

The Comic Book Film as Palimpsest

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A Thesis  
In the Department  
of  
Film Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy (Film and Moving Image Studies) at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

October 2014

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**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**  
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (FILM AND MOVING IMAGE STUDIES)

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## ABSTRACT

### The Comic Book Film as Palimpsest

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In this dissertation, I argue that the comic book film can be productively conceptualized along the same theoretical lines used by Gérard Genette in his literary study *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*: that is, as a genre whose individual works are constructed of multiple textual layers. In this case, these layers consist of different media—film and comics—both of which remain uniquely visible in the final product, and whose combination results in unique articulations of cinematic style. I argue that the full import of these stylistic interventions is lost or overlooked when using an adaptation studies approach to the genre; therefore I employ a version of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s theory of remediation filtered through Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of literary dialogism and heteroglossia. Chapter One articulates the limitations of adaptation theory and presents remediation as a productive alternative. Chapter Two develops a Genette-inspired six-tiered schema that details the categories into which the various strategies of remediation fit. The following two chapters draw upon this framework to explore particular formal differences between comics and film and the stylistic means through which various film texts have addressed them: namely, the difference between the film frame and the comic book panel (Chapter Three) and cinematic movement versus comic book stasis (Chapter Four). In Chapter Five, I explode the established paradigm by considering two case studies that remediate comic books amongst a broader variety of media, which present comics as one medium in the vast contemporary digital media ecology. In the final chapter, I address the superhero film in particular, exploring the question of celluloid versus digital cinema at length and how Christopher Nolan’s “Dark Knight” trilogy (*Batman Begins*; *The Dark Knight*; *The Dark Knight Rises*) uses its narrative to allegorically advocate for cinematic specificity, thus articulating a counter-example to the framework established in the previous chapters.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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As a young boy, I was so well known for my admiration of comic book superheroes that my classmates at school nicknamed me “Druclops,” a neologism of my own first name and Cyclops, the leader of the X-Men. A decade and a half later I found my Professor X in Martin Lefebvre, who never fails to astonish me with his uncanny intellect. He also provides an example to which I will always aspire as a scholar. Unlike Professor X, he doesn’t have the ability to stop time (which would have been nice for making last minute revisions), though his careful readings of this dissertation and the support he provided me throughout my tenure at Concordia proved just as helpful. I’d also like to thank my committee—Luca Caminati, Marc Steinberg, Darren Wershler, and Will Brooker—for spending their valuable time considering this dissertation.

I want to thank all of my colleagues in the PhD program at Concordia, but especially Kris Woofter, Julien Lapointe, and Adam “Early Bird” Szymanski. Beyond Concordia, I am grateful for the friendship (and troubleshooting!) of Tony Fong and the sage wisdom of my “lawyer” and lifetime friend Jeff Gross.

Over the past few years, I’ve been producing a podcast that shares its subject matter with this dissertation. I’m certain that some of the ideas herein originally emerged out of conversations that happened on the show. I therefore hope that Dave Babbitt, James Hrivnak, Andrew Kannegiesser, and Chris Martin will accept my forgiveness if any of those ideas were first articulated by them!

I want to thank Giselle for her love and support. I hope that you’ll continue this journey with me wherever it takes us.

My family—Mom, Rick, Amanda, and Emily—have been a constant source of love and support in my life, and I have no doubt that without any one of them I would not now be writing the acknowledgements page for my own doctoral dissertation. My mom, in particular, has always been my greatest and loudest cheerleader. Dedicating this dissertation to her is truly the least that I can do to express my love and gratitude. (*“No mother...!”*)

This research wouldn’t have been possible without financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

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## INTRODUCTION

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### The Comic Book Film in Focus

The Summer 2011 issue of *Cinema Journal* devoted its “In Focus” section to the perpetually nascent field of Comics Studies. Taken collectively, the short essays contained therein function simultaneously as an overview of the field and some of its key concerns, a literature review, and a call to arms ordaining which paths comics scholars ought to take (and which to avoid!) in the future in order to best advance our collective understanding of sequential art. The history of the scholarly study of comics, like that of the medium itself, is largely defined by a perpetual struggle for legitimacy, by attempts to carve out a place in an increasingly crowded media ecology. While Greg M. Smith ultimately concludes “that Cinema and Media Studies is as fruitful a place as any to ground comics research” (“Surveying the World” 147), cinema nevertheless emerges as something of an antagonist in these essays. In Bart Beaty’s estimation, “Comics Studies lags about a half century behind the academic study of film” (“Introduction” 106); the field thus “lives in the shadows not only of literature and art but also, increasingly, of Film Studies” (107), which represents a benchmark to which Comics Studies could aspire. When compared directly, Comics Studies fails to measure up: Smith and Scott Bukatman both note that the discipline is plagued by dated thematic and ideological readings of key texts that are more concerned with demonstrating their “seriousness” to other departments than attending to the specificities of the medium (Smith, “Surveying the World” 138), while Smith bemoans the glut of “comics and...” projects, which seem to suggest that comics aren’t worth studying on their own (“It Ain’t Easy” 110-11). The former is a hurdle that Cinema Studies overcame long ago but with which Comics Studies continues to struggle, while the latter often implies that comics are lesser than the medium on the other side of the “and.” For all of the scholars represented in this “In Focus” section, it would seem that the way forward is, as Beaty suggests, “to offer critical insights into comics as a social and aesthetic system that has broader transmedia and intermedia implications” (“Introduction” 108): in other words, to develop a poetics of comics as an autonomous medium first and foremost, while also considering its role in the mediasphere more broadly, rather than develop our understanding of comics solely with regard to its relationships to cinema, literature, and other media.

