I would argue that Warner Bros. and DC Comics offered up the latest incarnation of what Justin Wyatt dubs “high concept” or, “a product differentiated through the emphasis on style in production and through the integration of the film with its marketing.”⁴¹⁵ The unique look of the Joker, like the films and coordinated marketing campaigns Wyatt analyzes, provides the studio with “a *visual* form, presentable in television spots, trailers, and print ads. The high concept films therefore depend upon the visual representation of their marketable concepts in advertising.”⁴¹⁶ Moreover, for Wyatt, the simpler the image (the revamped Batman logo in the Burton’s film for instance), as the Glasgow grin is, the easier it is to establish the film with potential moviegoers. In other words, film has appropriated the visual grammar of advertising in order to simplify the task placed in front of the studio’s marketing division. For Wyatt, these images have the potential to work against classical Hollywood narrative conventions by emphasizing style over story. Yet, in the case of Nolan’s film at least, the image, the marketing, and the narrative (the Joker’s repeated, differing interpretations of his scars add to his characterization) work in perfect unison. Intentional or not,

⁴¹⁴ Marshall Crook and Peter Sanders, “Will Marketing Change After Star’s Death?,” The Wall Street Journal, 24 January 2008, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120113527501911813.html>> (24 January 2011).

⁴¹⁵ Justin Wyatt, High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 7.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

the Glasgow grin and the new interpretations offered up by Morrison, Nolan, and Azzarello completed the same objective Eileen Meehan noted in the building of the original franchise: a means of widening the audience and providing a “basic infrastructure necessary for manufacturing a line of films, albums, sheet music, comics, and novelizations.”⁴¹⁷ Since his debut, the remediated appearance of the Joker has been based upon intertextual homage with the aim of capturing additional demographics and bridging that newly established audience over to ancillary products.

Part 2: The Curious Case of Frank Miller

*“This isn’t an adaptation of a comic book, it’s like a comic book brought to life and pumped with steroids....The movie is not about narrative but about style.”-Roger Ebert on Sin City (2005).*⁴¹⁸

*“The movie is all style---style without substance, style whirling in a senseless void....The movie was written, directed, and fabricated largely on computers by Frank Miller, whose 300 and Sin City showed a similar elevation of the graphic novel into fantastical style shows. But they had characters, stories, a sense of fun. The Spirit is all setups and posing, muscles and cleavage, hats and ruby lips...”-Roger Ebert on The Spirit (2008).*⁴¹⁹

While the graphical remediation of the Joker, described in the previous case study, illuminates how the cyclical process of stylistic remediation can be an effective means of introducing and marketing ancillary titles, similar to what Justin Wyatt describes in his book High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood, the case of Frank Miller illustrates its limits. His over-the-top, noir infused style made him, according to comic historian Bradford Wright, the greatest influence on the comic book form since Stan Lee’s work in the 1960s.⁴²⁰ His success in the medium drew the attention of not only those involved in comics, but also of those

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Roger Ebert, “Sin City Movie Review,” RogerEbert.com, 31 March 2005, <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050331/REVIEWS/50322001/1023>> (24 January 2011).

⁴¹⁹ Roger Ebert, “The Spirit Movie Review,” RogerEbert.com, 23 December 2008, <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081223/REVIEWS/812239987>> (24 January 2011).

⁴²⁰ Bradford Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 266.

involved in the world of its aligned form, film: Hollywood executives, independent filmmaker Robert Rodriguez, and moviegoers were all eager to bring Miller's work to the big screen. Yet, while Miller's signature style drew a great deal of praise when it involved his own properties (Sin City, 300) his process of remediation quickly alienated the same audience it established when it was applied to his production of a film adaptation based on the work of another comic auteur: Will Eisner's The Spirit (see the above Roger Ebert epigraph quotes for an illustration of this sea change).

Miller's career at the drawing board began in the late 1970s when he began working for Marvel Comics on a revamp of Daredevil with artist Klaus Janson. In the words of Wright, "Preceding creators had already developed the blind superhero... alias defense attorney Matt Murdock, into a brooding, isolated soul. Miller went even further in this direction, portraying him as a deeply tortured soul, torn apart by his own internal contradictions as a lawyer and extralegal vigilante.... Miller's plots were tight and absorbing, his scripts, terse and ironic. The art by Miller and Janson was stripped-down, yet atmospheric, verging on a crude expressionism."⁴²¹ By 1983, Miller's work with Marvel gained him industry-wide recognition and he was approached by rival DC Comics to pen a six-issue miniseries entitled Ronin (1983-1984) which "reflected the influence of Japanese and European comics on the new American comic books."⁴²² Three years later, Miller would cement his legacy with another miniseries for DC: Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (1986), the significance of which has already been discussed.

Driven by an upswing in sales and the cultural redefinition of the comic book in America,

⁴²¹ Ibid., 267.

⁴²² Mike Benton, The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1989), 84.

new publishers and product lines quickly began to spring up in order to capitalize upon the craze. DC launched Vertigo Comics, a line that historian Roger Sabin describes as being “a new imprint designed to encompass titles devoted to horror and fantasy. In the now-established fashion, comics would first appear as single-issues, with a ‘Suggested for Mature Readers’ label, and would later be collected as graphic novels.”⁴²³ Slowly, as Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith describe, “publishers would once again overtly tap into the marketing power of their creators’ names” (creators were often only credited on an opening splash page of an issue, not on the cover) and the industry began to change its position regarding the ownership of rights.⁴²⁴ Gone were the days when creators like Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster would sell the rights to their characters (Superman!) to the publisher for a measly \$130. As Duncan and Smith note in their overview of the contemporary comic book industry, “Today comics creators have more opportunity for ownership of their properties and can enjoy more of the profits that their work can generate.”⁴²⁵ One noted publisher to rise during this era was Dark Horse Comics, a company that had established itself on licensed properties (most notably comics based off of Star Wars) and began to push towards what Duncan and Smith term “creator-owned properties that would go on to feature film development.”⁴²⁶

Miller, following the release of Dark Knight Returns and Batman: Year One, left DC Comics after a disagreement with the publisher regarding its approach towards censorship and property management (Miller once said that the publisher was “problematic because they don’t like noise. There’s always been a tension in my relationship with them because I want noise

⁴²³ Roger Sabin, Comics, Comix, & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art (New York: Phaidon, 1996), 168.

⁴²⁴ Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, The Power of Comics: History, Form & Culture (New York: Continuum, 2009), 120.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

every time out”).⁴²⁷ He would go on to sign with Dark Horse, which would release his properties Hard Boiled (1990-1992, with Matrix artist Geof Darrow collaborating), Sin City (1991-2000), and 300 (1998). According to Miller, his work with Dark Horse was significantly different from his tenures at Marvel and DC: “The whole thing about the first Sin City is that I was rediscovering the love of drawing on that job. I had absolutely no boss and it was the first thing I completely did from head to toe myself...I can go off and do Sin City, we can do anything we want to, and they’ll smile at us and nod. But the minute I turn around and dent the Batmobile, they [DC Comics] go out of their minds! They have such a precious view of these fantasies!”⁴²⁸

It was during his tenure at Dark Horse that Miller first became involved with Hollywood. Shortly after the success of Paul Verhoeven’s ultraviolent action film Robocop (1987) became a box office success with \$30 million in domestic gross revenue (on a \$13 million dollar budget), Orion Pictures announced its intent to make a “funnier, more satirical, and less violent” sequel.⁴²⁹ Despite this early enthusiasm, it took Orion nearly two years to get the project off the ground. In the winter of 1989, producer Jon Davison had signed Peter Weller to reprise his role, Tim Hunter to direct (the director’s seat later went to The Empire Strikes Back helmsman Irvin Kershner) and, significantly, the project marked the “screenwriting debut” of Miller.⁴³⁰ The film, budgeted at \$50 million dollars, went on to become a critical and box office flop when it was finally released in the summer of 1990, grossing \$45 domestically.

According to the clipping files available at the Margaret Herrick Library, Miller (and the project in general) seems to have received surprisingly little press attention during pre-production. After the film was released however, both Kershner and Miller defended the film in

⁴²⁷ Charles Brownstein, Eisner/Miller (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2005), 151.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26, 153.

⁴²⁹ Claudia Eller, “Orion Reveals Plan for Robocop II,” The Hollywood Reporter, 6 August 1987.

⁴³⁰ “Cinefile,” The Los Angeles Times, 19 March 1989.

the press (Kershner wrote a piece for the Los Angeles Times while Miller was interviewed by Time Out). In his interview with Time Out, Miller expressed his dissatisfaction with the pre-production process, noting that his original script went through “eight major drafts” and that “rewrites reached such a pitch that sometimes actors would get their lines ten minutes before saying them.”⁴³¹ For Miller, this practice resulted in a plot that “simply no longer made sense”; Orion put his script through the production wringer because “There is a tendency in film, with millions of dollars in the balance and nothing but words on paper, to change the words every ten minutes because you get worried about them. Fear is the main motivator.”⁴³²

Despite the negative reaction of the public and critics to Robocop 2 (1990) and Miller’s less-than-desirable experience with Orion, the comic book pioneer was still willing to give the franchise another crack. Yet, the production was rockier the second time around for the writer and artist. First, lead actor Peter Weller dropped out in the fall of 1990 after being disappointed with the second film and, according to The Hollywood Reporter, “script problems finally convinced everyone to throw in the towel on it.”⁴³³ Two days later, the paper published a report to the contrary, in which producer Patrick Crowley claimed the film “is definitely on” and “there’s never been a moment...when anyone has been dissatisfied with the script.”⁴³⁴ Despite the opposing stories offered by the Hollywood Reporter, Weller did not don the metal suit for the third outing and he was subsequently replaced by actor Robert Burke. The film, allegedly budgeted at \$22 million, grossed a mere \$10 million domestically (Orion had initially scheduled the film for summer but “awesome competition” and exhibition space scarcity pushed the film to November) and was, once again, panned by critics. This time, Frank Miller would remain silent

⁴³¹ Steve Grant, “Frank Opinions,” Time Out, 10-17 October 1990, 15.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ “Rambling Reporter,” The Hollywood Reporter, 17 October 1990.

⁴³⁴ “Rambling Reporter,” The Hollywood Reporter, 19 October 1990.

in the press and his dissatisfaction with his work on the franchise would later manifest itself in his medium of choice. Frank Miller's Robocop (2003-2006), a comic series based off of his original scripts for the two sequels and supervised by Miller (the title was written by Steven Grant, illustrated by Juan Jose Ryp), was published by Avatar Press. Initial reviews were far from complementary and the title's introductory issue sold a meager 21,566 copies, ranked 104th behind Neil Gaiman, Andy Kubert, Richard Isanove, and Scott McKowen's first issue of Marvel 1602 (which sold 152,528 copies the same month – August 2003).⁴³⁵

During the decade following his negative experiences on the Robocop series, Miller veered away from working in Hollywood, retreating to his workshop to finish Sin City and 300. In 2000, Miller was initially enlisted by director Darren Aronofsky to script an adaptation of Batman: Year One with the hopes of revitalizing the franchise.⁴³⁶ The project, which was shelved, would later evolve into Christopher Nolan's series of films. Still dissatisfied with Hollywood, Miller "rejected many offers" to turn his Sin City into a film.⁴³⁷ According to the author, the mentality of Hollywood was that "your screenplay is a fire hydrant with an awful lot of dogs lined up behind it. And I wasn't interested at all in directing---I just wanted to draw my comics."⁴³⁸ Miller's combative stance towards Hollywood began to change when he was approached by Robert Rodriguez, who was planning on completing a short film based on the Sin City story "The Consumer is Always Right." Rodriguez flew Miller out to his base of operations in Austin, Texas and introduced the comic artist to both his "digital backlot" and actors Josh Hartnett and Marley Shelton. While shooting the film, Rodriguez informed Miller that he felt that they did not need to produce an adaptation but could use advances in technology to make a

⁴³⁵ "August 2003 Comic Book Sales Figures," The Comics Chronicles, <<http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2003/2003-08.html>> (22 June 2011).

⁴³⁶ Dana Harris, "WB Sends Pi Guy into the Bat Cave," Variety, 21 September 2000, 1.

⁴³⁷ Kevin O'Donnell, "Q&A: Frank Miller," Rolling Stone, 25 August 2005.

⁴³⁸ Stephen Garrett, "Q&A: Frank Miller," Esquire, April 2007.

translation. Moreover, the filmmaker wanted the creator to co-direct the film with him.⁴³⁹

Miller, impressed with Rodriguez's "tree fort," ultimately agreed to work with Rodriguez and "special guest director" Quentin Tarantino.⁴⁴⁰

In order to complete the translation, which Rodriguez billed "Frank Miller's Sin City," Rodriguez utilized extensive green screen lined sets at his Troublemaker Studios so that he and Miller could "take cinema and try to make it into this book."⁴⁴¹ While the green screens allowed Miller and Rodriguez to use CGI to fill in backgrounds and essentially construct the mise-en-scène (Miller, on the commentary track for the film, remarks how "I was always told that my skills as a cartoonist and the writing I do wouldn't relate to film" but that the green screen process essentially allowed him to draw on film) and to match the style of the original book, it also had more pragmatic benefits. While CGI is traditionally viewed as an expensive asset to be gained with a large budget, Rodriguez and Miller also used it to lower costs by filming some of their assembled stable of stars (Bruce Willis, Elijah Wood, Jessica Alba, Clive Owen) separately, only to later composite them into the same scene. For instance, "The Hard Goodbye" features a climactic battle between Marv (Mickey Rourke) and Kevin (Elijah Wood), yet neither had ever been physically present with the other, due to a short and conflicting shooting schedule. For all of its star power and visual flourishes, Sin City carried a relatively low production budget of \$40 million dollars. In comparison, the largest grossing comic book film of 2005, Batman Begins, was budgeted at \$150 million.

In order to discuss the style of Sin City and Miller's overall approach, I will be conflating the graphic novels and the film for the sake of brevity, as the focus will be solely on graphical

⁴³⁹ See the feature film commentary on the theatrical release of Sin City with Miller and Rodriguez on the Recut, Extended, Unrated DVD or Blu-Ray release (2005).

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ See the featurette on the Recut, Extended, Unrated DVD or Blu-Ray entitled How It Went Down: Convincing Frank Miller to Make the Film (2005).

remediation or, as defined in chapter two, “remediation that addresses the difference between film’s representational roots in photography and the comic’s representational roots in the graphic arts.”⁴⁴² Before proceeding, it is important to note that noir had stylistic roots in the graphic arts, including – arguably to the point of overestimation – the German Expressionist movement that extended across painting, literature, theater, dance, film, architecture and music. Moreover, this movement had stylistically influenced comics, particularly in the wood engraved proto-graphic novels of Lynd Ward who, according to comics writer, artist, and historian Art Spiegelman (who edited Ward’s works for inclusion into the Library of America series) “became steeped in German Expressionist art, and learned wood engraving from a German master.”⁴⁴³ I am uncertain to what degree Miller may have been influenced by Ward’s woodcuts or by German Expressionist art in general. Looking at his compositions in Sin City, it certainly seems feasible that Miller was familiar with Ward, who experienced the beginnings of a reappraisal in 1972 when an anthology of six of his novels was published, complete with prologues written by the artist. However, given Miller’s avid and vocal affection for film noir proper (which I discuss shortly), I think it is safe to say, as comics historian Jean-Paul Gabilliet claims, that “Frank Miller...brought [‘film noir’ inspiration] back into fashion.”⁴⁴⁴

An obvious starting point to begin discussing Miller’s embrace of the film noir style is to define the style, which has already been expounded on by Paul Schrader in his essay “Notes on *Film Noir*” and Janey Place and Lowell Peterson in their essay “Some Visual Motifs of *Film*

⁴⁴² There are a handful of graphical differences between the comics and the film to acknowledge, most notably the addition of colored mise-en-scène in certain scenes (Miller was very sparse with the use of color whereas Rodriguez encouraged him to open up the palate a bit more at times). Yet, it is telling that one of the most discussed visual differences between the comic and the film is that Nancy (Jessica Alba) is nude in the book and scantily clad in the film. That is how similar these two texts are from a visual standpoint.

⁴⁴³ Art Spiegelman, “Reading Pictures,” in Lynd Ward: Prelude to a Million Years, Song Without Words, Vertigo, ed. Art Spiegelman (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2010), x.

⁴⁴⁴ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 90.

Noir.⁴⁴⁵ For Schrader, whose essay deals also with historical context and narrative themes, noir defines itself visually through scenes “lit for night,” a preference for “oblique and vertical lines...[that] splinter a screen, making it restless and unstable” (Venetian blinds), equal emphasis lighting (I find that this characteristic overlaps with “lit for night”), “compositional tension” (the *mise-en-scène* drives the action rather than characterization) and, finally, “an almost Freudian attachment to water...(even in Los Angeles).”⁴⁴⁶

The first volume of Miller’s Sin City series, “The Hard Goodbye” (1991-1992), is essentially an illustrated accompaniment to Schrader’s discussion of noir visual style. The arc never once features a scene that takes place during the daylight hours (I sometimes wonder if Sin City is a snowless metropolis located in Northern Alaska in winter). The inhabitants of Sin City are like the noir characters Schrader describes, “One always has the suspicion that if the lights were all suddenly flipped on the characters would shriek and shrink from the scene like Count Dracula at sunrise.”⁴⁴⁷ Similarly, Miller continually relies upon equal emphasis lighting to compose his panels. As the arc is rendered simply in black and white, scenes and characters tend to reflect the setting they are placed within. A sublime example of this occurs when a captured Marv gazed out his cell window at one of the book’s protagonists, Kevin (figure 5.10). All five panels on the page are rendered with black backgrounds with Kevin’s form emerging from the darkness either accentuated by a reflection of light in his glasses or a thin-white line tracing his silhouette, courtesy of a nearby automobile headlight. In the one panel to feature him on the

⁴⁴⁵ I acknowledge that these essays – while foundational texts in studies on film noir – have been complicated and elaborated upon recently, specifically in James Naremore’s seminal volume More Than Night: Film Noir and its Contexts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). However, in order to reign in the discussion and to keep a tangent from becoming a digression, I have simplified and generalized my analysis of noir style. The subject of Frank Miller and the noir style deserves further research and I hope this modest analysis can serve as a stepping stone to a deeper study.