I thus feel it necessary to tread carefully when announcing the intentions of the present work, which is decidedly in the “comics and...” camp and whose affiliations lie more comfortably with Cinema Studies than Comics Studies. The following chapters do not attempt to advance our understanding of comics as an autonomous art or medium, but instead develop a theory of how comics influence and interact with contemporary cinema, giving specific shape to one of the “transmedia and intermedial implications” of comics noted by Beaty. In the roundtable that concludes the “In Focus” section, Bukatman suggests that what the world of comics and film scholarship needs is “a *poetics* of superhero films” (Smith, “Surveying the World” 142); this dissertation, taking a slightly wider view, proposes a poetics of the comic book film as a genre. This corpus—which, it should be noted, is by no means exhaustively examined in these pages—is largely inclusive of but not limited to the superhero film, and is defined by the presence of aesthetic strategies that transpose the form of the comics medium into cinematic style. This process is best described as *remediation*, whereby one medium appropriates the form of another as a means of expanding its expressive capabilities, or at the very least of articulating them in a novel way. The widespread use of cinematic terminology in analyses of comics suggests that there is a great deal of overlap between how the two media communicate—“camera angle” being a term “routinely used to describe compositional framing in comics even though no camera is employed in the construction of the image” (Beaty, “Introduction” 108)—but the many significant differences provide more productive terrain for study, since they require substantive stylistic interventions to remediate cinematically.

Remediation is a term that also appears in the “In Focus” essays, namely in Angela Ndalians’ contribution. One of the things she’s interested in is how comic books—a decidedly analog medium consisting of little more than ink and paper—have been formally repurposed for distribution in the new digital mediascape (e.g., in the iPad app ComiXology, through which I sourced many of the comics images featured in this dissertation). Darren Wershler’s essay, “Digital Comics, Circulation, and the Importance of Being Eric Sluis,” doesn’t mention remediation by name, but in tracing the various means through which Marvel Comics have attempted to distribute their vast archive of material over the Internet he effectively charts the specific transformations—losses, gains, and differences—these texts undergo as they are remediated onto different digital formats and platforms. Ndalians also remarks that “In addition to noting that comics have been remediated for new purposes, it’s also important to recognize

that a comic book aesthetic is making its presence felt in a whole range of audiovisual media experiences” (“Why Comics Studies?” 115), including the cinema. If my project is of interest to Comics Studies, it will be because it traces and analyses this comic book “presence” in cinematic texts. In so doing, I have endeavoured to treat the comics medium with a great deal of specificity and nuance, putting comics scholarship in conversation with film and literary theory. As such, this dissertation is undoubtedly interdisciplinary in approach, though the corpus it analyses is overwhelmingly comprised of cinematic texts.

Comics, perhaps more than other media, is terminologically problematic. The variety of nomenclature noted by Catherine Labio in her “In Focus” essay—“Comics, funnies, *bande dessinée*, *fumetti*, *historieta*, *tebeo*, *manga*, *cómic*” and, of course, the graphic novel (123)—speaks to the varied ways the medium is understood in different national cultures and at different historical moments. The division between “comics” and “the graphic novel” is particularly loaded, as the latter term was adopted by the American comics industry as a self-conscious strategy aimed at imbuing comics with increased literary importance and thematic seriousness, suited for a predominantly adult readership. Labio argues against the trend of replacing the term “comics” with “graphic novel,” which she claims “is doubly hegemonic: geographically, it relegates non-American comics to the background, while academically, it represents a problematic territorial grab by literature scholars” (124). The substitution also suggests that “comics” are less worthy of study than “graphic novels,” presumably based on the higher cultural value afforded to literary works compared to visual narratives. I have deliberately chosen to employ the word “comics” or “comic books” to refer to the medium itself throughout this dissertation; while I do employ “graphic novel” to refer to comics texts of a significant length, the designation is not meant to imply an increase in merit, literary or otherwise. (How does a text like Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen* gain aesthetic value by being collected into a single volume compared to twelve separate issues, released on a monthly basis? I’d suggest that it doesn’t.) Though I am not particularly interested in the relative “status”—highbrow, lowbrow, or middlebrow—of the works under analysis in these pages, it’s worth recognizing that my filmography is largely comprised of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters rather than “difficult” foreign or art-house fare. It’s my implicit contention throughout that both categories are equally worthy of analysis, and that both have the potential for the kinds of aesthetic

innovation that necessitate and reward detailed close readings. I hope that those contained herein support this claim.

Moreover, the relative lack of non-American texts included in this study is deliberate. While other national cinemas certainly adapt and remediate comics, the category of “comic book film” is undoubtedly dominated by Hollywood productions, with superhero blockbusters being most visible. Italian, Japanese, and Franco-Belgian comic book films—to name only three alternative production contexts—are equally deserving of study, and could be productively considered within the framework I establish here. Thomas Lamarre notes that as comics scholars “we should be careful not to assume the primacy of one location of production, and we need to avoid the reduction of locations to national cultures” (Smith, “Surveying the World” 144). If, in focusing on American cinema, I have further entrenched David Bordwell’s placement of Hollywood at the centre of the global filmmaking stage—the paradigmatic standard against which other national cinemas are compared—it is unintentional and not meant to reflect upon the relative merit of the films in question. Animated films are also excluded from my corpus, on the basis that the remediation of drawn images into live action represents one of the most compelling differences between the media of comics and film.

I have heretofore excluded a key rationale for the selection of the corpus analysed in the following chapters, which I will now disclose: I am a fan of American comic book films. With the coinage of the term “aca-fan” (most closely associated with Henry Jenkins) and the increasing visibility of various fandoms in Cinema and Media Studies, this is no longer something that should necessarily be cast aside or disavowed in the pursuit of rigorous academic work. As Bukatman puts it, “I do think that the fan’s stance is a perfect starting point for beginning an analysis: ‘This fascinates me—why?’ If you’re a decent scholar with enough critical theory or analytic chops to do the job, you don’t be producing an overly fannish discourse... I’d rather we all became little Roland Bartheses, pursuing our fascination” (ibid., 139). I readily admit that my lifetime interest in comic books and superheroes, and specifically how each manifests in live action cinema (I’ve never had much interest in animated versions of these characters) has shaped the development of this project in various ways.

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Why the comic book film? What is it about this genre that warrants such a close and extended investigation? While theatrical and literary works have long been a main source of content for

cinematic adaptation, comic book films are more often viewed as a comparatively recent phenomenon. Though comic strips and projected moving pictures both first appear in the mid-1890s and develop as formally and technologically distinct art forms, there was a great deal of content interaction from their earliest days. Two short film adaptations of Rudolph Dirks' *The Katzenjammer Kids* and three of Charles H. Ross's *Ally Sloper* strips appeared in 1898 and 1900;<sup>1</sup> live-action adaptations of other popular strips appeared throughout the silent era as well, including *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend*, *Hogan's Alley*, *Lady Bountiful*, *Mischievous Willie*, *Mr. Jack*, *Mutt and Jeff*, and many others.<sup>2</sup> The "comic book film" as it's usually understood refers primarily to big-budget, studio-made blockbuster films adapted from superhero comics. Despite the incredible success of films like *Superman* (dir. Richard Donner, 1978) and *Batman* (dir. Tim Burton, 1989), the sequels and imitators they inspired largely failed to coalesce into a larger trend in Hollywood filmmaking. *Spider-Man* (dir. Sam Raimi, 2002) is arguably the film that finally solidified the superhero formula such that other franchises and studios would be able to develop and release their own comic book film franchises. While few matched the financial success of *Spider-Man*, the quantity of superhero films it inspired indicates that the "comic book film" has become a fixture in the early twenty-first century cinematic landscape, as common as theatrical and literary adaptations. Non-superhero films like *30 Days of Night* (dir. David Slade, 2007), *American Splendor* (dirs. Shari Springer Bergman and Robert Pulcini, 2003), *Cowboys & Aliens* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2011), *Ghost World* (dir. Terry Zwigoff, 2001), *A History of Violence* (dir. David Cronenberg, 2005), *Jonah Hex* (dir. Jimmy Hayward, 2010), *R.I.P.D.* (dir. Robert Schwentke, 2013), *Sin City* (dirs. Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller, 2005), *Tamara Drewe* (dir. Stephen Frears, 2010), *V for Vendetta* (dir. James McTeigue, 2005), and others demonstrate that this post-2002 boom in comic book cinema has also spread beyond superheroes entirely.<sup>3</sup> In the year of my writing alone (2014), at least twelve major Hollywood theatrical releases are

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<sup>1</sup> *The Katzenjammer Kids in School* (dir. Unknown, 1898); *The Katzenjammer Kids Have a Love Affair* (dir. Unknown, 1900); *Ally Sloper* (dir. George Albert Smith, 1898); *Sloper's Visit to Brighton* (dir. James Williamson, 1898); *Ally Sloper* (dir. Franklyn Barrett, 1900).

<sup>2</sup> *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (dir. Edwin S. Porter, 1906); *Trouble in Hogan's Alley* (dir. Unknown, 1900); *Lady Bountiful Visits the Murphys on Wash Day* (dir. Unknown, 1903); *Mischievous Willie's Rocking Chair Motor* (dir. Unknown, 1902); *Mr. Jack in the Dressing Room* (dir. Unknown, 1904); *Mutt and Jeff* (dir. Bud Fisher, 1913).

<sup>3</sup> Generically, these films would be classified as horror, biopic, science-fiction/western, coming of age dramedy, thriller, western, sci-fi/buddy cop comedy, film noir, romantic comedy, and political thriller, respectively, in addition to their classification as comic book films.

based on comic books or strips.<sup>4</sup> Any phenomenon this pervasive in contemporary film culture warrants thorough consideration, if only to understand the desire for these kinds of films at this particular moment.

In my view, what unites these films as a corpus and makes them interesting as objects of study is not their quantity, but rather a specific quality they share: their *intermedial* relationship to comics. The aforementioned films all have a common lineage, a history in comic books, traces of which remain evident in their cinematic form. It is the purpose of this dissertation to identify, classify, and analyze the specific ways in which aspects of the medium of comics remain apparent in comic book films; for this reason, I have employed the metaphor of the palimpsest in order to describe the relationship between the two media. I am also interested in the consequences of the inherent and fundamental differences between comics and films: as individual texts but more so as media with certain sets of formal attributes. Cinematic appropriations of comics' form necessarily involve a substantial amount of creative transformation when they are radically decontextualized in this way. For instance, the appearance of a speech balloon—a common element of comics used to visually represent sonic information, to articulate dialogue and attribute it to a particular character—in a live-action film is a radical stylistic gesture toward comics' unique form. In comics, a speech balloon passes almost without notice, functioning almost invisibly as an accepted communicative strategy; in film, its presence is felt much more strongly. It is stripped of its original context—what Thierry Groensteen calls “the system of comics”<sup>5</sup>—and re-contextualized in a foreign system. It becomes an interloper from another medium. It loses its original function while retaining aspects of its visual appearance; it thus assumes a *new* function specific to the cinema. Since the presence of a synchronized soundtrack renders speech balloons unnecessary to communicate dialogue, the cinematic speech balloon's most obvious purpose is to point toward the medium of comics, to signal an intermedial dialogue. In so doing, the film may sacrifice its claim to photographic

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<sup>4</sup> 300: *Rise of an Empire* (dir. Noam Murro, 2014); *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (dir. Marc Webb, 2014); *Annie* (dir. Will Gluck, 2014); *Big Hero 6* (dirs. Don Hall and Chris Williams, 2014); *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (dirs. Anthony and Joe Russo, 2014); *Guardians of the Galaxy* (dir. James Gunn, 2014); *I, Frankenstein* (dir. Stuart Beattie, 2014); *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (dir. Matthew Vaughn, 2014); *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For* (dirs. Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller, 2014); *Snowpiercer* (dir. Bong Joon-ho, 2013); *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (dir. Jonathan Liebesman, 2014); *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> See Groensteen, *The System of Comics*.

realism, to a self-effacing style that shapes content “invisibly”;<sup>6</sup> instead its style becomes self-conscious, overt, and obviously mediated. This is a single example, but other formal appropriations from comics undergo similar transformations. The overarching thesis of this dissertation is that the comic book film is best understood as an intermedial palimpsest, a genre of film that consists of multiple layers of mediation, each of which is associated with a different media form (film, comics, or other). The co-presence of media that results when elements of comics form are remediated into a cinematic context produces a variety of unique, hybridized stylistic utterances. Over the course of its six chapters, this dissertation endeavours to explicate these palimpsestuous moments and the various meanings they produce.