⁴⁴⁶ Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” in Film Noir Reader, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 57.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

page, Marv is rendered as simply being a dark shape whose only defining features come from his eyes and mouth. Otherwise, he melts into the background.



Figure 5.10: *Noir Equal Emphasis Lighting in Sin City.*

A notable sequence of the novel illustrates Schrader's analysis of noir's tendency to rely on water, "compositional tension," and "oblique and vertical lines": Marv's long walk through the rain. When the sequence begins, Marv remarks that he loves the rain because "it helps me think."⁴⁴⁸ Yet, the way Miller presents the rainfall is in tension with Marv's dialogue as the torrents of water, like the bars of the jail cell Marv will later inhabit, confines him. Fittingly,

⁴⁴⁸ Frank Miller, *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse Comics, 2005), 127.

Marv begins to psychoanalyze himself (he is depicted as being a mentally imbalanced character who needs medication to remain socially stable) as he continues his walk through the storm, noted that he's "got a condition," is perhaps "imagining things," and it may, very well, turn out "what they always said I was going to turn into – a maniac, a psycho killer."⁴⁴⁹ The rain, despite Marv's initial suggestion that it is a liberating force, slowly begins to become just the opposite. He is a character whose fate is locked in thanks to his mental imbalance, causing him to be ostracized by the inhabitants of Sin City (figure 5.11).



Figure 5.11: Miller's Marv, Lost in the Psychoanalytical Rains of *Sin City*.

Place and Peterson's analysis of noir style no doubt takes its lead from Schrader's essay, published two years earlier, but makes significant contributions to the discussion of noir visuals that are worthy of discussion here. For Place and Peterson, noir's reliance on deep focus cinematography and wide-angle lenses results in a "certain distorting characteristics" and the

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 138.

style, as a whole, is defined by “antitraditional mise-en-scène” or a combination of off-angle compositions, “symbolic representations of fragmented ego or idealized image” (the use of mirrors and portraits) and “no means of spatial orientation” (shot patterns that undermine spatial continuity).⁴⁵⁰

While Miller’s work is produced by ink and pencils and not the photographic apparatus that has defined film from an ontological standpoint, thus making the visual distortion that comes from deep-focus cinematography and its wide-angle lenses an impossibility, he does draw upon the characteristics of caricature and, in one notable arc, color, to lend his characters a similar type of distortion. In the arc “That Yellow Bastard” (1996), Miller introduces us to Junior Rourke (played in the film by Nick Stahl), a rapist of pre-pubescent girls that is being pursued by police officer John Hartigan (Bruce Willis). When he is initially introduced, the villainous Junior is depicted much like the other characters of *Sin City*: abstractly, nearly feature-less, in simple black and white. However, after Hartigan shoots him and the years pass, Junior’s form becomes marked and contorted; he has become the Yellow Bastard of the title. Confronting Hartigan in his jail cell in the middle of the arc, the visually re-defined Bastard now boasts an electric yellow skin tone that is beyond jaundice. Wrinkled dark circles emphasize his large, yellow, eyes and an obscenely large, bulbous nose takes up more facial real estate than his nearly-hidden chin. Junior, like Orson Welles’ antagonist Frank Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* (1958), is expressively distorted from the rest of the characters by the tools of the medium (figure 5.12).

⁴⁵⁰ Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, “Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir,” in *Film Noir Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 67-69.



Figure 5.12: *The Grotesque Distortion of the Yellow Bastard in Sin City.*

This sequence also depicts Miller's embrace of the "antitraditional mise-en-scène" that Place and Peterson describe. Hartigan's cell is continuously depicted in canted frames (as seen in the first panel in the above figure); the visuals underline the theme that the justice system of Sin City is defined by corruption and that the world of Hartigan, the one good cop in the system, is askew. Moreover, the sequence undermines the classical rules of spatial orientation already discussed at length in the previous chapter. When the cell is introduced, Hartigan is initially depicted as being its only inhabitant (an overhead, canted, establishing shot begins the sequence). However, after Hartigan falls into a depressed psychological state, both the reader and the fallen cop are surprised by the entrance of the Yellow Bastard. On the page previous to the Yellow

Bastard's introduction, Hartigan is seen alone in his cell, lying on the floor, when he cranes his neck and expresses a note of confusion: "Hnh?"⁴⁵¹ After the page flip, which is used masterfully by Miller to draw out the suspense and mystery of the scene, we find the Yellow Bastard sitting in a previously vacant space. We are not shown his entrance into the space with a sequence or establishing shot and Miller depicts even the smallest space of a jail cell ambiguously. The only notable aspect of antitraditional mise-en-scène that Miller's *Sin City* seems to lack is the appearance of mirrors or portraits, although he does not shy away from dealing with the "fragmented ego" of Marv in "The Hard Goodbye" by utilizing previously described visual cues.

In the classical period of noir or, as Schrader sketches it, from 1941-1958, the criticism is often lobbed on behalf of scholars that the visual motifs that define the movement or genre (another heavily discussed topic in film studies) have been retroactively applied to other genres (melodrama, thriller, drama).⁴⁵² As historians are keen to note, noir was a French concept applied to American film and was not widely received until 1955 with the English translation of Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton's *A Panorama of American Film Noir: 1941-1953*. Essentially, the criticism is this: how could there be a cohesive style if the actual practitioners were unaware of its existence? Fortunately, Miller's case sidesteps this potential critique, as his works were produced well after the rise of noir as a debated category (Schrader, Place, and Peterson all published their essays in the 1970s) and that he prides himself on being a scholar of noir, appearing in the documentary *Film Noir: Bringing Darkness to Light* (2006) with filmmaker Christopher Nolan, writer James Ellroy, and even Paul Schrader. Miller is more than aware of noir's influence on his work and, despite his insistence that comics are movies on paper

⁴⁵¹ Frank Miller, *Sin City: That Yellow Bastard* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse Comics, 2005), 93.

⁴⁵² Schrader, 54.

is a “really corrupt” concept “because it makes us sound so inferior,” he is not above imitation or, as I have been describing imitation here, stylistic remediation.⁴⁵³

Both of Miller’s noir remediation texts, Sin City the comic and Sin City the film, were critically and commercially successful. The single issues tended to rank between the 30s and 50s of the Diamond Comic Distributors monthly listing, selling 49,000-53,000 copies per month (about 25% of the numbers that a top ranked title would sell). The comic series was awarded numerous Eisner Awards (awarded by the comic book professionals), including Best Short Story (1995), Best Limited Series (1995, 1996), Best Graphic Album: Reprint (1993, 1998), and Best Artist/Penciller/Inker (1993). Moreover, the series was awarded two Harvey Awards (also awarded by professionals) Best Continuing or Limited Series (1996) and Best Graphic Album of Original Work (1998). Finally, the series was voted by the readers of the Comics Buyer’s Guide as the Favorite Limited Series of 1996. The film, on the other hand, grossed \$158 million worldwide and won Miller and Rodriguez a Technical Grand Prize for “visual shaping” at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival (the film was also nominated for the Golden Palm). Moreover, the month after the release of the film, all seven collected volumes ranked amongst the top 100 trade paperbacks.⁴⁵⁴

Spurred by the success of Sin City and Zack Snyder’s adaptation of 300 (2007), Miller decided to give filmmaking another try. In an interview with Variety, the writer-artist remarked that “The fear is fading. Rodriguez said: ‘Don’t be nervous. All the stuff you’ve done throughout your career is the same thing you’re doing now---you’re just using different tools.’”⁴⁵⁵ Instead of bringing one of his own projects to the screen this time around however, Miller chose

⁴⁵³ Brownstein, 87-88.

⁴⁵⁴ “May 2005 Comic Book Sales Figures,” The Comics Chronicle, <<http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2005/2005-05.html>> (22 June 2011).

⁴⁵⁵ Jeff Goldsmith, “Spirit Moves Him,” Variety, 26 July 2007, A2.

to adapt a work by his late colleague, Will Eisner (the two men published a book of interviews under the title Eisner/Miller in 2005). Eisner, one of the forefathers of the comic book form and first graphic novelist, launched his career with the weekly strip The Spirit in 1940 and Miller thought it was time to bring it to the big screen. According to Miller, “I want to do him [Eisner] proud. [The film] is true to the Will Eisner that I know.”⁴⁵⁶ Miller completed the deal after meeting film producer Michael Uslan (producer of the Batman films) at Eisner’s memorial where the producer told him “There’s no way I can let anybody *else* do it.”⁴⁵⁷ With an unknown production budget, Miller began casting The Spirit in 2007 with Samuel L. Jackson in the role of the villainous Octopus and relative unknown Gabriel Macht as the lead.

Drawing from his work on Sin City, Miller decided to film the bulk of The Spirit on a digital backlot. According to producer Deborah Del Prete, the decision to use green screen derived from a desire to bring a comic book movie closer to the art that makes the native form so special. As she notes, “We’ve always been telling comic stories but we’ve never actually been able to show the art in the way we are able to now. That’s one of the great reasons for using the whole green screen technique because marrying art with the actual live action, you will get the experience as a comic fan that you got reading the books.”⁴⁵⁸ Despite the similar production method and nearly-identical style, Miller tried to distance the two films during interviews running up to the release of The Spirit. When speaking to the Los Angeles Times, Miller noted “It’s very different than the look and feel of Sin City and 300 because the source material is different.”⁴⁵⁹ Yet, fans of Eisner’s original were dubious of Miller’s interpretation. When I attended the 2008 San Diego Comic-Con panel for the film, many of my friends turned to one

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Geoff Boucher, “Revenge of the Dark Knight,” The Los Angeles Times, 29 April 2007, E5.

⁴⁵⁸ See the Green World featurette on The Spirit Special Edition DVD or Blu-Ray.

⁴⁵⁹ Geoff Boucher, “The Spirit Moved Him,” The Los Angeles Times, 2 November 2008.

another with a look of concern; something did not feel right with the footage being screened. As reporter Geoff Boucher notes in his article covering the film, “Eisner’s humanistic and often gentle, Capra-like approach to his character has many comics fans wondering why Miller – famous for spilling vats of blood-red ink in his comics – is taking the old man’s winking Spirit into a Sin City.”⁴⁶⁰ When faced with this interpretation, Miller simply replied “I like to shake things up and tell the story the best way possible. And I can tell you first hand, that’s what Will Eisner liked too.”⁴⁶¹

Despite Miller’s assurances and the proclamation that his style was in dialogue with Eisner’s, the interviews conducted between the two artists provide an illuminating example as to how different the stylistic philosophies of both writer/artists are. In fact, the two held fundamental disagreements over the form of comics to the point that even Miller notes in his introduction to the interviews that “Will Eisner and I argued a lot...What you’re about to read is the climax of our several-decade debate. I bet he wins.”⁴⁶² Later, in a discussion about imitation, Miller notes that Eisner’s work “is more like theater and mine is more like film.”⁴⁶³ When Miller admits he attempts to imitate other forms of visual media, Eisner pointedly notes that he has:

absolutely no intention of capturing the essence of any other medium. I’m in pursuit of a connection between me and the reader. The only entertainment form that provides a real, live, connection between the viewer and the actor is theater. In live theater, you are sitting there and watching a real thing happening. On film, you’re just the camera. There’s no sense of contact between you and the actors. It’s an experience that you immerse yourself in. You’re a spectator and comics is [sic.] a participatory form.⁴⁶⁴

As the dialogue progresses, it becomes clear that Eisner is willing to embrace the essence of

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Frank Miller, “Introduction,” in *Eisner/Miller*, Charles Brownstein (Milwaukee: Dark Horse Books, 2005), 3.

⁴⁶³ Brownstein, 87.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 88.

other media forms, but only in the vaguest possible ways (comics as participatory like theater, comics as grappling with the “visual language” of film and the necessity to “use the same language”). Essentially, Eisner is not above using the compositional principles of the graphic and visual arts as a guide to his work (as he notes in Comics & Sequential Art), but he is not keen on homage, direct imitation, or, in terms of this study, stylistic remediation.

Eisner’s statement becomes complicated when analyzing his work on The Spirit (1940-1952). While the title may take some narrative and stylistic cues from noir (which, at the time, was not a historical or critical designation) such as the femme fatale and the protagonist who oscillates between law and lawlessness (Detective Denny Colt essentially fakes his own death in order to work outside the limitations of the justice system), Eisner’s style and tone are far-less “hardboiled” than Miller’s remediation. Placing his first entry in the series (“The Origin of The Spirit,” 1940) in dialogue with Schrader’s description of noir, approximately half of the panels are evenly “lit” by Eisner and rendered in blooming colors more akin to Chester Gould’s Dick Tracy (1931-1977) than to Schrader’s definition of noir, despite the fact that all the sequences seem to take place at night. In addition, Eisner’s first entry lacks “an almost Freudian attachment to water” (he would utilize it later, but he would also stage many set pieces in the snow) and shadows are used sparingly, only to initially conceal the Spirit’s identity (he would later be given a mask).

Moreover, while Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith are correct to a degree when they note that “Eisner was one of the first artists to bring the mood and the danger of the big city at night to the comic book page by simulating the low-key lighting of the film noir genre,” the artist’s style went beyond noir, providing glimpses of low-key lighting and the compositional tension Schrader describes (“Meet P’Gell,” 1946, figure 5.13) while also embracing colorful,

comedic set-pieces (“The Story of Gerhard Shnobble,” 1948, figure 5.14).⁴⁶⁵



Figures 5.13 and 5.14: Eisner’s Diverse Style Ranged from Low-Key Noir to Colorful Comedy in *The Spirit*.

Quite simply, Eisner was a writer and artist whose *Spirit* was not defined by a specific genre, both in terms of style and narrative. The strip itself was marketed as offering three genres of entertainment: action, mystery, and adventure. Tellingly, comic historian Michael Barrier describes Eisner’s Gerhard Shnobble story as being “playful...serious...[and] sentimental...all at once.”⁴⁶⁶ Moreover, Eisner was even dubious of the genre of the crime drama and Miller’s reliance on it, telling his colleague that “I guess crime dramas...are form...some have content....The comics that I see are all generally about pursuit and vengeance – with vengeance being the primary motive of the pursuit.”⁴⁶⁷

Finally, Eisner’s reliance on color, despite his remark that it “is used essentially as a

⁴⁶⁵ Duncan and Smith, 142.

⁴⁶⁶ Michael Barrier, “About *The Spirit* and Will Eisner,” in *A Smithsonian Book of Comic Books*, eds. Michael Barrier and Martin Williams (New York: Smithsonian Institution Press and Harry N. Abrams, 1981), 270.

⁴⁶⁷ Brownstein, 96-97.

packaging device,” distances it greatly from the noir tradition.⁴⁶⁸ As Schrader describes about color cinematography, it was “the final blow to the ‘noir’ look.”⁴⁶⁹ While I would be cautious to go as far as Schrader in implying that color and noir are fundamentally incompatible, as Miller and several neo-noir filmmakers seem to have found a balance, to only describe Eisner’s Spirit as noir is not only a simplification but a simplification that verges on being ahistorical. After all, noir style, to borrow from genre theorist Rick Altman, was more of an adjective than a noun during his tenure on the series, as Borde and Chaumeton’s seminal study was not released in French until three years after The Spirit concluded. Essentially, how could Eisner’s work fully embody a style a style that had yet to be defined?

Reviews of Miller’s adaptation tend to come down into two camps when it comes to dissecting the failure of the film which was, at the time, equated by the fan site Ain’t It Cool News with the infamous disaster Battlefield Earth (2000).⁴⁷⁰ A film scholar and colleague at the website Pajiba suggested that Miller was unable to grapple with Eisner’s unclassifiable tone, writing “Miller has tried to reproduce the strip’s mash-up of noir, slapstick, fantasy, and social reportage, but his mix doesn’t cohere.”⁴⁷¹ Nathan Rabin, also noting Miller’s schizophrenic tone, wrote that “Infinitely more alarming: in terms of humor, The Spirit feels like the follow-up to Batman & Robin no one wanted. Main bad guy Samuel L. Jackson even spends much of the film indulging in egg-themed wordplay that almost inspires nostalgia for Arnold Schwarzenegger’s avalanche of ice puns in the unloved third Batman sequel.”⁴⁷² The hypothesis

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁶⁹ Schrader, 61.

⁴⁷⁰ Jondough, “Jondough Deems Frank Miller’s The Spirit The Worst Movie He’s Ever Seen!,” Ain’t It Cool News, 15 December 2008, <<http://www.aintitcool.com/node/39450>> (14 March 2011).