Though remediation is presently taking hold as the best means of understanding the tendency toward media hybridization in contemporary filmmaking, adaptation remains the dominant paradigm through which comic book films tend to be understood. In lieu of a literature review, the first chapter explores and answers the question, What theoretical framework is best suited to analyze the comic book film as a hybrid genre? What follows is a critique of adaptation theory that lays bare many of the approach’s drawbacks specifically as they impact the study of comic book films. Since the genre is primarily defined by its intermedial relationship to comics and its particular form—not by the presence of characters or stories that originated in particular texts that happen to be comics—adaptation’s interest in variations between versions (and the significance or meaning thereof) fails to address what is most compelling about these films. As a corrective to this discourse, I propose that we focus our attention on how cinematic texts respond to the formal differences between comics and film, and use cinematic style to transcend these differences in various ways. Whereas adaptation theorists might classify such interventions as “unfaithful” or “failed” attempts to reproduce the original text cinematically, remediation implies no such value judgments, instead allowing the media involved to maintain their distinctiveness. There’s no such thing as a “faithful” or “unfaithful” remediation, since media are necessarily different from each other; the precise form that remediations take emphasizes the areas of similarity and difference between media, and demonstrates how they exist non-hierarchically. The second chapter fully articulates these areas, positing six distinct “levels” of remediation that are particular to the comic book film.

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<sup>6</sup> See Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, especially “Part One: The classical Hollywood style, 1917-60” (1-87).



The third and fourth chapters zero in on salient areas of differences between comics and film: the comics panel versus the film frame and comics' stasis versus cinematic movement, respectively. In Chapter Three, I articulate how the panel and the frame function differently within their respective media and then analyze various attempts to remediate the panel in a cinematic context. As we saw above with the example of the speech balloon, the form and function of these devices are inevitably transformed during the process of remediation. Three distinct strategies will be discussed: the use of shifting aspect ratios to literally change the shape of the film frame from shot to shot; the use of *mise-en-scène* elements that divide the screen into discrete sections, replicating the look of the comics page; and, most obviously, split-screen cinematography. In Chapter Four, I interrogate the differences between how comics and cinema produce movement effects (movement is illusory in both media, albeit in different ways). Comics use sequential representations of stasis, as well as a host of representational conventions that imply dynamism and duration, giving them a kinetic quality. Cinema, obviously, produces the illusion of movement by rapidly projecting a series of still images onto a static surface, tricking the human eye into seeing a consistent world of fluid motion. After a discussion of chronophotography—a technological predecessor to cinema that represents a space between cinema and comics—I again identify three strategies used to remediate comics' treatment of movement in the comic book film: the staging, *tableau vivant*-like, of particular panels from comics, which make the viewer acutely aware of intertextual traces, of the comic book film as palimpsest; the use of motion lines in live-action cinema, which function very similarly to the example of speech balloons discussed earlier; and a technique that I refer to as the “panel moment,” which manipulates the ebb and flow of time (using slow- and fast-motion cinematography) in order to replicate the internal experience of temporality (psychological time, as opposed to mechanical or “real” time) experienced by the comic book reader.

Though earlier films found distinct ways of incorporating formal aspects associated with comics into their cinematic stylistic system, the digital era of filmmaking has increased filmmakers' ability to hybridize media exponentially. The reduction of all representation—be it visual or aural; moving or static; drawn, written, or filmed—to a string of binary code allows a variety of formerly distinct media forms to combine, for film to absorb the representational strategies of other media in a dynamic play of forms. The line that separates a cinematic aesthetic from a computational one is increasingly blurred. In the fifth chapter, I discuss two comic book

films that straddle this line, remediating comics while also employing digital tools to draw on a variety of other media. In *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (dir. Edgar Wright, 2010), comics, video games, anime, the television sitcom, and other media are incorporated into a homogeneous cinematic palimpsest that represents the characters' relationship to and experience of the contemporary digital media ecology. In *Watchmen* (dir. Zack Snyder, 2009), by contrast, the franchise is divided into paratexts that keep different media separate from each other, functioning both to remediate the paratexts included in the original comics while promoting the film as a transmedia storytelling experience.

While *Scott Pilgrim* and *Watchmen* explore and celebrate the expressive potential and aesthetic liberation of digital filmmaking technologies, Christopher Nolan's "Dark Knight" trilogy (*Batman Begins*, 2005; *The Dark Knight*, 2008; *The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012) emphatically condemns the same. In Bukatman's heretofore unmentioned "In Focus" essay, provocatively titled "Why I Hate Superhero Movies," he bemoans the superhero blockbuster as a weightless (both literally and figuratively) spectacle, whose frivolousness he blames largely on the sharp contrast "between actor and action figure, between live action and CGI" (122). Nolan's trilogy, surely, represents an exception, not only avoiding CGI whenever possible but allegorically making an anti-digital argument similar to Bukatman's (though wider-ranging). Chapter Six presents this allegorical reading in depth, explaining how Batman represents celluloid film while his enemies embody various elements and signifiers of digital technology. I argue that the trilogy's overall narrative asserts the triumph and superiority of celluloid over digital film; in so doing, it largely eschews the kinds of media hybridization discussed in previous chapters in favour of a specifically cinematic aesthetic. I conclude with a brief discussion of Marvel Studios, whose superhero films embody "the fundamental playfulness of the comic book superhero" (ibid., 118), transcending the "bifurcation" discussed by Bukatman to achieve true hybridization between analog and digital, man and superman.

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In 1989, I wrote a letter to Spider-Man. Having failed to save a copy for posterity, I can't be sure of the exact contents of my end of the correspondence, but I do still have his reply in my possession. I present it here, in full (punctuation and spelling errors retained—hey, I thought Spidey was supposed to be a genius!?): "Thank's for your great idea's! MOVIES! CEREAL! TOYS! Sounds OK to me. Thanks alot for writing Inside is a gift for you. Your pal, Spidy." It

would seem that my four year-old self was largely uninterested in following my pen pal's monthly adventures in comics, but I wanted to engage with the character in other ways, most of all cinematically. I wanted to see the panels move, to hear his mask-muffled voice, to experience his point-of-view as he swings through the streets of New York City. In 2002, I got my wish—and then again in 2004, and 2007, and 2012, and 2014... I've spent my academic career to this point pursuing how such films work, attempting to understand the exact relationship between the two media involved. This dissertation is the result of that prolonged interest and inquiry.

## CHAPTER ONE

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### From Adaptation to Remediation

“[The] ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph...” - Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (23-4)

The study of adaptations is both among the most consistently popular and problematized discourses in film scholarship. However, its reputation today is generally poor, and valid criticisms of the practice are legion. So pervasive is this critique that any new study focusing on the practice or theory of film adaptation is forced not only to justify itself, but to preface its analyses with the now-familiar disclaimer that *this study is different*, that *this study doesn't fall into the same old traps*. The temptation is to not have to throw fifty-plus years of theorizing away,<sup>7</sup> but might it be true that some concepts are simply better suited to casual discussions (e.g. newspaper criticism) than rigorous academic work? If adaptation theory is as corrupt as many of its own practitioners now suggest, might it be possible that it's also beyond redemption?

Despite this pessimistic opening, I don't intend to use this chapter to sound adaptation theory's death knell. Rather, my goals are more modest: I would like to shift the discussion away from adaptation insofar as my corpus is concerned—I will not speak for cinema (studies) writ large—and replace it with an approach that I hope will be more productive: namely, that of remediation. I will first demonstrate the necessity of this hermeneutic shift through a review of adaptation theory and its application in the study of comic book films in particular. I will then present remediation as an alternative methodology for studying these films, but with the necessary caveat that it too has problems that must first be addressed. After recognizing these through a review of its literature, I will present a rearticulation of remediation that, I believe, will provide the strongest support for the analyses of the comic book film in the chapters to follow.

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<sup>7</sup> This figure traces adaptation theory back to George Bluestone and the publication of *Novels into Film* in 1957; the number is closer to seventy years when you begin with Sergei Eisenstein's 1944 article on Charles Dickens' influence on the films of D.W. Griffith.

## Survey of Adaptation Theory

Despite the fact that adaptations of comic strips were among the earliest films ever made (filmic versions of various newspaper comics appeared as early as 1898) and have been consistently present since this era, adaptation theory has been almost entirely myopic in its focus on the cinematic adaptation of traditional literary works, and in particular that of the prose novel. This approach considers the novel as the source or *urtext* upon which its cinematic adaptation is based and against which it must be judged. In the most familiar version of this narrative, the novel is usually held up as the superior artistic achievement while the film version is found lacking, for whatever reason (e.g., it may be seen as an “incomplete” or digest version of the plot, or as a superficial recounting of a story more richly told with access to characters’ internal monologues, etc.). Among the reasons commonly pointed to for such failures are a lack of “fidelity” to the source text—or, in even more impressionistically vague and subjective terms, its “spirit” or “essence”—, a failure to engage the material in a specifically “cinematic” rather than “literary” way, or even the inherent artistic superiority of literature as a medium over film. None of these seems like a good criterion from which to develop a rigorous analysis. Indeed, adaptation theory, like early auteur theory, was primarily used as an evaluative schema, giving us criteria with which to praise certain films as “good” and to denounce others as “bad.”<sup>8</sup>

It is for these reasons that recent adaptation studies feel compelled to disavow these tendencies, even if they end up being guilty of them all the same. As Thomas Leitch, perhaps the most self-aware adaptation scholar today, notes, “since its inception half a century ago, adaptation studies has been haunted by concepts and premises it has repudiated in principle but continued to rely on in practice” (63). The so-called “fidelity discourse” is often the first of these to be disavowed, only to rear its ugly head in subtler forms: “the field is still haunted by the notion that adaptations *ought to* [emphasis added] be faithful to their ostensible sourcetexts” (64). Evaluating a film not for what it *is* but *for what you think it should be* is a faux-pas even for film journalists, to say nothing about academics. For those that remain drawn to the phenomenon of film adaptation as an object of serious study, it’s clear why they would want to distance

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Stam’s amusing list of pejorative words commonly found in studies of film adaptations is the best summation of this tendency: “The language of criticism dealing with the film adaptation of novels has often been profoundly moralistic, awash in terms such as *infidelity*, *betrayal*, *deformation*, *violation*, *vulgarization*, and *desecration*, each accusation carrying its specific charge of outraged negativity” (2000: 54).

themselves from these practices, but it seems as though there's a magnetic field inherent in adaptation theory that pulls scholars into these kinds of orbits—or, more accurately, black holes.

Let's go back to the origins of adaptation theory. Most scholars of adaptation agree that Bluestone's *Novels into Film* is the defining, if not the instigating, work of the then nascent field of inquiry. There are two writers from the classical film theory era that I would like to consider first, however: Sergei Eisenstein and André Bazin, whose essays "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today" and "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest," respectively, are arguably precursors to Bluestone's influential work.