⁴⁷¹ Ranylt Richildis, “The Spirit Movie Review,” Pajiba, 30 December 2008, <http://www.pajiba.com/film_reviews/spirit-the-review.php> (7 February 2011).

⁴⁷² Nathan Rabin, “The Spirit Movie Review,” The AV Club, 24 December 2008, <<http://www.avclub.com/articles/the-spirit,17083/>> (7 February 2011).

proposed in chapter one of this study, that moviegoers are willing to accept stylization without the faintest hint of camp, appears to have held for the few patrons who saw The Spirit in theaters (it grossed a mere \$39 million worldwide).

The other camp of reviewers, consisting of many viewers who were familiar with Eisner's version, felt betrayed by Miller's interpretation. The Spirit was, in that much-maligned tenet of adaptation theory, an unfaithful adaptation. Unlike Eisner's compositions, Miller drained most of the film of color, composing his shots around the chiaroscuro that made Sin City so notable. It is telling that producer Deborah Del Prete describes the look of the film as "contemporary noir."⁴⁷³ Moreover, instead of dressing Eisner's femme fatales in actual clothing, Miller brought his signature obsession with the female form to the forefront by dressing many of the women in leather bondage gear or, as many critics noted, Nazi paraphernalia. Yet, there were other graphical betrayals that Miller was held accountable for: changing Denny Colt's trademark blue trench coat and fedora for a black one, giving Denny a pair of Converse All-Stars (the shoe that Dwight wears in Sin City), and actually showing the visage of Eisner's faceless villain, the Octopus (played in the film by Samuel L. Jackson).

The biggest shift that I noted was Miller's insistence on stylistically remediating other art forms, despite Eisner's hardline philosophy against it. In one scene, Octopus speaks with Silken Floss (played by Scarlett Johansson) and the space of the scene changes abruptly into one formed by the Octopus's deranged subjectivity. As Del Prete notes on the commentary, "This whole...scene, when Frank told me about it, I had no idea what he was talking about. He wanted to do it like an anime and I kept going 'OK, fine, I'm sure you know what you mean.'"⁴⁷⁴ Thanks to Miller's radical changes, as one self-described fan of Eisner's comic and Miller's work

⁴⁷³ Green World featurette.

⁴⁷⁴ See the filmmaker commentary track on The Spirit DVD or Blu-Ray.

assessed the film, “everything about it was an insult to the memory of Will Eisner...I believe once he admits these wrong doings to himself he can move on to another step that I feel should be a public apology.”⁴⁷⁵

The marketing behind The Spirit reveals the image that distributor Lions Gate was after. Featuring a stark black and white composition with the title character (red neck tie flailing in the wind) standing atop bricks spelling out the film’s tagline (“My city screams.”), all of which is crowned by the title of the film, the poster promises everything that filmgoers loved about the other movies Miller had been associated with. The hardboiled tagline is similar to that for Sin City (“Walk down the right back alley in Sin City and you can find anything.”), the pointed, inky font appears to be a mash-up of those used on Sin City marketing materials and that used on 300 (figure 5.15).



Figure 5.15: The High Concept Marketing of Frank Miller’s Graphical Remediation.

The graphical remediation of Frank Miller, like bullet-time or the Glasgow grin Joker before it, had become a commodity in the high concept intersection between marketing the filmmaking. This time however, damned partially by tone and partially by conflicted authorship (one might

⁴⁷⁵ Iann Robinson, “The Redemption of Frank Miller,” Crave Online, 12 January 2009, <<http://www.craveonline.com/entertainment/comics/article/the-redemption-of-frank-miller-72867>> 7 February 2011.

ask whose Spirit is it anyway?), the concept crashed and burned with critics and general audiences. The style had played itself out; Joe Popcorn needed to give his rods and cones a break or, as Nathan Rabin notes, “The hard-boiled visual style of Sin City, with its comic book compositions, noirish black-and-white, and impressionistic splashes of color, now feels shopworn....In comics, it took Miller decades to devolve into embarrassing self-parody. In film, he’s made that leap over the course of a single disastrous film.”⁴⁷⁶

Moreover, Miller and Lionsgate seem to overestimate the value of the property. While Eisner’s work has established him as one of the founding fathers of American comics art and has become an incredibly influential figure, his work was never a top seller. As comics scholar Jean-Paul Gabilliet notes, “Over a twelve-year career, the strip never experienced large-scale popularity (only a limited number of Sunday newspapers carried the Spirit section)...[Yet] In terms of artistic achievement The Spirit stands out in America as the most worthwhile counterpart to the Belgian cartoonist Hergé’s Tintin in the mid-twentieth century.”⁴⁷⁷ Thus, considering the small readership that The Spirit had and the canonical status Eisner and the strip had with that demographic, it would appear that Lionsgate and Miller made an expensive and misguided film that attempted to capture a wider audience with style rather than retaining the original fan community with fidelity.

In the two years that have passed since The Spirit (dis)graced screens, Miller’s working profile has gone from high to low. From 2005-2008, Miller revisited the character who helped make him famous, Batman, for DC Comics’ All-Star Batman and Robin the Boy Wonder (this was after being scheduled to work on a Batman title, entitled “Holy Terror, Batman!,” that pitted

⁴⁷⁶ Rabin, “The Spirit Movie Review.”

⁴⁷⁷ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 21.

the caped crusader against Al-Qaeda). Yet the series, scheduled to run for twelve issues, never reached its conclusion. In 2010, DC issued a press release proclaiming that the series would be rebranded as Dark Knight: Boy Wonder, would finish the narrative begun in 2005 in six issues, and would “ship on time, every month” (the original title had release date problems, allegedly due to artist Jim Lee’s full schedule).⁴⁷⁸ As of February 2011, the title has yet to be scheduled for release. Also rumored to be in Miller’s comic pipe line is a prequel to 300, tentatively titled Xerxes. His only film project since The Spirit was a commercial for the fragrance Gucci Guilty. The often rumored film follow ups to 300 and Sin City have yet to reach the production stage.

Conclusions

The objective of this chapter has been to trace stylistic remediation as a potentially cyclical occurrence, thus differentiating itself from the theories of adaptation. Adaptation theory tends to account for consistencies or changes simply made across the progression from the original to the adaptation whereas this developing theory of stylistic remediation widens the scope of analysis, providing a nuanced account that details the complex stylistic shifts that art forms inevitably experience as they encounter other art forms. In the example of Frank Miller, we see how film noir influenced his work on Sin City nearly forty years after the fact and how he brought that sensibility to the work of a predecessor, Will Eisner, a comic book writer and artist actually working in the classical era of film noir but whose work only showed stylistic glimpses of.

Miller’s remediation and the critical and fan reaction it inspired also begs questions about authorship, comics, and film. Authorship has been a defining force in the comic book industry since the rise of the graphic novel and adult print lines, making Miller, Alan Moore, and other

⁴⁷⁸ Alex Segure, “What’s Next for Frank Miller and Jim Lee?,” The Source, 2 April 2010, <<http://dcu.blog.dccomics.com/2010/04/02/whats-next-for-frank-miller-and-jim-lee/>> (7 February 2011).

writers and artists, commodities in themselves. Yet, when those artistic sensibilities clash, as Eisner's and Miller's obviously do in both style and artistic philosophy, despite the insistence that green screen allows a film to match the experience of the original comic, whose Spirit wins out? When the dust settled with critics, fans, and the box office, it appears in the case of The Spirit at least, that it was the original vision, Eisner's. The cyclical remediation of noir, from film, to comics, back to film, distanced the adaptation from its source material.

Yet, cyclical stylistic remediation and the formal changes it inspires are not always received poorly. As noted in the first case study of this chapter focusing on the Joker, the graphical remediation and redefinition of the character over the past decades has drawn from film in the comics and comics in the film. Moreover, while the Glasgow Grin Joker was originally met with skepticism in some fan circles, the trifecta of texts across both media forms by Morrison, Nolan, and Azzarello to embrace his new look provided Warner Bros. and DC Comics with a perpetual motion marketing machine. The style unified the three texts which, despite taking place in three separate diegetic spaces, provided the studio and publisher with a high concept style to market the projects seamlessly. In the next chapter, I will move away from sketching out this process of stylistic remediation between comics and film to speculating about the future media objects it may give birth to.

Chapter VI: The Future of Stylistic Remediation Between Comics and Film

The title of this chapter makes me somewhat uneasy. Writing about the future inherently involves a great deal of speculation, normally applied to a hypothetical situation and, occasionally, those speculative thoughts fall into the paradox of becoming better documents of our history (flipping through a mid-1990s, out of print issue of Wired magazine ten years after the fact can be an easy indulgence of absurd comedy) than predicting our future. Yet, the title of this chapter is a bit of a misnomer: I am not predicting what stylistic trends may occur, I am analyzing trends that are beginning to occur, exemplified by the new media form of the motion comic and how stylistic remediation, in the case of the film, video game, and soundtrack based on Bryan Lee O'Malley's Scott Pilgrim comic series (2004-2010). In doing so, I will be revisiting a bit of the comic studies theory and film theory that I have taken for granted over the past two chapters in order to avoid what may be perceived as critical redundancy. That said, I encourage the reader to think of this chapter as the outline to a comic book or a film, whichever you prefer: it can be considered a fully realized road map that is the product of its historical moment but may experience some small changes when it finally becomes drawn or photographed within the frame. It is a foundation, a beginning and I look forward to whatever discussion it may eventually encourage.

Part 1: The Form and Marketing of the Perpetual Motion (Comic) Machine

"There's a great deal of additional drawing to be done [in the transition from a comic to a motion comic]. Talking mouths, add-ons to shots to fit the new and necessary dimensions, and some action in between bits. I contribute here and there, but Neal Adams has been undertaking the bulk of that task."-Artist John Cassaday on Adapting the Astonishing X-Men Comic into a Motion Comic.⁴⁷⁹

"Warner [Bros.] hopes the resulting hybrids [motion comics] will carry appeal for both hard-core comic fans and draw in new aficionados....Warner hopes the [Watchmen] motion comic, to

⁴⁷⁹ Dave Richards, "Cassaday on the Astonishing X-Men Motion Comic," Comic Book Resources, 23 October 2009, <<http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=23421>> (14 March 2011).

be released chapter by chapter over several months, will help build buzz for next year's Watchmen feature movie, says Thomas Gewecke, Warner Bros. president of digital distribution. He plans to play around with different business approaches for the motion comics, trying some ad-supported models, and some paid ones; he may bundle several chapters together and sell them on DVD."-Sarah McBride, The Wall Street Journal.⁴⁸⁰

It is tempting to think that the motion comic is simply the product of this current era of media conglomeration and convergence. In 2002, Scott Bukatman described rudimentary "online comics" as a "slow-loading 'new media' form that, with its static, laterally sliding figures and static backgrounds" produced through such technologies as Flash (like the Brooke Burgess series Broken Saints from 2001-2003). Bukatman saw part of this online comic phenomenon as a means for "larger multimedia companies such as Dark Horse, Marvel, or the short-lived Stan Lee Media" to try to "generate plenty of 'synergy' and 'buzz' by incorporating 'the interactive bag of tricks associated with multimedia gaming and 'infotainment.'"⁴⁸¹ While Bukatman is undoubtedly correct that the online comic arose in the late 1990s resembling "film less than magic lantern shows," the motion comic has been around since the mid-1960s if not earlier.⁴⁸² In 1966, a Marvel licensed, Canadian produced syndicated television briefly hit the airwaves: The Marvel Superheroes animated series.

Produced by the production team Grantray-Lawrence (named for its principal personnel team Grant Simmons, Ray Patterson, and Robert Lawrence), the production company's short lived series was allegedly panned by Marvel fans due to its "laughedly cheap...ultra-limited animation."⁴⁸³ Yet, according to the authors of an article focusing on the series in Jack Kirby Collector, it is also possible to see the production company's reverence for the material. The

⁴⁸⁰ Sarah McBride, "Web Draws on Comics," The Wall Street Journal, 18 July 2008.

⁴⁸¹ Scott Bukatman, "Online Comics and the Reframing of the Moving Image," The New Media Book, ed. Dan Harries (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), 138.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Adam McGovern, Arlen Schumer, Steve Lawrence, and Robert Lawrence, "Animatters: Marvel Man," Jack Kirby Collector 42 (2004): 42.

Marvel Superheroes was produced by shooting the original comic art “directly...with minimal hand, eye, and mouth motion and some panning across scenes and tracking of still figures...the shows were like a talking gallery of classic Marvel art.”⁴⁸⁴ According to Robert Lawrence, one of the creative personnel behind the show, “the artwork [of the comics] was absolutely alluring. We decided to see if we could animate a book.”⁴⁸⁵ Promotional materials sent out to potential networks promised a show that gave viewers an experience of the Marvel heroes “Exactly as they originally appeared. The same superhero artwork as in the MARVEL comic books. The same authors and stories that have proven themselves with 60 million readers of MARVEL Comics each year.”⁴⁸⁶

While the article in Jack Kirby Collector features a photo spread that details the nuts and bolts of the production, Lawrence describes how the original creative teams were or were not involved specifically. Lawrence notes in the article that Stan Lee would write dialogue for the series while Jack Kirby and other artists did not directly work on the cartoons. Essentially, despite providing the literal blueprint for the series, Kirby never worked on any animation cels and, therefore, was never paid for his work. Neither was publisher Martin Goodman, who licensed the rights “as a loss-leader...[Goodman] was trying to enhance the value of his company [so he could sell it]...[he was] trying to enhance the merchandising of his characters and their profile.”⁴⁸⁷ While the article does not detail why the show halted production after just one year, it seems to imply that the success of the program gave Grantray-Lawrence the opportunity to work on a bigger budget, network animated series based on Spider-Man (1967-1970).

Thus, the hybrid of animation and comics has gone through a strange evolution in its

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 47.

distribution from its potential beginnings in a 1966 Canadian produced, syndicated series, through “online comics” embedded in web pages and consumed through web browsers, to its current incarnation that is accessible on everything from DVD (Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic), online (digitalmotioncomics.com), and on smart phones and iPads (Marvel and DC Comics both have motion comic applications that are available through the iTunes Store).⁴⁸⁸ Yet, like the means of distribution, the form of the motion comic has changed a great deal over the past forty-five years. A fundamental question I would like to briefly explore here is how do we define the relationship between comics and animation? More specifically, how are motion comics stand related to these two similar but ontologically different forms?

Motion comics, to my knowledge, lack a proper definition or examination of how they differ from both animation and comics. For Bukatman, as already noted, the online comics featuring Flash animation (I would be cautious to conflate online comics with motion comics for the obvious reason that there are online comics which do not feature animated motion – not that Bukatman does) harken back to the proto-cinema form of the magic lantern show. The movement is stilted and lacks the fluidity of most animation and the space presented lacks any tactile qualities: characters often exist on separate dimensional planes than the backgrounds. In order to begin to understand and define the form of the motion comic, let us examine definitions of animation and comics first.

Preston Blair, a veteran animator for both Disney and Tex Avery, defines animation as “the process of drawing and photographing a character...in successive positions to create lifelike movement.”⁴⁸⁹ Blair’s definition, written in 1994 in the refining stages of computer generated

⁴⁸⁸ For more information as to the development of digital and motion comics in the 1990s, see Darren Wershler, “Digital Comics, Circulation, and the Importance of Being Eric Sluis,” Cinema Journal 50, no. 3(2011): 127-134.

⁴⁸⁹ Preston Blair, Cartoon Animation (Laguna Hills: Walter Foster Publishing, 1994), 6.

graphics (the first computer animated feature film, Toy Story, was released one year later), is a good starting point but the linkages of “drawing...in successive positions” ignores the diversity of both the form (clay animation, puppet or cut-out animation) and production method (Toy Story was not the product of successive photographs and but successive frames, rendered by a computer). Moreover, as Paul Wells notes, Blair’s definition assumes that realism (“lifelike movement”) is fundamental to the form and while, thanks to the works of Disney specifically, it may be the “predominant language of animation...More developmental and experimental forms of animation frequently strive for the opposite effect.”⁴⁹⁰

For Wells, animation is best described in far more open ended terms: the creation of “the illusion of movement frame-by-frame through a variety of technical applications.”⁴⁹¹ Animation historian Giannalberto Bendazzi offers up a similar, helpful definition from a trade organization, the International Association of Animation Film Artists, “everything that is not a simple representation of a live action shot at 24 frames a second.”⁴⁹² While both of these definitions may either be considered frustratingly vague or negative, they both rightfully acknowledge that animation is not a genre of film. While it may follow narrative conventions and the continuity codes of live action cinema, animation is a media form of its own.

Moreover, as Bendazzi begins to tease out, the connections between animation and the comic are often overstated. Animation “has only a faint relationship with printed comic strips” (he notes that America witnessed an overlap from 1900-1920s, see chapter two for a brief discussion of those connections).⁴⁹³ While both forms may be the product removed by the automation of live action cinema, Scott McCloud further elaborates upon the disparate

⁴⁹⁰ Paul Wells, Animation: Genre and Authorship (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 4.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁹² Giannalberto Bendazzi, Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Animation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xvi.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, xv.

relationship between both media by noting that “the basic difference is that animation is sequential in time but not spatially juxtaposed as comics are.”⁴⁹⁴ McCloud’s definition once again brings us back to the fundamental difference between comics and film with regard to space: the viewer of the film encounters sequential images that successively replace one another on the plane of engagement while the reader of the comic encounters multiple images at the same time and must compromise them via the act of what McCloud describes as closure. For McCloud and I, the multiframe, as Groensteen defines the overall construction of the comics page out of several, separate, panels, is a fundamental difference between the media.