Eisenstein's essay, likely one of the very first extended considerations of the novel-to-film trajectory, is not really about adaptation per se: in fact, what Eisenstein describes is not so much Griffith's adaptation of Dickens' novels but rather his cinematic appropriation or *remediation* of elements of Dickens' style. Eisenstein quotes from Dickens' novels at length, but not with the intention of comparing Griffith's filmic treatment of a given narrative to its source text; rather, he wants to reveal the aesthetic ancestry of certain elements of Griffith's innovative film style. One example is "the basic montage structure, whose rudiment in Dickens's work was developed into the elements of film composition in Griffith's work" (Eisenstein 214), though Eisenstein is also attentive to the overlapping thematic concerns and handling of narrative between the two figures. Since Eisenstein doesn't limit his analysis to individual texts, nor to particular films adapting those texts, he is not at all concerned with issues like textual "fidelity," or whether Griffith's films capture the "spirit" of Dickens' work. Indeed, it is not the content of any specific work that is primarily at issue, but rather how that literary content can be transmitted through style. Furthermore, he's hardly concerned with what one medium does well and another does poorly; indeed, he sees direct aesthetic correspondences between them with regularity. After quoting from Dickens at length, rhetorical exclamations such as "How many such 'cinematic' surprises must be hiding in Dickens's pages!" (214) or "How often have we encountered just such a structure in the work of Griffith?" (216) are typical. What Eisenstein is interested in between Dickens and Griffith is how particular elements of the former's prose style are taken up and transformed into specifically cinematic tropes by the latter. The subtext of this article is not whether interart equivalences that enable smooth transmission of content from one medium to another can be found, but rather that the representational capabilities of one art form may evolve through the influence of and interaction with other arts: this is arguably an even

more forceful position (in 1944!) than Stam's much more recent assertion that "art renews itself through creative mistranslation" (62); it's also more or less in line with Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's definition of remediation as the process through which media present "themselves as refashioned and improved versions of other media" (14), though without the problematic qualitative claim that the appropriative medium is "improving" upon its predecessor. I will return to the issue of remediation in the final section of this chapter.

Bazin's article, on the other hand, is more typical of the adaptation studies that would follow. "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest," originally published in 1948, is effectively a defense<sup>9</sup> of the oft-maligned literary film. Of primary concern to Bazin here is the difference between form and style and the faulty sense of cultural elitism that necessarily privileges the novel as the superior work over its film adaptation. As Bazin puts it, "The chronological precedence of one part over another would not be an aesthetic criterion any more than the chronological precedence of one twin over the other is a genealogical one" (26). As we will see later in this chapter, Linda Hutcheon has also taken up this point as a central tenet of her own contemporary theory of adaptation. This is not the only area in which Bazin anticipates later trends in adaptation studies, for it is here that we first encounter the fidelity discourse and the vernacular associated with it, including such amorphous terms as "spirit" and "soul."

Bazin is particularly generous as a critic of adaptations because he believes that the viewer's imagination is as important as the filmmakers' in creating and identifying correspondences between the prose and film versions of a novel. For example, though there is no cinematic equivalent for the *passé simple* tense, Bazin identifies "Michèle Morgan's beautiful eyes—which are able to communicate the blind Gertrude's innermost thoughts—and the omnipresent motif of the ironically serene snow" as "acceptable substitutes" that create a similar, though specifically cinematic, effect in the film version of *The Pastoral Symphony* (dir. Jean Deannoy, 1946) (20). The unpopularity of adaptations would thus not simply be a matter of the films being subpar (be they considered as autonomous works of art or in comparison to their prose counterparts), but also of critics not devoting sufficient intellectual energy to reveal such correspondences. The primary theoretical issue here is the difference between form and style: for Bazin, while a novel's form cannot possibly be replicated in the cinema (he writes that

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, his other major work on adaptation is titled "In Defense of Impure Cinema" (Bazin, *What is Cinema?* 107-138).

“faithfulness to a form, literary or otherwise, is illusory”[20]), its style very well could be (e.g. “The *style* of Malraux’s film [*L’espoir*, dirs. André Malraux and Boris Peskine, 1945] is completely identical to that of his book, even though we are dealing here with two different artistic forms, cinema on the one hand and literature on the other” [20]). Form, then, should be understood as the vehicle through which both style and content are communicated and irrevocably conjoined; it is non-transferrable from one medium to another, but that which it communicates can reappear in another form—reincarnated, as it were, in another body, form, or medium (23). As Stam would later attest, fidelity to form is chimerical (54), while fidelity to a novel’s “spirit” remains possible. Though “spirit” is a nebulous term, generally used to refer to one’s subjective experience of a text, here Bazin at least attempts to give it some solidity. In his usage, a novel’s “spirit” is the particular alchemy that results from the combination of its content and its style, which are inseparable but transferrable. Style and content are connected through form, but are not connected *to* form: in other words, they could equally be expressed through *another* form. Since Bazin’s writing, adaptation scholars have been struggling to reconcile this assertion with the realities of adaptation. His claim that the style of texts in different media can be “identical” is an overreach on par with his famous statement that the photograph is not only “created out of the ontology of the model,” but in fact “is the model” itself (*What is Cinema?* 8): in my view, the style of adaptations should be considered on their own terms rather than as attempts to approximate the style of another form. Given Bazin’s profession as a film critic, it’s not surprising that his approach would generate analyses designed to demonstrate whether an adaptation succeeds or fails, but as Leitch notes, scholarly studies of adaptations are still struggling to overcome this tendency to evaluate today (64).

Bluestone’s work, as the first thorough study of the phenomenon, probably remains the touchstone of adaptation theory today. In *Novels to Film*, he locates the difference between the novel and the film “between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image” (1), but also systematically accounts for how film can accommodate (or approximate) different literary tropes in the novel using the particular means at its disposal. Editing and movement are given pride of place in Bluestone’s schema for the way they engender play in the treatment and representation of filmic time and space.