In order to parse out how motion comics fit into this relationship, we must first begin to analyze their form. Moving beyond The Marvel Superheroes as a historical lead in to the contemporary motion comic, I will be specifically analyzing three titles: Saw: Rebirth (2005), Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic (2007), and Inception: The Cobol Job (2010). Saw: Rebirth is a motion comic based on IDW Publishing’s comic series of the same name, written by R. Eric Lieb and Kris Oprisko with art by Renato Guedes and produced by Jeff Shuter and Daniel Viney of Bomb-xx. Released by Lions Gate Films and Twisted Pictures, the motion comic was distributed via the web (www.rebirth.saw2.com) in order for viewers of the upcoming Saw II (2005) to fill in the backstory of the first film’s villain, John/Jigsaw. The motion comic begins with fuzzy, green tinted images that appear to be taken from a surveillance camera of some sort as John, the narrator, begins telling us in voice-over, “So it’s all come down to this...” As John continues, the images behind the fuzz begin to show us details of his life while comic book, text captions provide us with the same information the voice over does. It is an odd choice for the motion comic producers (who go unbilled on the project; the only talent

⁴⁹⁴ Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 7.

billed are the original writers and artist, a rather telling labor practice that ignores the personnel involved in the remediation), as the practice is narrationally redundant; the textual remediation seems to be merely a stylistic flourish added, like an audio book that presents us with the same prose passages that it provides aurally.

As the short progresses however, the fuzzy image becomes the background for two juxtaposed panels depicting John/Jigsaw at his desk. The first panel depicts a long shot composition (with the Jigsaw puppet behind him) while the second panel relays to us a medium shot composition (figure 7.1). The viewer barely has enough time to register the information in the panels before they slide away to expose a third panel in the background: a close up of John.



Figure 6.1: Juxtaposed Panels in the *Saw: Rebirth* Motion Comic (2005).

The subsequent five frames depict single panels that are constructed, via jigsaw pieces, in front of our eyes. These panels pass, before we're given a composition of John and an unnamed woman. When she begins to speak, inside the flashback, a woman's voice picks up on the soundtrack (the soundtracks of some motion comics, as we will see, do not embody the radio drama format of casting separate actors and actresses) and a word balloon forms near her lips as both the voice over and stylistically remediated word balloon once again give us the same

narrative information.

The remainder of the motion comic follows this form: panels are presented (sometimes juxtaposed, sometimes in isolation) while the text of either the captions of the voice over or the actual character's word balloons are read aloud by the voice over artists on the accompanying soundtrack, which also features musical compositions. The process used, Bomb-xx, "starts with digital scans of the actual comic book pages," and according to New York Times writer George Gene Gustines, has a "frenetic energy...not unlike that of an MTV video."⁴⁹⁵ Oddly, the Saw: Rebirth motion comic does not completely meet Wells's definition of animation: movement does not exist within the compositions. Admittedly, the camera zooms or pans across the images and the panels slide and, in the case of the jig sawed panels, are formed before our very eyes. However, the motion comic lacks the illusion of movement within the spaces of the panels.

Essentially, the multiframe of the comic and the act of closure that McCloud speaks of are animated for the reader, making it nearly unnecessary for the reader/viewer of the motion comic to really become a "conscious collaborator...[who connects fractured moments in space and time into] a continuous, unified reality."⁴⁹⁶ At the same time however, the contents of the panels are not animated. They are images frozen in time, lacking any physical momentum. Essentially, Saw: Rebirth is neither a comic nor animation; it is a new media form that stylistically remediates aspects of both the previously established art forms (even the Marvel Superheroes program featured rudimentary movement within the panels).

Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic, directed by Jack Strider Hughes with illustrations and ink work credited to the original artist team of Dave Gibbons and John Higgins,

⁴⁹⁵ George Gene Gustines, "A Comic Book Superhero is Headed to Small Screens," The New York Times, 14 July 2008.

⁴⁹⁶ McCloud, 65, 67.

the original artists on the original graphic novel, embodies a different formal approach to the motion comic. Produced by Wesley Coller and Zack Snyder's production company Cruel & Unusual Films, the motion comic follows the original novel almost directly in terms of story and serialization. Fractured into twelve episodes with each episode following adapting the story of one of the twelve issues of the comic, the Watchmen motion comics, unlike Saw: Rebirth, were released for promotion and profit. Once the series was released on the web via the iTunes store, it was later re-packaged on DVD and Blu-Ray, complete with a voucher to see the film at a discounted cost and, later, re-packaged once again on DVD and Blu-Ray in Watchmen: The Ultimate Cut, this time with an altered cut of the film and a wide array of special features. Moreover, the form of the Watchmen motion comic is markedly different from Saw: Rebirth.

The first episode, "At Midnight, All the Agents..." begins with the slow, backwards zoom out of the Comedian's bloodied badge. As the zoom out continues, voice actor Tom Stechschulte begins his narration of the captions that begin to appear on the page: "Rorschach's journal. October 12th, 1985." At first, the zoom feels like the zoom out of a motionless composition, much like those of the Bomb-xx system that served as the technology for Saw. However, as the shot continues to its thirty second mark (which covers approximately the first three frames of the first page), movement begins to occur at the upper right hand part of the frame: a merchant is washing the blood into the gutter as Rorschach's alter ego walks through the puddle.

By the time the zoom out reaches its destination at the balcony of the Comedian's apartment, nearly one minute has passed. The panels have been successfully animated into motion with the only alteration being the captions and narration. Essentially, one minute of motion comic time was not enough to cover the first nine panels of the comic book, perhaps

because the voice over artist is narrating the captions, slowing down the act of reading. Once we reach the inside of the apartment, the motion comic's compositions are similar to that of the comic, but the framing varies. It is as if Strider and the creative team felt the need to add camera movements and to vary the framing from compositions that were originally designed as static tableaux. For instance, the first frame on the second page of the comic depicts the two detectives talking in a long distance shot: a patrol officer's obstructed face is in the extreme foreground, one detective is in the middle ground examining a broken lock, and the third is looking out the broken patio window. The motion comic reframes the panel, removing the officer from the foreground, providing a closer view of the middle ground detective who, once he finishes his dialogue (like Saw, both word balloons and voice over narration are used, this time by one actor instead of multiple, giving it the continuity of an audio book), is removed from the frame by a slow zoom onto the one by the window.

Following the motion comic's remediation of that panel, Strider switches to a reverse shot of the detective looking out the window, again altering Gibbons's framing of the original panel to move closer to the detective examining the lock. He builds another stylistic device into the shot worthy of note: an out of focus foreground. Unlike the original comic panel, which keeps the entire space in focus for the viewer, the motion comic captures the focal distortion of what David Bordwell describes as "staging in depth."⁴⁹⁷ Strider not only altered the framing of the original comic panel but built photographic distortion into the animation, which of course is not a by-product of the animation production process. Essentially, the remediation of the distortion is a paradox: an unnatural modification (with regard to theories of media specificity) of animation, a medium based in the graphic arts rather than the photographic, in order for it to

⁴⁹⁷ David Bordwell, On the History of Film Style (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 158-271.

have the ontological effect of a photographed reality.⁴⁹⁸

Another stylistic deviation made by Strider is the inclusion of all of the detectives' dialogue over shots set in the present. As mentioned in the earlier chapter on the comic and the film, the first sequence involves a flashback. The reader of the comic book "listens" to the detectives as they try to piece together what happened in the apartment while Moore juxtaposes their present time interactions with flashback panels. The dialogue between the detectives, both in the form of the word balloon in the present and in the form of the caption in the panels depicting the past, provides continuity to the sequence. The motion comic drops that continuity by depicting the flashback panels without captions or dialogue, simply as diegetic inserts. Given the earlier discussion regarding how the soundtrack seems to slow down the action in order to stay in sync, this allows the flashback inserts to keep their visceral qualities: they are short visual inserts, depicting the violent struggle between the Comedian and his assailant. Using the dialogue as a through line would only slow things down and the decision to excise it allows the motion comic to capture the staccato rhythm of the original panel breakdown, even if the act of animation alters the effect it has on the reader/viewer.

One of Strider's oddest modifications of the original book involves the handling and lack thereof of Moore, Gibbons, and Higgins' own remediations. The Watchmen (1986) series is known for being a multilayered text, a graphic novel taken literally. The book is known for not only embodying the deconstruction of comic book superhero but the deconstruction of the comic book form. Each chapter of the book ends with additional narrative information delivered in a form alternative to the comic book: a book written by one of the characters, a book about one of

⁴⁹⁸ Bolter and Grusin describe the same phenomena as the attempted erasure of our awareness of a medium's presence (immediacy) via the use of multiple media forms (hyperimmediacy). See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Remediation: Understanding New Media (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 20-51.

the characters, an article from a fictional book on comic book history, a police case file, a scholarly article, newspaper articles, and a marketing portfolio. All of these alternative media forms, which have been stylistically remediated by the creative team on the book complete with faux coffee stains and pieces of tape and a range of different printing processes, have been left out of the motion comics. The only remediation from the original graphic novel to survive the translation into motion comic is present in “Tales of the Black Freighter,” a comic book title one of the characters is shown reading at various times in the graphic novel (the theme of the title intersects with that of the Watchmen arc). The personnel behind the original novel differentiated this comic book material from the Watchmen narrative by simplifying the character design and utilizing more baroque colors, reminiscent of the simplified color palettes of those of the four-color printing period.

Strider, once again, matches the graphical style of Gibbons’ and Higgins’ artwork but adds two noteworthy embellishments. The first, an additional layer of remediation, casts a half tone dot filter over the images, giving it the appearance and tactile quality of newspaper print. Yet, even in the representation of a diegetic comic book in the motion comic is not allowed to remain static. Essentially, Strider gives us full screen panels of the comic within the comic but does not allow the panels of “Tales of the Black Freighter” to remain motionless. It is as if a static space or frame in Strider’s motion comic would be the kiss of death, killing all momentum, being too much like a comic and not enough like animation. One wonders if the Rorschach of the motion comic went to go see the Statue of Liberty if she would get up and take a walk.

Essentially, the bulk of the Watchmen motion comic only graphically remediates Gibbons’ and Higgins’ original work. By and large, the spatial and temporal aspects of the original graphic novel have been skewed by the act of adding motion to the comic. Specifically,

the act of providing motion to the comic only slows down the act of reading/viewing, dictating the reading speed for us instead of allowing us to take our own pace. Given the wide range of speeds that readers have, it is necessary for the motion comic to slow down the act in order to become legible for its wide audience. Moreover, the motion comic's presentation of the space within the panels adds the additional remediation of the by-products of cinema's photographic engine. More significantly however, the Watchmen motion comic, by removing the multiframe and the juxtaposition of spatial and temporally separate panels in a sequence to be "closed" by the reader, removes us from becoming, as McCloud describes, "conscious collaborators."⁴⁹⁹ Essentially, the Watchmen motion comic seems to only embody animation and the "motion" of its namesake. Aside from the graphical remediation of Gibbons' and Higgins' artwork, very little of the motion comic remediates the actual comic book experience.

The Watchmen motion comic is a curio, frustrating to watch, making any viewer already familiar with the comic lament their decision to watch rather than read. Yet, because of its odd form, which is intensely faithful to the original book while making what may feel like arbitrary deviations in style, it is incredibly fascinating: a phenomenological train wreck if you will. Despite the fact that the Watchmen motion comic bills itself as a "motion comic," I find that description misleading for multiple reasons. First, the shorts do not provide us with sequential images, juxtaposed in space (to return to McCloud's definition). Thus, the readerly act of closure, as described by McCloud, is unnecessary. It has been rendered unnecessary thanks to the process of animation. Even as project animator Jake Hughes notes in an interview, "No one will ever be able to take the experience of actually reading Watchmen away because of things

⁴⁹⁹ McCloud, 65.

like panel layout and even the way it's structured and organized...It's its own experience."⁵⁰⁰

McCloud, writing in 2000 on a variation of motion comics, which he terms "digital comics" or "comics that exist as pure information...as their native soil...[sometimes supplemented] by sound, motion, and interactivity," is also dubious of the form for removing the reader from the equation.⁵⁰¹ Positing ideas for the future direction of the form, which McCloud views as an inevitable evolution that can be embraced creatively while realizing the importance of the "conceptual distinctions" between them, he makes a key observation.⁵⁰² McCloud writes:

it may be necessary to eliminate the kind of autonomous sound and motion found in traditional multimedia but the option of interactivity is by no means off-limits. In fact, it's crucial....Comics is a still life, mute, unmoving and passive in and of itself but the act of reading comics, even though the technology you hold in your hands is anything but. Comics in a digital environment will remain a still life but a still life we explore dynamically. One nice side effect of interactivity is that sound and motion can actually sneak in through the back door as a byproduct of reader interaction.⁵⁰³

When placed in dialogue with McCloud's proposition, both the Saw: Rebirth and Watchmen motion comics are poor supplements for the actual comic reading experience. Despite the fact that the Saw: Rebirth motion comic attempts to mimic the multiframe by presenting multiple, static, sequential images, it is largely superficial because of the use of animation outside of the panel, completing the interactive act of closure for us. The Watchmen motion comics, on the other hand, do not even attempt to bring our attention to the unique property of closure in the comic; they embody full animation. The graphical remediation of Gibbons' and Higgins' style is the only characteristic Strider's films embrace, as the word balloons and captions are superficial flourishes. In the end, it is the way in which Wells

⁵⁰⁰ John Siuntres, "Word Balloon: Watchmen Motion Comics' Jake Hughes," Newsarama.com, 28 January 2009, <<http://www.newsarama.com/comics/010928-WB-Watchmen-Motion.html>> (15 March 2011).

⁵⁰¹ Scott McCloud, Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing an Art Form (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 203, 208.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 205.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 228-229.

describes animation that also describes the Watchmen motion comics “the illusion of movement frame-by-frame through a variety of technical applications.”⁵⁰⁴

The final motion comic text I would like to analyze before focusing on their industrial function, mainly as a means of marketing and/or the delivery of repurposed content (as the Wall Street Journal epigraph at the head of this chapter begins to illustrate), is Inception: The Cobol Job. The Cobol Job is distinct from Saw: Rebirth and the Watchmen motion comics for one key reason: it repurposes a digital comic. While the other two motion comics repurposed print comics, The Cobol Job initially appeared as what McCloud calls a “digital comic,” a comic written by Jordan Goldberg with art by Long Vo, Joe Ng, and Crystal Reid sans the sound and motion McCloud describes as being in others. Filling in the reader on the events that occurred before the film begins, the digital comic, accessible via an interactive interface or Adobe Reader document (PDF), allows readers to view the content either panel by panel or holistically, page by page.⁵⁰⁵ For the motion comic, directed by Ian Kirby and included on the special edition DVD and Blu-Ray, the interface and medium has been altered which, in turn, obviously changes the form and reader’s experience of the comic.

The motion comic of The Cobol Job begins with an overhead view of a massive labyrinth. A caption materializes in the upper right hand corner of the screen reading, “Professor Miles brought us into dream-share to prove to us our creativity knew no bounds. He was right.” Despite the presence of the caption, utilized by both the Saw and Watchmen motion comics as well, the soundtrack is eerily silent, with the exception of Hans Zimmer’s score. Slowly, the “camera” gets closer and closer to the labyrinth, exposing it for its true form: a vast, interlocked,

⁵⁰⁴ Wells., 5.

⁵⁰⁵ Jordan Goldberg, Long Vo, Joe Ng, Crystal Reid. Inception: The Cobol Job, Publication Date Unknown, <<http://movies.yahoo.com/feature/inception-comic.html>> (18 March 2011).

metropolis. Automobile traffic becomes audible on the soundtrack in addition to Zimmer's score however, as the flow of captions continues, we are allowed to fulfill our place as readers, even as the motion comic transitions to a close up of Dom Cobb (played by Leonardo DiCaprio in the film), word balloons following him, originating from his dead wife, Mal (played by Marion Cotillard in the film).

The motion comic graphically remediates the exact panels of the original digital comic while adding cinematic remediations such as lens flares and the distortion effects of staging in depth similar to those of the Watchmen motion comics. People go in and out of focus as they pass on the street, the headlights of oncoming cars bloom as they approach the camera's placement in the virtual world of the comic, all while Zimmer's score and the ambient noise of the street fill our ears in stereo. Like the Watchmen motion comics, caption placement has been slightly altered along with the flow of panels into an animated sequence. The main formal distinction between The Cobol Job and the Watchmen motion comics is how it attempts to retain the viewer's role of the reader in the form of the remediated word balloons, which are not enunciated on the soundtrack for us: we need to read in order to grasp the narrative.

The Cobol Job motion comic presents comic book interactivity, a step removed. Like Saw: Rebirth and, to a greater degree, the Watchmen motion comic, the animation of the panel progression removes us from the process of closure. We are not required to fill in the spatiotemporal gaps produced by the panel breakdown of the multiframe. As David Carrier writes of the comic, "We need to engage in the interpretative act of re-creation because we cannot know the meaning of an artwork simply by looking at it. To understand an image, we must know something of the artist's intentions – we need to re-create the artist's goals and

purposes.”⁵⁰⁶ As readers and viewers, we are only tangentially given this ability to understand the image by controlling the speed of the narrative via the mechanism of the remote control. Unlike its initial digital interface, we cannot zoom in on panels, taking in the fine details of the art work, nor can we zoom out and place the panels and pages in relation to one another in order to attempt to grasp its larger form. Our interactivity is limited to reading balloons on the screen, like the subtitles of a foreign film.

While the animation of the panels into a relatively steady progression of frames (some of the “panels” have been rendered into shots of varying shutter speeds) removes the consumer from the process of closure, already described as a fundamental formal attribute of the comic book, the necessity for the viewer to “read” the balloons is more engaging than that of the other motion comics already described. The gap in the narration presented by the film invites us to become conscious collaborators, even if it is to a lesser degree. We no longer feel unnecessary in the process of viewing and, like Christopher Nolan’s Inception (2010), which begs us to answer the final question of whether or not the reality presented to Dom Cobb is a dream or not, we are asked to participate, to fill in the gaps left by the soundtrack. While the format of the motion comic does not allow for closure, a concept which is ultimately incompatible with the animation presented in motion comics, at least in their current manifestation, the viewer of The Cobol Job can seek temporary solace and isolation as a reader for a short amount of time. Overall, the motion comic owes more to animation and less to the form of the comic. If, as Thierry Groensteen writes, the comic “marries the visual and the verbal, demonstrates a discontinuity, a staggering, and the effects of networks, and finally constitutes a sort of image

⁵⁰⁶ David Carrier, The Aesthetics of Comics (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 80.

bank,” the motion comic does not meet the same formal criteria.⁵⁰⁷ In the majority of the cases presented here, the remediation of the medium specific properties of the comic book (the multiframe/spatial remediation and captions and word balloons/textual remediation) are superfluous; motion comics are, to return to Paul Wells, defined by animation, the frame by frame illusion of movement, not the act of closure so central to the theories of comic expounded by Scott McCloud and Thierry Groensteen.⁵⁰⁸

Moving on from a consideration of the formal properties of the motion comic to a consideration of their consumption, we once again see the mechanisms of the studio system’s conglomeration at work and, to be more specific, multimedia synergy. If, as Eileen Meehan wrote about Batman, the Burton film was a means of widening the audience and providing a “basic infrastructure necessary for manufacturing a line of films, albums, sheet music, comics, and novelizations,” motion comics, by and large, have traditionally had a benefit for the studios producing the franchise.⁵⁰⁹ Out of the three texts analyzed here, only one was free: the Saw: Rebirth motion comic, based on the comic series, essentially gives some inconsequential details about Jigsaw’s life before serial killing and yet, announces its true purpose in the final frame of the text: “Saw II. Oh yes, there will be blood. In theaters October 28th.” The Rebirth motion comic is less about being an elaboration of the diegesis of the narrative, to return to my discussion of transmedia storytelling begun in chapter IV. The backstory revealed in Rebirth is

⁵⁰⁷ Thierry Groensteen, The System of Comics, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 160.

⁵⁰⁸ I should note that there is a “hidden” motion comic entitled “The Big Under” accessible on the Blu-Ray by pressing 528491, the code used by Cobb in the film to open a vault. This motion comic, credited to many of the same personnel as the Cobol Job digital comic, is a formal oddity. A silent motion comic, it presents the viewer with the multiframe of the comic and slowly pans from panel to panel or controlled by the remote control. It is essentially a hybrid of a digital comic and a motion comic, further complicating the taxonomy of the motion comic.

⁵⁰⁹ Eileen R. Meehan, “Holy Commodity Fetish Batman!’: The Political Economy of the Commercial Intertext,” in The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media, eds. Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio (London: Routledge, 1991), 54.

simply revealed in Saw II; it is not necessary to read the comic or watch the motion comic in order to gain a full understanding of the fictional world. Saw: Rebirth is not an exercise in transmedia storytelling but an exercise in transmedia marketing. Admittedly, the short also references that the comic the motion comic is based on is available but, as aforementioned, the narrative material exposed within its panels and frames is relayed in the film proper. All roads of reference in this transmedia text lead back to the film; they are not united by a continuous narrative as they are by their mothership, franchise property.

Yet, to call motion comics simply a form of marketing would miss one other key incentive for studios: profit. The other two texts analyzed here were only available by paying for them (admittedly, The Cobol Job was free as a digital comic, but a consumer had to buy the DVD or Blu-Ray to see the motion comic). According to the Wall Street Journal, Warner Bros. and DC Comics, the studio behind both the Watchmen and Inception motion comics, sees the format “as a way to unlock value from the company’s...comics library by creating a new kind of comic that can be distributed via the Internet, mobile phones and video on demand. It underscores the importance the studios are attaching to finding new revenue streams as sales shrink from DVDs...Warner is mining the D.C. archives to find titles that lend themselves to motion comics, particularly those with plots ‘suited to short form, episodic storytelling,’ says Ms. [Diane] Nelson [president of D.C. Comics].”⁵¹⁰

According to the film profit tracking site The Numbers, which posts a disclosure that reads that “Precise information on DVD sales is not generally available. Our DVD sales figures are estimates based on studio figures, publicly available data, and private research on retail sales carried out by Nash Information Technologies,” the DVD incarnation of the Watchmen motion

⁵¹⁰ McBride, “Web Draws on Comics.”

comics (remember, they were also released on Blu-Ray and iTunes), sold approximately 132,775 units during release, grossing \$2.5 million dollars for Warner Bros.⁵¹¹ Thus, not only did the Watchmen motion comics serve as a means of getting an unfamiliar audience familiar with the property by supplying them with a panel by panel reconstruction, an audiobook-esque version of the Moore and Gibbons volume, but also as a means of appeasing “hard-cord comic fans” by giving them new media experiences based on some of their favorite texts. The studio also found in the motion comics a means of generating profit, both for the motion comics themselves and, potentially, for the Watchmen film as well: the DVD and Blu-Ray versions of the motion comic came with a voucher for discounted movie ticket for the film, to be used during opening weekend.⁵¹²

As The Numbers notes, tracking down sales figures for DVDs and Blu-Rays that are precise is no easy task, which makes it relatively unsurprising that it has become difficult to find exact numbers on the downloads and sales of motion comics. The DC Comics application for the iPhone and iPad, for instance, features a “most popular” and “top 25” listing, but it does not include a figure on how many times the digital incarnations (both “digital” and motion comics) have been sold. Speaking to Jeff Shuter, the developer of the Bomb-xx software behind Saw: Rebirth and the director of Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Season 8 Motion Comic (2011), a motion comic based on the comic book series that picked off where the Joss Whedon series ended, I was told that studios had been generally cagey about the acknowledgment of sales figures, even to the director himself. Shuter informed me, “In terms of numbers, the studios haven’t really released

⁵¹¹ “Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic – DVD Sales,” The Numbers, Publication Date Unknown, <<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2009/0WCMC-DVD.php>> (21 March 2011).

⁵¹² McBride, “Web Draws on Comics.”

these to me, but they have suggested that they are tracking similar to cable TV shows.”⁵¹³

To put that in perspective, TV by the Numbers reported that the top 25, highest rated television shows of a week in March 2011 ranged from 3.5 million to 7.2 million with a median of approximately 4 million people.⁵¹⁴ If we take the lowest number of that ranking, 3.5 million, and multiply it by the average cost of a motion comic at \$1.99 an episode, the studio has a potential profit of \$6.9 million dollars per episode (the Watchmen motion comics ran 12 episodes). Of course, this all depends on the content: consumers are far more likely to pay \$1.99 for a Batman or Spider-Man story than they are for a motion comic based off of a Harvey Pekar strip. As Shuter stated in our interview, “Motion Comics in its most basic and practical use is a means to expand classic and archetypal stories and characters into a more visible and portable environment than previously existing in text and print forms.”⁵¹⁵ This sentiment was shared by D.C. Comics President Diane Nelson, who noted in an interview with the Wall Street Journal that new characters and brands may be introduced later.⁵¹⁶

Most comic book aficionados are dubious with regard to the future of motion comics. Comics fans Johanna Carlson and KC Carlson, describing motion comics as “a bit too twee for me,” beg the question “What’s the point of a motion comic?...[The studios and publishers] need to create a new format in order to open a new market and ‘unlock value’ from whatever assets they can plunder.”⁵¹⁷ Moreover, as Scott McCloud noted in a personal interview with me, motion comics are “a sad, temporary, abomination....The worst part of it is that we are conscious

⁵¹³ Jeff Shuter, letter to the author, March 19th 2011.

⁵¹⁴ Robert Seidman, “Cable Top 25,” TV by the Numbers, 15 March 2011, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2011/03/15/cable-top-25-jersey-shore-wwe-raw-the-best-player-spongebob-lakersheat-top-weekly-cable-viewing/85817>> (21 March 2011).

⁵¹⁵ Jeff Shuter, letter to the author.

⁵¹⁶ McBride, “Web Draws from Comics.”

⁵¹⁷ Johanna and KC Carlson, “What’s the Point of a Motion Comic?,” DVDs Worth Watching, 23 August 2009, <<http://comicsworthreading.com/2009/08/23/whats-the-point-of-a-motion-comic/>> (21 March 2011).

collaborators one moment and not the next and then back again. It's just a miserable, inconsistent, soup of sensations."⁵¹⁸ As McCloud alludes to, the format of the motion comic robs the comic book fan of a fundamental formal attribute of reading a comic, conscious collaboration, while simply re-selling stories and artwork we already have access to on our shelves or on our iPhones or iPads.⁵¹⁹ Speaking to people in line for Hall H attractions at San Diego Comic-Con in 2010, I was amazed to find how many comic book fans shrugged off motion comics for both their formal attributes and for the pay-as-you-go model embraced by the publishers. The question became less about if they were viewing motion comics to what they were viewing on their portable, digital platforms and the answer was near unanimous: Comic Book Reader files (CBRs).

Essentially a form of PDF that is accessible on devices running Android and iTunes software, CBRs, violations of copyright law, are typically fan-made files that consist of high-quality image scans of comic book pages, pieced together into files resembling "issues" which can be downloaded for free via most file sharing or BitTorrent supported sites. To put this in perspective, why spend \$59.99 on five pound book that reprints the first forty-eight issues of Robert Kirkman, Charlie Adlard, Cliff Rathburn, and Tony Moore's The Walking Dead (2003-) when you can spend a few hours and less than a gigabyte of hard drive space carrying it around on an iPad. The experience is still potentially the same as reading the printed version of the comic: the reader can linger over panels or full pages, completing the act of closure in order to propel the narrative rather than having the act completed by the mechanisms of the cinematic apparatus. Moreover, it can be a rewarding experience. Gone are the days of handling with care,

⁵¹⁸ Scott McCloud, phone interview with author, 1 April 2011.

⁵¹⁹ I should note that some comic artists are beginning to utilize the form of the digital comic to complicate and challenge the form of the motion comic, most notably Chris Ware with his iPad application Touch Sensitive (2011).

wrapping each issue in a bag and board combination, only carrying around trade paperback reprints for casual consumption. Now, fans can skip the trade paperback and non-collectors can skip both iterations and embrace the digital *for free*. While Shuter sees the future of the motion comic as being “more interactive than presentational,” why would readers wait for motion comics to catch up to CBRs?⁵²⁰ To end on a tired adage, there is no reason to buy the cow when you can get the milk for free; just look at what the mp3 did to the music industry.

Part 2: Stylistic Remediation Becomes Transmedia Style in the “Scott Pilgrim Experience”

“The visual transitions between scenes are just like they are in the graphic novel but they’re not just replicating the storyboarding. It’s like finding a new cinematic way.”-Michael Phillips on Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2010).⁵²¹

“It’s perfect! It looks just like the book!”-Unknown Audience Member at an Opening Day Screening of Scott Pilgrim vs. the World.

While motion comics are one potential avenue that may define the evolving relationship between the comics and film (both the industries and the forms), there is another avenue that I briefly introduced in the previous case study on “bullet time” worth considering in greater detail: stylistic remediation as an entry point to discussing what I have begun to describe as transmedia style. In this case study, I will be focusing on Bryan Lee O’Malley’s Scott Pilgrim comics and Edgar (Shaun of the Dead, Hot Fuzz) Wright’s film adaptation Scott Pilgrim vs. the World and how stylistic attributes of the comics were utilized by a media conglomerate to tie together various transmedia properties. O’Malley’s series, first appearing on shelves in the digest Scott Pilgrim’s Precious Little Life, tells the story of Scott Pilgrim, a young twenty-something who has what one would best describe as a rudderless existence. After being dumped by his girlfriend, Pilgrim spends his days walking around the streets of Toronto, playing bass in his band Sex Bob-Omb, and dating a high school student. He doesn’t attend college; he doesn’t have a job. Scott

⁵²⁰ Jeff Shuter, letter to author.

⁵²¹ Michael Phillips and A.O. Scott, “Scott Pilgrim vs. the World Movie Review,” At the Movies, 14 August 2010.

Pilgrim, like many members of my generation (Generation Y), defines himself through popular culture as he seeks to find his own identity, making his initial interactions with the literal girl of his dreams, Ramona Flowers, a bit awkward.

Scott's quest for identity via navigating the glut of pop culture is made particularly obvious by his rather schizophrenic compositional style. The title was not sold in single, monthly issues that define the majority of American comics. Rather, Scott Pilgrim was packaged in a small digest form by Oni Press on a release pattern of roughly one volume a year. The digest form (approximately 7.5 x 5 inches) is strikingly smaller than the usual comic book format (approximately 10.25 x 6.5 inches) and is most familiar to American comic book readers as the typical format that Japanese manga is published in. Publication format aside, O'Malley's title owes much to the manga mode. Scott's quest for identity through love is a narrative characteristic of modern *shōjo/shoujo* (the first is the female variation, the second is the male) manga and O'Malley's character designs (specifically the large, round, eyes of the characters and the minimal use of lines to define emotion).



Figure 6.2: O'Malley's Scott Pilgrim.



Figure 6.3: Donbo's Kamichama Karin.

For the sake of illustration, I've placed a page of O'Malley's Scott Pilgrim next to a page of Koge Donbo's Kamichama Karin (2003-2005, 2007-2008), a popular Japanese manga that also became a television anime (cartoon). In the above figures, we notice that both artists have abstracted their characters from the photorealistic by providing few details beyond the mouth and eyes (although Kim Pine, in panel one of Scott Pilgrim, has freckles and Steven Stills, highlighted most notably in the final panel, has what looks to be a beard). Moreover, the eyes of the characters in both titles are often either drawn circular and round (panels 1, 2, 4 of Scott Pilgrim and the final panel of Kamichama Karin) or "closed" by the use of the line (the final panel of Scott, the first three panels of Kamichama). Perhaps more obvious is that the settings of

both worlds are minimally established (with the exception of middle panel of Scott) with each artist placing their characters against either white or black backgrounds or “subjective” backgrounds that indicate the emotion of the character (an adrenaline rush in the final panel of Scott, the love and excitement in the first panel of Kamichama).

Despite my limited exposure to manga, my impressions, when placed in contrast to American titles, fall in line with what Scott McCloud alludes to when he discusses the difference in motion between American and Japanese comics. Specifically, for McCloud, the latter engages in “subjective motion.”⁵²² Essentially, McCloud writes that Japanese artists began to provide subjective point-of-view panels (his example is a motorcycle chase) to engage the reader beginning in the late 1960s. I would broaden this out to the general styles of both comics: American comics normally do not engage in rendering scenes subjectively (artists and writers tend to use dialogue and facial expression to relay emotion) while Japanese artists will place the emotion literally within the physical space of the setting.⁵²³

While O’Malley’s stylistic citation may start with manga, it definitely does not end there. The writer and artist also draws upon the formal conventions of video games and kung-fu movies. With regard to the former, O’Malley protagonist is tasked with facing off against Ramona’s “seven, evil, exes,” which provides each volume in the six book series with a climactic duel (one of the duels involves twins, hence the seven exes and the six books). Once Scott defeats an ex, he is showered with coins (a device borrowed from the Super Mario games) and power-ups (including an extra life). Moreover, volumes two (Scott Pilgrim vs. the World), four (Scott Pilgrim Gets it Together), and five (Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe) begin with “title

⁵²² Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics, 114.

⁵²³ Thanks to my good friends William Bibbiani and Jennifer Wang for sharing their knowledge of manga with me.

sequences” that pay homage to popular video games.⁵²⁴



6.4: *Scott Pilgrim Intro* (2007). Figure 6.5: *Sonic the Hedgehog 2 Intro* (1992).

O’Malley’s stylistic remediation is not merely a means of dressing up his young adult tale of budding romance, as the style paves the way for metaphors and certain narrative devices that do not have any resonance in day to day reality. For instance, Scott’s battles with the seven exes, structured like boss battles in a video game, are a metaphor for his grappling with Ramona’s romantic baggage. Moreover, the extra life Scott earns in one of the books comes into use when he is nearly killed by Ramona’s final evil ex, Gideon. Finally, O’Malley builds in the device of the “Continue” into the narrative. In video games, if a player’s actions lead to the death of a character or a less-than-desirable outcome, the player is sometimes offered the ability to “Continue,” which often takes the player back a few sequences into their gameplay and allows them to try again. In the comic, Scott is faced with losing Ramona forever and yet decides to continue (after a “Game Over” page) his quest for her love.