The opening section of *Novels into Film* is by far the most interesting, wherein Bluestone details what seems to be an unbridgeable ontological gap between the novel and the film. His



work on medium specificity falls squarely in the tradition inaugurated by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose *Laocoön* was written as a corrective to the “*ut pictura poesis*” thesis advanced by Horace more than a millennium prior. Bluestone writes:

Both film and novel create the illusion of psychologically distorted time and space, but neither destroys time or space. The novel renders the illusion of space by going from point to point in time; the film renders time by going from point to point in space. The novel tends to abide by, yet explore, the possibilities of psychological law; the film tends to abide by, yet explore, the possibilities of physical law. (61)

Because the novel and the film seem in this way to be diametrically opposed, with very little in the way of a shared representational vocabulary, there is not much that Bluestone can do in the case studies that follow beyond noting differences in action and character motivations, and then attempting to account for why these changes were made and what effect they might have on the overall work. Despite his claim that the most important criterion for assessing a film adaptation is whether it “stands up as an autonomous work of art” (111), he nevertheless seems fixated on the idea that alterations that undermine what he perceives to be the novelist’s “intentions” are bad. For example, Vincent Minnelli’s *Madame Bovary* (1949) is deemed to have “failed so utterly” because the director refused to abide by the historical facts of the novel (213-14), while John Ford’s *The Informer* (1935) is praised for retaining “respect toward his original” (90). Thus while Bluestone knowingly attempts to steer himself away from the black hole of fidelity discourse, he ultimately succumbs to it nevertheless.

In the much more recent *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon takes issue not only with Bluestone’s emphasis on intentionality, but also with his criterion that the film adaptation should be judged “as an autonomous work of art.” Indeed, Hutcheon would view that principle as counter to the very nature of adaptations. Her theory is based on the principle that to study adaptations *as adaptations* is to treat them “not only as autonomous works. Instead, they are examined as deliberate, announced, and extended revisitations of prior works” (xiv). Hutcheon believes that the case study model of adaptation analysis advanced by Bluestone and others inevitably gives “priority (and therefore, implicitly, value)” to the original over the adaptation. As Bazin also recognized, this is flawed because “Multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically” and we are more or less free to experience them in any order we like (xiii). Concomitant with this shift in how we think about adaptations is Stam’s initiative to forgo

moralizing over fidelity (or the perceived lack thereof) between two texts (hypotext and hypertext, or original and adaptation) in favour of a more inclusive approach that considers direct and indirect influences alike. According to him, film adaptations “are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts with no clear point of origin” (66). Stam’s ultimate proposal—to treat each adaptation as an “intertextual dialogism”—gets us out of the mire of fidelity discourse, but it nevertheless seems to privilege the content of texts over their form: his straight reading of Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel” assumes a shared vehicle of discourse in which intertexts can interact without remediation; in other words, it proposes that adaptations be considered as intertextual, but not also intermedial, dialogisms. Without modifying Bakhtin’s conception of dialogism to refer not simply to how each linguistic utterance interacts with a history of utterances but also to how each medium interacts with and remediates other media (as I do in chapter five), Stam’s reading of film adaptations winds up in the same methodological place as Bluestone: that is, the discovery and reading of formal “equivalences” between media, but without the evaluative judgments and with a greater body of texts between which to draw connections.

Despite all of these influential calls for reformation, Leitch summarizes the contemporary field thusly:

Some recent theorists, seeking to turn their backs on these spirits [fidelity, categorization, evaluation] by changing the subject, remain haunted by them. Others accept their presence more or less willingly and find their work accordingly limited. Still others attempt to manage the contradictions [...] between the desire to break new ground in adaptation studies and the constraints of a vocabulary that severely limits the scope and originality of new contributions. (65)

Even with Stam’s intervention opening the field up to include a greater variety of texts and media, recent books and collections within adaptation studies still tend to maintain their focus on the novel, for the most part. Even though Leitch, Hutcheon, and James Naremore have each individually singled out comic books as a medium ripe for exploration in adaptation studies (see Stam 64; Hutcheon xiv; Naremore 1), such studies have hardly appeared within adaptation

circles.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, studies of comics-to-film adaptations have appeared in other venues, especially collections<sup>11</sup> and journals<sup>12</sup> specifically mandated to study comics. In the next section, I will explore how the rhetoric of adaptation studies has been taken up and applied in the context of such comics-to-film analyses.

### **Adaptation Rhetoric in Comics-to-Film Analyses**

At a press junket for *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012), writer/director Joss Whedon claimed that the key to making a good superhero movie was “capturing the essence of the comic and being true to what’s wonderful about it, while remembering that it’s a movie and not a comic... You have to give the spirit and the thing and then step away from that, and create something cinematic and new” (Faraci). All of the most repudiated elements of adaptation theory are on display in this one quotation—the importance of capturing the source text’s “essence,” translating it into something medium-specific, and then evaluating its success or failure as an adaptation based on these criteria—and if you take the filmmaker’s word for it, you might also be accused of succumbing to the intentional fallacy and naïve auteurism to boot. Clearly, Whedon is not helping adaptation scholars leave these counterintuitive impulses behind!

Bart Beaty has accurately noted that comics studies “lags about fifty years” behind film studies (106), despite the approximately simultaneous appearance of both media in mid-1890s mass culture. It’s also unfortunately true that studies of comics-to-film adaptations have remained similarly retrograde, having not yet disavowed the drawbacks inherent in adaptation theory and unproblematically using outdated film theory, effectively rendering them as “of the moment” as a good Freudian reading. Though adaptation theory is not the dominant lens through which comic book films are typically analyzed—political/ideological readings, cultural studies, and gender studies are all more prevalent in the English language literature<sup>13</sup>—the inherent

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<sup>10</sup> Will Brooker’s “Batman: One Life, Many Faces” and Luca Somigli’s “The Superhero with a Thousand Faces: Visual Narratives on Film and Paper” are notable exceptions.

<sup>11</sup> See Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen’s *Comics and Culture*; Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister’s *Film and Comic Books*; Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest’s *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*; and Mark Berniger, Jochen Ecker, and Gideon Haberkorn’s *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures*.

<sup>12</sup> Including *ImageText*, *The International Journal of Comic Art*, and *Studies in Comics*.

<sup>13</sup> See Greg M. Smith’s contribution to *Cinema Journal*’s “In Focus” feature on comics studies, “Surveying the World of Contemporary Comics Scholarship” for a thorough review of this body of work.

intertextuality of these films has nevertheless suggested the applicability of this approach to more than a few scholars.