One final source of stylistic influence worthy of brief analysis in O’Malley’s volumes is

⁵²⁴ See also Chris Sims, “The Best Video Game Moments in *Scott Pilgrim*,” *Comics Alliance*, 28 July 2009, <<http://www.comicsalliance.com/2009/07/28/the-best-video-game-moments-in-scott-pilgrim/>> (2 August 2010).

that of kung-fu. Given the prevalence of kung-fu in contemporary media, including films like Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000), the Wachowski brothers' already described Matrix trilogy (1999-2003), and Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill films (2003-2004) and the story's emphasis on duels, it is not incredibly surprising that O'Malley would attempt to throw one more tool in his stylistic arsenal. The kung-fu of Scott Pilgrim is mainly introduced via the character of Knives Chau, Scott's Chinese-Canadian ex-girlfriend. In one sequence in the second volume of the series, Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2005), Knives stalks Ramona as she spends her time in the Toronto Reference Library. Knives looks down upon the library from atop an elevator, draws the weapons that provide her with her name, and attacks Ramona. In the sequence, which progresses across fifteen pages (with a short flashback included), O'Malley's rendering of the violence is both weightless and, for the most part, graceful. Characters defy gravity and strike one another with ease, utilizing potted plants and purses to block one another's advances. The sequence and the character of Knives struck me as a rather obvious homage to the character of O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu), an assassin also torn between two cultures (Japan and China), and her animated sequences in Tarantino's Kill Bill: Vol. 1 (without the over the top gore, of course).

Given the array of stylistic influences that O'Malley draws upon, a post-modern collage of forms that Tarantino is reported to have enjoyed ("he was really into it," according to director Kevin Smith), you can imagine the task that Edgar Wright had in front of him when adapting the material for the screen.⁵²⁵ Not only did he decide to adapt all six volumes (over 1000 pages of comic book) into a single, two-hour film but he was also intent on matching O'Malley's schizophrenic style. When I spoke to Wright about the process and his decisions to focus on

⁵²⁵ Jack Giroux, "Kevin Smith talks Scott Pilgrim vs. the World," The Film Stage, 3 March 2010, <<http://thefilmstage.com/2010/03/03/exclusive-kevin-smith-talks-scott-pilgrim-vs-the-world/>> (3 August 2010).

only doing one film and to engage with O'Malley's compositions, he was extremely forthcoming. "Why isn't it six films? Well, to be honest, we're lucky to have made one. We'd been laughed out of the studio [if we had asked to make six films]. Narnia is having a hard time making it to three and that book has sold billions of copies. Even if we would have had the option, I'm not sure we'd want to be working on an adaptation of Scott Pilgrim's Finest Hour in 2022. It feels nice that everything has climaxed in the same year, both the books and the film, and Bryan Lee O'Malley was key in putting his stamp on both."⁵²⁶

What about Wright's desire to capture O'Malley's graphical style? The film is a prime example of stylistic remediation, engaging in nearly all the forms analyzed in this study (graphical, temporal, spatial, and textual) as well as a unique form: aural remediation. Essentially, Wright continually represents sounds visually. Comics are of course a "silent" medium, built upon static images and text, a blend of which is often used to represent sound. Think of a fight scene between Batman and the Joker; the impact of the punches and kicks are captured with graphical texts reading "Pow!," "Boom!," "Ka-Pow!" This no doubt brings to mind perhaps the most notable example of aural remediation, the Batman television series (1966-1968). To better illustrate this concept of aural remediation, below are two visual examples, the first one being a range of examples from the Batman television show and the second one is a still from a fight scene in Scott Pilgrim vs. the World.

⁵²⁶ Edgar Wright, interview with author, 27 July 2010.



Figure 6.6: Aural Remediation in Batman. Figure 6.7: Aural Remediation in Scott Pilgrim.

Obviously, the television show and Wright’s film are not “silent” moving image texts. Why represent a sound both aurally and visually? For Wright, the decision to remediate O’Malley’s style was influenced by the Batman series which, as I noted in chapter one, has a history of being looked down upon for its camp aspects and disavowed by the Batman fan community. As Wright informed me in our interview, “I really like the style of the artwork and the film is a comedy, not gritty or realistic. I just really wanted to embrace the pop art nature of comics. Maybe because of the Batman television series, which I always liked as a kid but became a dirty word in the 1980s when The Dark Knight Returns came out. But there are things about the '60s and '70s books – the colors – that really embraced the pop art and fun that I appreciated.”⁵²⁷

Now, my desire in this final case study is not to trace how Wright’s version of Scott Pilgrim remediates all those aforementioned aspects of O’Malley’s style. I simply focused on aural remediation as an illustrating example because it is a unique form not often found in comic book films in the stylistic remediation mode. Rather, my desire is to engage with the industrial motives for this remediation and how it intersects with synergy. Quite simply, I believe that

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

Universal's desire was to mobilize stylistic remediation as a means of establishing a transmedia universe not so much united by storytelling but by style in order to appease the fan base of the comic and the film's perceived core audience. Essentially, instead of constructing a narrative universe in which each text contributes a predesigned plot thread, the Scott Pilgrim texts are united by O'Malley's embrace of video game style, taking away the possible intimidation that those interested in the universe might feel if faced by a checklist of narrative homework.

Shortly after their release, the Scott Pilgrim comics occupied a unique position with regard to the film. Specifically, the series was optioned by Universal who hired screenwriter Michael Bacall to draft the screenplay with Wright one month before the release of the second title in the series in the summer of 2005. Wright and Bacall quickly wrote a first draft of the screenplay, focusing only on the first two books, before temporarily putting the project aside. Wright then went on to focus on the follow up to his acclaimed breakthrough, Shaun of the Dead (2004), Hot Fuzz (2007). Over the course of those two years, O'Malley's series headed towards its eventual conclusion while Wright and company decided to adapt all six books into one film. When production began on the film in March of 2009, O'Malley had yet to write the ending to the books, leaving the ending of the film up in the air. Wright shot an original ending in which Scott (Michael Cera) ends up with Knives Chau (Ellen Wong) rather than his dream girl Ramona Flowers (Mary Elizabeth Winstead). However, after test screenings, Wright decided to re-shoot the ending, moving closer to the ending O'Malley ultimately provided in the final volume. Thus, despite the fact that both texts were being developed simultaneously, a creative decision that can enable transmedia storytelling, the filmmakers and studio did not want each medium to provide unique narrative information: both the comic and the film (with alterations of course) construct the same story around the arc of Scott and Ramona's relationship.

Yet, O'Malley's stylistic remediation of video games and music (Sex Bob-Omb's first musical number in the book is accompanied with lyrics and guitar chords) was easily exploited by NBC Universal in conjunction with the film. At San Diego Comic-Con 2009, Universal announced that it would be publishing Scott Pilgrim vs. the World: The Game (2010), developed by Ubisoft Montreal and Ubisoft Chengdu. Art director Paul Robertson served as lead designer on the game, which follows the structure of the books (the seven "boss" battles being the seven evil exes) and the style of the comics over the film (with the exception of the game being in color while the book is mainly black and white). Oddly enough, the team behind the Scott Pilgrim film did not want the game to take its inspiration from the film. As O'Malley told me in an interview, "We wanted to give people three separate experiences (the comic, the movie, and the game)... The thing about the game is, when they make a movie tie-in game it's usually something that feels shoddy, they do it quickly and it feels like a cash in. So the first thing we said when we sat down was that we didn't want to see the cheap polygon version of Michael Cera fighting bad guys. That's no knock on Michael Cera; I just don't want to play him in a video game right now. I was really adamant on doing a cartoon style and when Ubisoft hired Robertson, I knew we were on the right track."⁵²⁸

Yet, notably, the video game was not Robertson's sole contribution to the Scott Pilgrim transmedia experience. Robertson designed a slipcase for the entire comic series and, while working on the game, Wright asked the artist to make a memorable contribution to the film: the 8-bit "1-Up" icon.⁵²⁹ Now, this may seem like an Easter egg placed into the film for those obsessive fans, making it largely irrelevant. However, given the narrative significance of the

⁵²⁸ Bryan Lee O'Malley, interview with author, 27 July 2010.

⁵²⁹ Edgar Wright, interview with author. Another Robertson piece, an animated Scott Pilgrim, appears after the end credits.

icon (it gives Scott an extra life during his climactic battle with the final evil ex, Gideon Graves, turning the tide against the villain) and that its graphic representation of Scott (which looks more like the video game character than actor Michael Cera) clashes with the film's, it does not exactly seem hidden like most fan-appeasing Easter eggs. Given O'Malley's statement regarding giving fans three unique experiences and not producing a game that seems like a "cash in," the presence of Robertson's 1-Up icon in the film feels like a means of stylistically motivating the existence of a video game. After all, if the book embraces the stylistic devices of the video game, which have rubbed off on the film, it is only natural that a video game exists. Essentially, O'Malley's stylistic remediation organically motivates its transmedia sister properties. Like transmedia storytelling, transmedia style rewards involvement in a property as it moves across multiple platforms. Unlike transmedia storytelling however, the success of the individual texts are not compromised by consumer ignorance: transmedia style is merely a form of reference, not a form of narrative embellishment. Essentially, transmedia style is a form of textually motivated synergy that does not have the narrative payoffs of transmedia storytelling. At the same time however, it does not incur the potential financial risk of alienating the viewer/consumer with an elaborately designed, multi-platform, narrative. Transmedia style provides a visceral pleasure that can but does not need to be fully mentally registered and comprehended to be a successful hook. For instance, I am sure many filmgoers unfamiliar with both the comic and the fundamentals of comic book form were awed by the formal explorations of 300 (2007).

Perhaps the most obvious form of transmedia style comes in the form of motion picture soundtracks, particularly those of the 1990s and 2000s. Many of the soundtracks of the past twenty years have included dialogue snippets. Examples of such soundtracks include the Dust

brothers' score to Fight Club (1999) and, most notably, those accompanying the film releases of the most notable referential filmmakers, Quentin Tarantino. Take, for instance, the soundtrack to Pulp Fiction (1994). The album's opening track, re-titled "Pumpkin & Honey Bunny/Miserlou," includes the opening dialogue between Pumpkin (Tim Roth) and Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer), climaxing with the iconic line "Any of you fuckin' pigs move and I'll execute every motherfuckin' last one of you!" Biting the end off of Plummer's line, the surfer guitar riffs of Dick Dale and the Del-Tones cue up, properly beginning the soundtrack. Essentially, the soundtrack mimics the film, right down to the order of the tracks (the final track, The Lively Ones' "Surf Rider," wraps up both the film and the album), putting the listener through an abridged, aural version of the film. The film motivates the existence of the soundtrack, making it feel less like a synergistic cash-in than a unique experience.

While the soundtrack to Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2010) does not feature dialogue snippets, it is tied to the comics and the film via other textual ties. The soundtrack includes four Sex Bob-Omb tracks performed by the actors and actresses of the film, a track by Metric that was "performed" by fictional pop singer Envy Adams in the film, and an 8-bit MIDI version (a form of electronic musical composition that was used on early Nintendo systems) of the Sex Bob-Omb track "Threshold." In addition to the tracks originating from the diegesis of the Scott Pilgrim universe, the soundtrack also includes compositions that inspired both O'Malley and Wright during production (specifically Plumtree's 1997 track "Scott Pilgrim," which served as the source for the hero's name). Like the video game, the existence of the soundtrack is stylistically motivated by the film and the book, a point that Wright, who served as executive producer on the soundtrack, acknowledges in the album's liner notes. As Wright describes:

Music is not just integral to the original Scott Pilgrim comics, it pretty much leaps off of every page....O'Malley's artwork fizzes with life to represent the raucous sounds of the Toronto music scene. This album is lovingly compiled to compliment the film, the book, and indeed the city....This collection of songs represents songs that inspired Bryan's stories and characters. Some of them are also songs that are featured on the playlists printed on the back pages of the original volumes.⁵³⁰

Given the generically eclectic range of tracks (ranging from indie rock to MIDI compositions) and the various sources for the music (the comic, the film, and the video game), there is a self-reflexive edge to the Scott Pilgrim soundtrack that links it to the art house-esque soundtracks of not only the Tarantino films but to another film featuring star Michael Cera, Jason Reitman's critically and economically successful Juno (2007). A low-budget indie budgeted at \$7 million dollars, Juno went on to be nominated for Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Director (it would only win Best Original Screenplay for Diablo Cody) and to gross more than \$231 million. The Juno soundtrack had various incarnations including a regular release version (featuring a range of artists from Buddy Holly, Kimya Dawson, and Cera and lead actress Ellen Page), a special edition (featuring Kimya Dawson's interpretation of the Twentieth Century Fox Fanfare and an additional track performed by Ellen Page), and a sampler CD entitled Juno's Mix CD that accompanied Wal-Mart releases of the DVD. Thus, not only did the Juno soundtracks include songs featured non-diegetically in the film but also those performed by the actors and actresses, diegetically, within the narrative.

Yet, while there initially appears to be a self-reflexive art house impulse giving shape to this eclectic aural blend of diegetic, non-diegetic, and extra-diegetic music (the Fox Fanfare), these characteristics were also true of many other soundtracks, including those to big budget blockbusters, throughout the 90s and 2000s. For instance, David Holmes's scores to the Ocean's

⁵³⁰ Edgar Wright, "Liner Notes," Scott Pilgrim vs. the World: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack (New York City: ABKCO Records, 2010), page number unknown.

Eleven films (2001-2007) featured dialogue snippets from the film, superimposed over Holmes's acid-jazzed funk tracks. Moreover, one of the best-selling soundtracks of the 1990s, Armageddon (1998), featured Aerosmith's "I Don't Want to Miss a Thing" alongside the Steven Tyler collaboration with film composers Trevor Rabin and Harry Gregson-Williams entitled "Animal Crackers," which was punctuated by a dialogue between two characters from the film. Essentially, I would argue that this trend is not limited to soundtracks to art house films but owes a certain debt to what Justin Wyatt has described as "high concept" or the studio practice of turning out films that are definable by images, style, and plot gimmicks (Snakes on a Plane is a prime contemporary example) rather than characterization. According to Wyatt, cross-promotion is also a key characteristic of this trend, including the motion picture soundtrack and music videos. While soundtrack albums and licensed merchandise released alongside high concept films is undoubtedly coordinated at an industrial level, I think there are two differences between Wyatt's high concept and transmedia style. First, what purpose do they serve for the consumer? If a product does not engage with a listener's knowledge of the property in the ways outlined above (dialogue snippets, songs performed by fictional bands from the story's universe, etc.), I would contend that the case in question does not engage in transmedia style is still an example of high concept marketing.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, how is the ancillary product situated in the marketplace via marketing rhetoric? As Wright's liner notes and O'Malley's interview indicate, both the video game and the soundtrack were considered as complimentary experiences whose existence were all organically tied to stylistic characteristics of O'Malley's original books. The licensed products were not, to return to O'Malley's description, a "cash in." This trend in motion picture soundtracks over the past two decades (the earliest instance that comes to my mind is the

soundtrack to Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs in 1992) makes it apparent that transmedia style is not limited to comic books, film, or the realm of the visual. The stylized visuals of many of the properties examined here perhaps made the practice more noticeable and more accessible to media studies scholars, who tend to focus on the visual over the aural (hence the rather slow development of sound studies in our field). The next logical step in analyzing transmedia style is to analyze the history of the practice and its mobilization both within and beyond the visual.

It would be short-sighted to consider the stylistic remediation to transmedia style evolution that Universal, O'Malley, and Wright practiced without considering its economic results. Box office reports have not been stellar with regard to the longevity of stylistic remediation in particular. Out of the five films analyzed in chapter three, roughly half of them made their respective studios money (American Splendor, Hulk, and 300). More contemporarily, two of the most hyped comic book films of 2010, Scott Pilgrim vs. the World included, were considered box office failures. Matthew Vaughan's Kick-Ass (2010), which features a flashback relayed via comic-book form, was budgeted at \$30 million and benefitted from a great deal of hype (the product of a panel at 2009's San Diego Comic-Con and a secret screening at the 2010 South by Southwest Film Festival). Despite the hype, the graphically violent film – which infamously features a thirteen year old girl blowing the brains out of the bad guys – finished with a global, “limp return,” of \$96 million.⁵³¹ In the opinion of many entertainment bloggers, the film failed for two reasons. First, its graphic violence led to an R-rating, essentially barring anyone under the age of 18 from viewing the film theatrically. Secondly, according to Bill Gibron, writer Mark Millar and artist John Romita Jr. “are less than

⁵³¹ Bill Gibron, “Game(r) Over,” Popmatters.com, 16 August 2010, <<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/post/129700-gamer-over/>> (18 August 2010).

household names...[the film had] a lack of recognizability.”⁵³²

The economic return has, so far, been much worse for Scott Pilgrim. Despite garnering great reviews and an “A-” CinemaScore (a survey conducted on a sample of audience members after screening of the films), the \$60 million (\$85-90 million before tax breaks) budgeted film came in fifth place during its opening weekend, earning what industrial analyst Nikki Finke described as “a pittance”: \$10.5 million dollars.⁵³³ Ignoring marketing costs, the film grossed \$47 million globally, \$13 million less than its hefty production budget. Like Kick-Ass, the studio seemingly had huge expectations for the film. During the 2010 San Diego Comic-Con, Scott Pilgrim was one of the main events, drawing massive crowds to the outdoor “Scott Pilgrim Experience” where fans could get autographs and collect their own swag and city-block sprawling lines for secret advance screenings. Moreover, prior to the film’s release, four of the five top selling titles on Amazon.com were Scott Pilgrim titles and property was one of the leading “treading” topics on the social networking tool Twitter.

The failure of the film at the box office has been attributed to multiple factors. One of the most cited reasons was Michael Cera saturation. The star, whom had become a bit of a cult hero after appearing on the television series Arrested Development (2003-2006), the Judd Apatow comedy Superbad (2007), and Juno, was beginning to be lampooned for typically being typecast as the sarcastic yet lovable loser role. This perception of typecasting and, more generally, Cera saturation rose after the massive success of Juno. The actor quickly experienced a critical and box office free fall from 2008 to 2010. For instance, his follow up to Juno, Nick

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Nikki Finke, “Guys Beat Gal,” Deadline.com, 14 August 2010, <<http://www.deadline.com/2010/08/first-box-office-the-expendables-13m34m-eat-pray-love-8m23m-scott-pilgrim-5m12m/>> (18 August 2010).

and Norah's Infinite Playlist (2008), grossed \$33 million in comparison with a production budget of \$10 million, a far cry from the success of Juno. Then, the bottom began to fully drop out. Cera co-starred in Year One (also released in the summer of 2009) alongside Jack Black. The film, which carried a production budget of \$60 million, grossed a mere \$62 million. Tellingly, as Roger Ebert noted in his negative review, "Cera plays shy and uncertain, but then he always does, and responds to Black as if Jack were Juno and a source of intimidating wit."⁵³⁴ Apparently, the public shared Ebert's Cera fatigue. By the time Scott Pilgrim vs. the World hit the multiplex – at roughly the same time a scathing viral video entitled "The Michael Cera School of Acting" hit the web – Cera saturation had pushed potential moviegoers away from the film. As one commenter noted on Nikki Finke's article, "I don't care about watching Michael Cera doing his Michael Cera awkward love-struck schtick YET AGAIN. I like the guy, but god damn get a new schtick....I AM TIRED OF WATCHING THE MICHAEL CERA STOCK CHARACTER. Good god, that's growing old."⁵³⁵

While Cera fatigue is probably a minor cause of Scott Pilgrim's economic underperformance, Bill Gibron rightly attributes the film's implosion to an age-gap in Hollywood demographics and Universal's catering towards a vocal, visible yet ultimately miniscule geek crowd. Gibron writes that "Scott Pilgrim vs. the World will end up being the last word on the season-long argument between 'gamers' and 'geezers'---and the old coots win a 'flawless victory' this time out....It's easy to predict a real reevaluation of the whole subgenre - even with Hollywood grappling hand over hammer toe to grab the latest 'hot' comic

⁵³⁴ Roger Ebert, "Year One Movie Review," RogerEbert.com, 17 June 2009, <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090617/REVIEWS/906179997>> (27 July 2010).

⁵³⁵ Finke, "Guys Beat Gal."

release....For now, the argument is over. In fact, it's gamer over."⁵³⁶ Despite Gibron's informed opinion and a statement from Kick-Ass director Vaughn, who controversially proclaimed that "the genre is going to be dead for a while because the audience has just been pummeled too much" while prepping his latest project, the comic book film X-Men: First Class (2011), the future of comic book movies is undoubtedly brighter than that of stylistic remediation.⁵³⁷ For instance, Marvel Studios utilized 2010 Comic-Con to begin launching their latest superhero films, Thor (2011), Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), and the forthcoming cross-over release The Avengers (2012), which will feature many of the Marvel superheroes from the other films deployed as a team.

Moreover, when I interviewed producer Neil Moritz regarding his upcoming adaptation of Garth Ennis's The Boys and his decision to make it an R-rated movie in the light of the reception of Kick-Ass, Moritz said "I really enjoyed Kick-Ass and I thought Matthew Vaughn did a great job but I don't know if that was the most mainstream version of the movie....The hard part is making these movies not to go to a very small, comic book fan base, but trying to broaden it out."⁵³⁸ The failure of previous films will not keep studios from green lighting comic book films, but it may teach them a pivotal lesson: stylistic remediation is a costly means of appeasing the original fan base, so why aim for the minority when you need the majority to turn a profit? Yet, I would not declare the death of stylistic remediation in the larger picture of the industry. Even after the financial disaster of Warren Beatty's Dick Tracy (1990) more than twenty years ago, filmmakers and studios still attempted to use film form to match that of the

⁵³⁶ Gibron, "Game(r) Over."

⁵³⁷ Adam Quigley, "Matthew Vaughn Agreed to Direct X-Men: First Class Because He Believes Superhero Movies Will Be Dead Soon," Slashfilm.com, 7 August 2010, <<http://www.slashfilm.com/2010/08/07/matthew-vaughn-agreed-to-direct-x-men-first-class-because-he-believes-superhero-movies-will-be-dead-soon/>> (18 August 2010).

⁵³⁸ Drew Morton, "Adam McKay Signs on to Direct R-Rated Superhero Satire The Boys," The Playlist, 24 July 2010, <<http://theplaylist.blogspot.com/2010/07/adam-mckay-signs-on-to-direct-r-rated.html>> (18 August 2010).

comics.

Conclusions

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, hypothesizing the future of any cultural development is almost always a gambit in futility. However, the analyses of the motion comic and stylistic remediation as a gateway to transmedia style included here are not akin to reading the palms of filmmakers, comic book creators, and industrial professionals. I have attempted to base these observations on their historical developments and multiple manifestations, particularly in the case of motion comics, while drawing informed conclusions from an array of sources including theoretical informed textual analysis, industry trade publications, and interviews with actual practitioners working in both forms of media.

The future of motion comics as a form of paid entertainment appears to be a short-lived fad. The bulk of comic book fans frown upon them as a poor substitute for the actual experience of reading a comic. The motion comics, owing more to animation, rob the comic reader of their collaborative role in forming the narrative. Moreover, cynical fans view the form for what it is often used as: either as another means of selling the same content, a double-dip, or, as I have traced here, marketing in the form of faux transmedia storytelling. Either way, it is difficult to view the bulk of motion comics as a form that is fulfilling in its own right, especially when gluts of comic books can be experienced on the same platforms at no cost thanks to fan-produced CBR files (which, despite being illegal infringements of American copyright laws, have become a popular development amongst the comic book community). As the hardware accessible to the general public begins to include high-resolution displays and interactive interfaces via such technology as the iPad, Nook, and Kindle, there seems to be a longer road ahead for the digital

comics that McCloud writes of in Re-Inventing Comics than for motion comics.

The future of stylistic remediation and transmedia style, with regard to comic book films at least, appears to be bleak as well. The immense box office success of comic book films not practicing stylistic remediation like The Dark Knight (2008), which carried a production budget of \$185 million and grossed more than \$1 billion dollars worldwide and Iron Man 2 (2010), which carried a production budget of \$200 million and grossed \$622 million worldwide in contrast with the already described, high-profile, stylistic remediation failures of Kick-Ass (2010) and Scott Pilgrim vs. The World. While this is, in certain aspects, an apples to oranges comparison, given that the latter two films are adaptations of independent comics rather than showcases for the central characters of the DC and Marvel publishing lines, the budgetary gap between the two is beginning to narrow: Scott Pilgrim vs. the World was a \$90 million dollar gamble that was shaved down to \$60 million thanks to tax rebates. However, once print and advertising costs are factored in, the budget potentially reached the \$90-100 million dollar mark (a large leap, considering that only five years earlier Sin City was made for \$40 million).

Yet, as noted at the end of the analysis of Scott Pilgrim, there are two potential avenues for the future of the concepts of stylistic remediation and transmedia style. First, stylistic remediation is not limited to limited to comic book films or transmedia properties like The Dark Tower books, comics, and potential films and television series. Stylistic remediation, like remediation, can be considered an umbrella concept that can be embellished via medium specific theories that discuss style over narrative. Moreover, transmedia style as a theoretical concept, while limited to discussing transmedia properties, does not need to be limited to discussions of comic books and/or film. As my analysis briefly takes into account, we can consider such texts

as motion picture soundtracks as alternative forms of transmedia style. Moreover, we do not need to limit such investigations to the realm of the visual.

Secondly, while stylistic remediation and transmedia style have been currently encountering harsh economic realities at the box office, it remains a powerful means of marketing and appeasing a fan base. However, it can only be successful if the costs are kept in the perspective of the small (albeit vocal and visible) demographic size that comic book fans are a part of. Just because Scott Pilgrim, like Dick Tracy before it, failed to recoup the production costs associated with such a flamboyant style, we cannot ignore the successes that have come out of stylistic remediation. With Zack Snyder, one of the main practitioners of stylistic remediation in filmmaking, teaming up with Christopher Nolan on the Superman reboot scheduled for release in 2012 (tentatively titled Man of Steel), it is far too soon to bring the curtain down on the formal practice.

Conclusion: Comics are in Right Now?

“A movie-inspired aesthetic has also redefined the [comics] medium in some respects....The new focus on the trade paperback and the creator-owned work has...led to a preponderance of one-shot graphic novels or mini-/maxi-series with a finite end. Comparisons with the movies therefore seem more relevant to today’s industry and likely to continue.”-Comics studies scholar Julia Round.⁵³⁹

“The thorough intermedial negotiations that the film industry has entered into with comics in the recent years have greatly helped to enrich the cinematic language. Film directors and their collaborators have learned to integrate the possibilities of the mise-en-page and the spatio-topia into their cinematic adaptations – not just as merely ornamental accessories, but as incentives to reconsider the advantages that foregrounding the movie screen’s very own spatiality might yield. The formal experiments of films like 300 or The Hulk [sic.] can be regarded as the avant-garde products of this new, serious interest in comics as a medium.”-Comics studies scholar Jochen Ecke.⁵⁴⁰

“Comics in the last ten years have tried to imitate movies but movies have now got so good at doing comics that we just look like a poor cousin.”-Comic book writer Grant Morrison.⁵⁴¹

In order to offer up a proper conclusion to this modest study, I would like to return to the three questions guiding this investigation that were first proposed in the introduction and offer answers based upon the research and analysis performed since their proposal. The first two research questions, as I will analyze, are closely related.

What role has horizontal integration and multimedia conglomerates had in the process of stylistic remediation? What is the industrial motivation behind stylistic remediation, both in films and comics?

With regard to stylistic remediation, the role of horizontal integration and multimedia conglomerates has evolved towards greater influence throughout the past thirty years. A

⁵³⁹ Julia Round, “‘Is This a Book?’ DC Vertigo and the Redefinition of Comics in the 1990s,” in The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts, eds. Paul Williams and James Lyons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 25.

⁵⁴⁰ Jochen Ecke, “Spatializing the Movie Screen: How Mainstream Cinema Is Catching Up on the Formal Potentialities of the Comic Book Page,” in Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives, eds. Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 19.

⁵⁴¹ Laura Sneddon, “Full and Uncut Interview with Grant Morrison,” comicbookGRRRL, 29 September 2011, <<http://www.comicbookgrrrl.com/2011/09/29/full-and-uncut-interview-with-grant-morrison/>> (16 January 2012).

summarization of one of the central case studies here, the Time Warner media conglomerate (behind the production of comic and film titles ranging from Superman and Batman to film productions of 300 and Watchmen) is a prime example. During the production of their subsidiary's (DC Comics) film adaptation of Superman: The Movie (1978), the conglomerate (then known as Warner Communications Incorporated) left independent producers Alexander and Ilya Salkind, for the most part, to their own creative devices. In the early 1970s, Warner Bros. was not confident in the value of the property as a film franchise and licensed the rights for a mere \$3 million dollars. While the studio's licensing agreement came with a stipulation that the producers would come back to Warner Bros.' distribution arm for a possible first look distribution agreement, the studio was not, at least initially, involved in the production.

The one stipulation that the Salkinds were required to honor as part of the licensing agreement was to accept input from a DC Comics creative executive, who served as liaison on the project. However, given the reports in the trade papers at the time and later, aforementioned and cited disclosures from the talent and personnel involved, this liaison essentially ensured that casting decisions would be kept clean and family friendly. Essentially, DC Comics did not want to see their property defaced if an actor or actress with ties to questionable content (softcore or hardcore pornography being chief concerns) was cast in the film. Warner Communications remained uninvolved in the day to day production of the film until the film (which was being shot simultaneously with Superman II) began to go over budget. Then, depending on the source, Warner Bros. provided \$15 million dollars in exchange for partial ownership rights (this is based on Jake Rossen's assumption that they liked the footage the Salkinds had provided and wanted the property back in the Warner Communications stable) and/or a film negative that was being held hostage (according to the Los Angeles Times).

Warner Communication's initial disinterest towards Superman: The Movie can be attributed to an unstable comic book industry and the cultural context of the comic book at the time. As comics scholar Jean-Paul Gabilliet writes, the 1970s "proved problematic for the large publishers [like DC]. They had to cope with dropping revenue, increasingly rebellious employees, and a society in permanent change necessitating a permanent evolution in the content of their magazines."⁵⁴² Moreover, American society, at this point in time, still viewed comics as being a mass medium of low cultural status, a belief buttressed by the legacy of Fredric Wertham and the child friendly content that was produced under the self-regulatory Comics Code. This cultural belief and the Comics Code were only beginning to be challenged during this moment in time. As former DC and Marvel Comics editor Denny O'Neil informed me in a personal interview, when he first arrived in Los Angeles he was told by his manager that he didn't "have to talk about...comic books. Talk about your science fiction stories and your journalism. Now, any connection with comic books will get you in the door."⁵⁴³ This began to change in the mid-1970s when DC hired editor Jeanette Kahn who, according to O'Neil, "insisted we be proud in what we did...Most of the time we said we worked in publishing or magazines. Part of the attraction for me was that it was so disreputable. It wasn't supposed to be good, it was supposed to be done by Thursday."⁵⁴⁴

In contrast, when comics began to gain cultural high ground during the 1980s, the role of Warner Communications began to evolve. When critical and institutional recognition of the comic book form was established throughout the late 1970s and 80s, partially thanks to the flurry of adult centered titles released in 1986 like Watchmen, Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, and

⁵⁴² Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 73.

⁵⁴³ Denny O'Neil, phone interview with author, 19 May 2011.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

Maus, Warner Communications began to involve themselves in the production of Batman (1989). Negative fan reaction to the casting of Michael Keaton, which was covered at length by newspapers ranging from the Los Angeles Times to the Wall Street Journal, was met with hiring of Batman creator Bob Kane as a creative consultant, public statements from director Tim Burton regarding the tone of the film, and rushed release of a trailer in an attempt to placate disgruntled fans.

Moreover, when the first film became a box office success, these cultural attitudes began to shift. O’Neil informed me that once they made money DC was re-evaluated. “Anything that makes a billion is respectable....In 1989, it seemed that the studio [Warner Bros.] did not want to use the word comic book....The studio was a little uneasy about it but those attitudes did gradually change.”⁵⁴⁵ Not only did the perception of the cultural value of the medium change culturally but, given the large sums of money at stake, a re-evaluation took place at a corporate level. For instance, when the darker sequel began an economic slide (a 40% slide, to be exact, against a 225% increase in budget) and drew criticism from parents, subsequently endangering licensing rights with such companies as McDonalds, a new director was hired and a new tone for the series was embraced. To put the importance of licensing in perspective, one of the chief motives for both the increasingly hands on role of conglomerates, comics scholar Mark Rogers writes, “The 1989 Batman film grossed \$405 million worldwide...and sold over a billion dollars in merchandise. It is estimated that Warner Communications, then DC’s parent company, netted at least \$390 million, some \$90 million more than the sales of the entire comic book industry that year.”⁵⁴⁶ As intellectual property licensing has become both more lucrative and more

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ Mark C. Rogers, “License Farming and the American Comic Book Industry,” International Journal of Comic Art 1, no. 2 (1999), 134.

exploitable, via the vast and diverse holdings of media conglomerates like Time Warner's, increased involvement at the larger, corporate level, has become not just common but necessary to ensure the longevity of a potentially costly yet potentially rewarding tent pole franchise.

Yet, despite the tremendous rise in the cultural and economic value of comic book franchises in media conglomerates at the time, Warner Communications and Warner Bros. did not exert pressure on DC and O'Neil, who was editor of the Batman comic book titles at this time. According to O'Neil, "Initially, Jeanette and my immediate boss would go over proofs with me.... As far as editorial direction, my understanding was that I was hired to redo the Batman franchise, which consisted of only two titles at the time. So I thought, 'Ok, that's my job.' They were pretty much hands off, right up to the end."⁵⁴⁷ Yet, this began to shift when O'Neil retired from his role as editor in the late 1990s. While his anecdotes and analysis remained somewhat vague (perhaps due to confidentiality clauses included in most contracts at the editorial level), O'Neil stated "I still have a lot of dealings with DC and I would not be comfortable with the way comics are being done now. They aren't being done wrong, it's a personal thing....Now, they've [comics and film] become virtually the same business....Both comic book companies are serving as R&D arms for the movies."⁵⁴⁸

Yet, this involvement is not just limited to tent pole franchises, as the previous chapter's analysis of Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2010) has argued. Moreover, as formal properties have become a lucrative means of drawing fans and potential readers between both synergistic and transmedia texts, conglomerates have, for the most part, increasingly allowed and nurtured stylistic remediation. Normally, this allowance appears to be on the condition that production

⁵⁴⁷ Denny O'Neil, phone interview with author, 19 May 2011.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid. When I asked former DC President and editor Paul Levitz if he was available for a similar interview, he said he was interested but needed clearance approval from Time Warner publicity due to confidentiality agreements he was still being held to. It goes without saying that these clearances are difficult, if not impossible, to receive.

costs are kept low (as such big budget disasters as Dick Tracy and Hulk have provided very significant examples of how this technique, no matter how marketable, can backfire economically). By doing so, multimedia conglomerates, like Time Warner and Scott Pilgrim's parent company, NBCUniversal, can rely on an alternative means of product marketing, the image and the style, to unite ancillary and transmedia texts. While transmedia scholars often discuss the phenomenon from the standpoint of narrative or storytelling, transmedia style, as discussed throughout this study (particularly in the case study on bullet time and The Matrix and Scott Pilgrim) can be equally successful without running the risk of consumer alienation that transmedia storytelling can produce when a reader or viewer feels out of the textual loop.

Yet, with the tremendous economic failure of Scott Pilgrim vs. the World, the media conglomerates, particularly Universal, seem to be reappraising the cultural and economic field of comic books, comic book adaptations, and both transmedia storytelling and style. In June 2011, the New York Times reported that the bulk of Hollywood studios would be sitting out on the year's biggest marketing launch pad, San Diego Comic-Con. Upcoming tent pole releases like Disney and Marvel's The Avengers (2012) and Warner Bros.' The Dark Knight Rises and Man of Steel (2012) were absent from the proceedings. The 6,500 seat Hall H will not feature panels or footage of the newest Batman or Superman films. Rather, the massive room played host to a roster of science fiction and fantasy television programming. As the New York Times reported, "Comic-Con, as a growing number of movie marketers are realizing, has turned into a treacherous place. Studios come seeking buzz, but the Comic-Con effect can be more negative than positive. The swarm of dedicated fans – many of whom arrive at the convention in Japanese anime drag or draped in Ewok fur – can instantly sour on a film if it doesn't like what it

sees, leaving publicity teams with months of damaging Web chatter to clean up.”⁵⁴⁹

Perhaps a more illustrative example of this re-evaluation is to be found in the transmedia production of Stephen King’s The Dark Tower that I previously analyzed. The project, during the span of less than one year, went from green light to red light. Initially envisioned as a transmedia story that would hypothetically span across three feature films, comic books, and two limited run television series, Universal Studios first rushed the film into pre-production (casting had already begun, with Javier Bardem in the lead) and then, faced with rising costs, attempted to scale down the budget before pulling the plug altogether in July 2011.⁵⁵⁰ The ambitious project may find a home at Time Warner, which is rumored to be on the hunt for a new tent pole franchise after their largest franchise, Harry Potter, came to an end, but this is largely an unsubstantiated rumor at this time.

Moreover, a major factor that tends to be overlooked in these discussions is just how many people read comic books (including more specific demographic information like gender and age) and what books they are, in fact, reading. As Gabilliet notes in his essential cultural study of the medium, a 1999 American Library Association (ALA) survey noted that only 33% of children between ages 11-18 read comic books (the gender distribution was divided at 42% boys, 27% girls). As Gabilliet writes, “More revealing was the marginal position occupied by comic books in the reading priority of the everyday cultural universe of young Americans: seventh position for boys, far behind magazines about sports, music, computers, and show business...and eleventh position for girls.”⁵⁵¹ Gabilliet notes that tracking adult readership has become increasingly difficult and cites, with caution, a 1997 survey conducted by comic book

⁵⁴⁹ Brooks Barnes and Michael Cieply, “Movie Studios Reassess Comic-Con,” New York Times, 12 June 2011.

⁵⁵⁰ Mike Fleming, “Universal Nixes Stephen King’s Dark Tower – No Ambitious Film Trilogy or TV Series,” Deadline.com, 18 July 2011, <<http://www.deadline.com/2011/07/universal-wont-scale-stephen-kings-the-dark-tower-studio-declines-to-make-ambitious-trilogy-and-tv-series/>> (20 July 2011).

⁵⁵¹ Gabilliet, 207.

retailers. The results are shocking: the audience was only made up of approximately 1,250,000 people, 94% men, 6% women, and an average age of twenty-six.⁵⁵² What also tends to be overlooked is that the best-selling comics in the United States tend to be Japanese manga.⁵⁵³ One industrial worry about comic book publishing has been that the continuities that have begun to span hundreds of issues and titles and decades of time have become too complicated and intimidating to new and casual readers. In order to deal with this growing problem, DC Comics has recently announced that beginning in fall 2011, the restart button will be hit and titles, distributed both physically and digitally, will reboot with new character designs, writers, and artists (and, significantly, with issue #1 stamped on each cover). With the uncertain financial outlook for both comic books and comic book films in the wake of major failures like Scott Pilgrim and Kick-Ass (2010), the double-edged marketing sword of San Diego Comic-Con, and Universal swiftly pulling the plug on a major transmedia comic book adaptation of The Dark Tower, the future of stylistic remediation and transmedia style remains uncertain.

Is the remediation of comic book stylistics into films fundamentally a by-product of technologies and an indication of a Manovichian shift from cinema to digital cinema?

Judging from the epigraph quotes from comics scholars Julia Round (2010) and Jochen Ecke (also 2010), their outlook for what I am describing as stylistic remediation is extremely positive. For both comics scholars, the intertwining businesses of comics and film have resulted in a formal influence and interchange between both media that will continue into the coming years. Yet, both scholars approach the question of stylistic influences from the standpoint of

⁵⁵² Ibid., 208.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 210.

formal analysis and cultural analysis rather than industrial analysis.⁵⁵⁴ While I was once as optimistic as Round and Ecke (who no doubt wrote these essays around the same time I wrote my initial, enthusiastic, assessment), trumpeting the dawn of formal exploration in both comics and film, the economic realities of the film industry – particularly the implosion of big budget, stylistic remediation properties at the box office – has engrained a pessimism in my assessment regarding the near-future of stylistic remediation.⁵⁵⁵ It seems that the stylistic cycle is coming to an end, much like it did after the box office failures of Dick Tracy (1990) and Hulk (2003). However, if the history of this stylistic movement as analyzed throughout this volume has exemplified, stylistic remediation is exactly that: a cycle, a series of events that are regularly repeated in the same order. Stylistic remediation, economically and historically, is defined by a cycle of exploration, embrace, overgrowth, and decline. Stylistic remediation, unlike adaptation, is also capable of becoming a formal cycle in which stylistic elements ping pong back and forth between media, with each strike leaving its own formal imprint until, like the multiple incarnations of Sin City and the Joker, we are left unsure where one medium leaves off and the other begins.

Yet, it is not just the economic and industrial realities of stylistic remediation at this current moment in time (2011) that indulges this short-term, pessimistic assessment. While stylistic remediation's ties to digital technology and computer generated imagery can result in larger budgets (see Hulk and Scott Pilgrim), there also appears to be a cultural fatigue to the experience, best exemplified by the gradual decline of Zack Snyder and Frank Miller in the eyes of both fans and general moviegoers (a sentiment traced here via my continuous citation of

⁵⁵⁴ It should be noted that formal influence is not the central thesis to Round's essay and that it is largely a tangential, observation that works in dialogue with her central thesis: the ways in which DC imprint Vertigo redefined the form. She does include industrial analysis but its chief focus is the comic book industry, not the overlap between the comic book and film industries.

⁵⁵⁵ Drew Morton, "Comics to Film (And Halfway Back Again): A DVD Essay," Flow TV 5, no. 11 (2007).

movie reviews and industrial trade articles). Moreover, there are creative limitations to how much the style of comics can be embraced by film and vice-versa.

Accepting the premise that stylistic remediation is the result of evolutions in both hardware and software, we should return to Lev Manovich's concept of spatial montage or the involvement of "a number of images, potentially of different sizes and proportions, appearing on screen at the same time....Spatial montage represents an alternative to traditional cinematic temporal montage, replacing its traditional sequential mode with a spatial one."⁵⁵⁶ For Manovich, the possibilities of spatial montage are the result of evolutions in both technology and our perception of the image as influenced by technology. Manovich writes that "Traditional film and video technology was designed to fill a screen completely with a single image; thus to explore spatial montage a filmmaker had to work 'against' the technology."⁵⁵⁷ Manovich's thesis is historically dubious. He rightly considers comics and animation proto forms of spatial montage that were altogether marginalized by other, classical, modes of representation until the digital made a representational logic of simultaneity possible. However, he also overlooks developments in television, particularly television news, which has engaged in spatial montage since the staging of weather reports and the utilization of blue screen throughout the 80s and 90s.

Yet, even with the evolution of software and hardware and our increased ability to decipher multiple images simultaneously (thanks, not so much to the infiltration of comics into everyday life but to broadcast news and the graphical user interface), Manovich's leap that we have transitioned into a new era of cinema in which "the diachronic dimension is no longer privileged over the synchronic dimension, time is no longer privileged over space, sequence is no longer privileged over simultaneity, montage in time is no longer privileged over montage within

⁵⁵⁶ Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 322.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 324.

a shot” is an optimistic analysis.⁵⁵⁸ After all, if spatial montage was upon us and if, as Manovich rightly argues, it had a precedent within the form of the comic, is it not safe to assume that it would be apparent in filmic comic book adaptations that practice stylistic remediation?

Yet, even in these instances, such as Ang Lee’s Hulk, stylistic remediation and spatial montage are utilized by the filmmakers in a classical, Bordwellian, sense. The moments of spatial montage are incredibly brief in the grand scheme of the film. Moreover, they do not function in the same way spatial montage in comics does (whereas each panel embodies a different moment in time). Rather, the multiframe of Hulk embodies the spatial montage logic of split-screen cinema (whereas each image embodies a different portion of space at the same time; images of different spaces at a simultaneous moment). Essentially, stylistic remediation bends to the rules of continuity editing that David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson described as taking root in 1917 and, as later refined by Bordwell, continue into the present moment.

Bordwell has been the most vocal proponent and rigorous scholar of classical style. Recently, he published a pseudo-sequel to The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960 entitled The Way Hollywood Tells It. In his expansion, Bordwell traces the stylistic evolution of Hollywood cinema since the 1960s and argues that despite the changes in film style – what he describes as “intensified continuity” – Hollywood filmmakers still favor the classical norms embodied by the continuity system.⁵⁵⁹ Bordwell has become a straw man for media studies historians and theorists, thanks to what has become interpreted as a monolithic theory. Essentially, he attempts to account for every deviation from classical

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 326.

⁵⁵⁹ David Bordwell, The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

Hollywood normative style as still being, nonetheless, part of the normative style because the deviations are motivated by the text. To a degree, Bordwell does overreach. Every normative system – a system that Bordwell chosen as his primarily focus, rigorously researched, and persuasively analyzed – has outliers, some of which cannot be accounted for. As digital cinema scholar Sean Cubitt rightly objects, “Bordwell’s strategy...is to establish as normative the practices of the North American film industry, and to derive all other filmic styles from that norm...thus leaving space neither for film styles independent of the North American industry nor for dialectical currents within the normative style itself.”⁵⁶⁰

Bordwell attempts to justify these normative outliers within what he describes as “the bounds of difference.” For Bordwell, in order for Hollywood to continue to remain a profitable business enterprise, the classical system must be guided by standardization while also allowing for differentiation. As Bordwell writes, in the historical content of the Hollywood studio system, “Novelty and originality were taken to be valuable qualities, and scriptwriters evolved an entire vocabulary for describing variation....Cameramen likewise claimed to see each story as requiring a unique visual style.”⁵⁶¹ Yet, for Bordwell, “The principle of motivation gives the classical paradigm a great range of non-disruptive differentiation.”⁵⁶² Essentially, Bordwell argues that deviations from classical normative style can be motivated by the text in numerous ways. Film form can be generically motivated, realistically motivated, artistically motivated, or causally motivated.

Essentially, and Bordwell draws upon film noir here – the film practice that would initially appear to be the most antagonistic to his system – and accounts for all the ways in which

⁵⁶⁰ Sean Cubitt, The Cinema Effect (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 5.

⁵⁶¹ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 70.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

its formal attributes are, in fact, motivated by the text. First, Bordwell writes how noir is commonly described as assaulting psychological causality (characters are incapable of logical action because they are deranged, thus muddling the viewer's conception of the character's motivations). Bordwell justifies this by writing these outliers can be understood and justified within the wider umbrella of popular literature conventions (incomprehensible character motivations have been "conventionalized in psychological thrillers").⁵⁶³ The assault of psychological causality by film noir is thus generically motivated. Bordwell justifies low-key lighting as a stylistic device that is often motivated by a conception of cinematic realism that could "be plausibly motivated as coming from a single, harsh source."⁵⁶⁴ In the end, for Bordwell, noir remains "codified [formally and technically]: a minority practice, but a unified one. These films blend causal unity with a new realistic and generic motivation, and the result no more subverts the classical film than crime fiction undercuts the orthodox novel."⁵⁶⁵ The other two types of motivation Bordwell considers briefly are artistic (an example would be using symbolism, an intersection between imagery and theme/content) and casual (an example would be a flashback that is motivated by one character is telling another character a story).

Hypothetically, Bordwell's theory might account for the practice of stylistic remediation in comic book adaptations as being generically motivated. He argues that subjective effects – such as flashbacks and voice over narration – have been a stylistic characteristic of detective fiction (the literary predecessor to film noir), thus generically motivating their existence within their filmic equivalent. However, Bordwell's notion of generic motivation is somewhat forced. Each medium, as remediation embodies, participates in a dialogue with other media forms and

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

that does not overwrite the possibility for unique formal attributes that define a medium and potentially a genre. Therefore, literary generic conventions may remain independent of filmic generic conventions and vice versa (aural remediation is a good case here, as it is infrequent in most comic book films because it is unnecessary). Moreover, if we were to argue that the multiframe imagery in Hulk was motivated by being a part of the genre of the comic book (which Bordwell implies in his analysis), we would be overlooking the problematic assertion that comic books are not a genre but a medium.⁵⁶⁶ Finally, Bordwell's theory may attempt to account for stylistic remediation as being artistically motivated, but in the case of the multiframe in Hulk – a film which Bordwell even examines yet he leaves out a discussion of the fragmented screen – the device is not used symbolically. Regardless of how brief the sequences are, they are not motivated by the narrative.

Where they can be motivated, however, is in the purpose they serve to the film's form. In Bordwell's latest book, he writes at length about how new developments in technology and staging have provided an opportunity to differentiate film form while still obeying the laws of spatiotemporal continuity. Bordwell describes these developments as engaging in "intensified continuity" and writes that even "When every shot is short, when establishing shots are brief or postponed or nonexistent" other devices (such as eyeline matches and the axis of action) redundantly serve the continuity system.⁵⁶⁷ In the case of the Hulk, this is precisely the case: time unites the images, making the relationship between them unambiguous. When Bordwell goes on to describe devices such as this which "add decorative and expressive overlays to the story information transmitted by the basic intensified continuity techniques" he once again falls

⁵⁶⁶ David Bordwell, The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies, 54.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

upon a motivating force: subjectivity.⁵⁶⁸

Yet, the aspects of stylistic remediation (graphical, spatial, temporal, textual, and aural) are often not always portrayed as being the product of psychological subjectivity. Quickly accounting for some of the cases analyzed throughout this study, the graphical remediation of Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller's Sin City (2005) is spread across the film's multiple narrators, rather than being attributed to the obvious source of the psychopathic Marv (played by Mickey Rourke). The same conclusion can be made about Warren Beatty's Dick Tracy and the remediation of the multiframe in Hulk (it is not as if the multiframe is a form of "Hulkvision"). Character subjectivity may be able to motivate the shifts in time and spaces in 300 (2006), as we discover that the film is essentially one long flashback narrated by Dilios (played by David Wenham). However, Watchmen (2008) depicts the same effects in an objective narrative (the film even ignores the flashback braiding in the first section of the first issue). The textual remediation of American Splendor (2003), at least in the main case of the supermarket line is subjective, an internal monologue that is the product of Harvey's rage. Finally, the aural remediation of Scott Pilgrim is difficult to attribute either way. It appears to be the product of Scott's fantasies, yet other characters are aware of it. Moreover, the film has an omniscient narrator (voiced by Bill Hader).

In the end, stylistic remediation is neither a form of Manovichian spatial montage or digital cinema (despite often being digitally produced, it simply does not function in the same way he describes) nor can it be completely accounted for by Bordwell's bounds of difference. It may function within the continuity system when it comes to the construction of space and time, but is difficult to pin down a motivating force for it aside from being something outside the

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 138.

realm of the classical system, an outlier. Stylistic remediation in film is a type of formal practice, as Cubitt describes, that exists as a dialectical current within a system of norms. It may be limited in practice and may be a temporally brief development in the grand scheme of American film history but it is still a unique formal practice that came into being from a collision of economic, industrial, technological, and cultural factors. As Cubitt writes, “The historian must be alert to difference as much to similarity, and the materialist historian has also the ethical duty to watch out for contradiction and alternatives.”⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁹ Cubitt, The Cinema Effect, 5.

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