Despite having been declared a “chimera” by Stam (54) and disowned by most others within adaptation studies, a few comics-to-film scholars argue in favour of the possibility of fidelity, the logic being that comics and film are more representationally similar than are novels and film. For instance, Greg M. Smith claims that the animated television adaptation of Image Comics’ *The Maxx* “is as literal an adaptation of the comic book as is imaginable” (33), while Bob Rehak writes that a film like “*Watchmen* simply takes faithfulness and fidelity to a cosmic degree” (Rehak, *Watchmen: Stuck in the Uncanny Valley*). The assumption underlying these claims is that visual resemblance (in terms of composition, mise-en-scène, perspective, etc.) is sufficient grounds for fidelity to be achieved.<sup>14</sup> Dan Hassler-Forest argues the opposite in his article on *300* (dir. Zack Snyder, 2006):

For adaptations of comic books or graphic novels, a large part of the debate is usually, once again, focused on fidelity. But as comic books are made up of both images and words, visual faithfulness is targeted much more specifically. The publicity surrounding *Spider-Man 2* ([dir.] Sam Raimi, 2004), for instance, often included side-by-side comparisons of well-known comic book panels and shots from the film that copied them faithfully. (Hassler-Forest)

He goes on to undermine the idea that *300* is “faithful” to its source text simply because care has been taken to ensure a similar look in the adaptation. More importantly for Hassler-Forest, the screenwriters have added material to the film that creates parallels between the narrative and the contemporaneous Iraq war and American foreign policy, which fundamentally changes the thematic and political thrust of the adaptation. To call *300* a “faithful” adaptation, he argues, is to privilege the film’s visuals at the expense of its ideological content. Somigli’s “Superhero with a Thousand Faces” goes a step further, expressing dissatisfaction with the entire adaptation paradigm, not because of its inherent drawbacks but rather because it’s simply not well suited to discussing superhero films, which draw inspiration from decades of stories in service of an entirely new narrative more often than they adapt (or remake) a particular text (291).

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<sup>14</sup> This is especially true for Rehak, who also refers to *Watchmen* as a “hyperfaithful adaptation” in an article otherwise devoted to explaining significant differences in the film and comics versions of the narrative (“Adapting *Watchmen* After 9/11,” 158).

Within the anti-fidelity camp, Pascal Lefèvre's article "Incompatible Visual Ontologies? The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images" is arguably the most cited, as well as the most problematic. Even before he gets to his list of "adaptation problems" that every comic book film must reckon with, Lefèvre makes a statement that is at best questionable and at worst plainly inaccurate when he asserts that these films "have little automatic appeal for comics readers" (1). Naturally, he presents no data to support this counterintuitive claim, and common-sense would support precisely the opposite, that these films' considerable "automatic appeal" is why they are green-lit ahead of the innumerable superior original screenplays floating around Hollywood; brand familiarity goes a long way with film producers, and devoted fans will see just about anything featuring their favourite characters (the comic book films that aren't successful speaks less to a lack of interest on behalf of comics readers than it does to a dearth of comics readers in contemporary North American society). Lefèvre's thesis is similarly questionable, based as it is on (re)tired strands of adaptation and film theory. He argues that by juxtaposing the "inherent visual ontologies" of comics and film, it becomes evident why comics fans denounce "film adaptations as often unfaithful and even disrespectful" (3). If Lefèvre intended to perform a reception study, such terminology may have been more appropriate, but given that he wants to engage with the question of adaptation on a formal level, framing his analysis in this way is not an ideal start.

Lefèvre's four "adaptation problems" stem from his interpretation of the "inherent visual ontologies" of the two media in question. I'd like to address the issue of "inherent visual ontology" first, for I believe that such claims provide ample evidence to support Beaty's aforementioned assessment about how far comics studies lags behind film studies. While film scholars continue to debate cinema's (changing) ontology, particularly given the transition to digital, we have certainly moved beyond Bazin's reduction of cinema to a photographic (read: realist) ontology. Lefèvre seems unaware of this progress, or that filmic and photographic images (even digitally produced or altered ones) can be other than realist in orientation. Despite a well-reasoned and -researched explanation of the capabilities of drawn images, Lefèvre ultimately associates an inherent aesthetic predisposition towards abstraction or caricature with drawing, compared to an inherent predisposition towards realism with the cinema. I will go into greater detail on this issue in later chapters, but suffice it to say for now that the incorporation of digital production (not to mention distribution and exhibition) technologies in both comics and cinema

have effectively imbued them both with a common or “flat” ontology because neither medium is necessarily bound to its physical properties any longer. The incorporation of digital technologies has ensured that the limitations of pencils and ink on paper or of photographic emulsion on celluloid no longer determine what can be represented on comics pages and cinema screens, respectively. While both media have, for the most part, retained or strived toward the look associated with the pre-digital era, there is no ontological reason why they should *necessarily* do so. Indeed, any aesthetic similarity to the look of ink on paper or to the materiality of celluloid film in the digital era must be understood not as a natural consequence of the inherent qualities of the media in question but rather as a deliberate artistic choice that might have been otherwise. For example, Robert Rodriguez’s *Planet Terror* (2007) and *Machete* (dirs. Rodriguez and Ethan Maniquis, 2010), though shot digitally, have added film grain, cue marks, and other visual signifiers of celluloid production and exhibition for their aesthetic effect. Similarly, *WALL•E* (dir. Andrew Stanton, 2008) is a digitally animated film that employs different digital “lens” and “camera” effects (e.g. lens distortions and flares, zooms, shaky camera, etc.), despite the fact that cameras were not used to produce the film’s images. And even when such efforts to ground digital productions in an analog visual tradition are not present, we continue to recognize digital comics and movies *as* comics and movies: our engagement with and practical understanding of these media is not limited to the means of their production and their consequent ontological limitations (or lack thereof). Even if that weren’t the case, however, Beaty is currently demonstrating—in a work-in-progress known as “Comics Off the Page”—how reducing comics to an “inherent visual ontology” is fallacious and wrong-headed. In this project, he is analyzing the diversity of forms that comics can assume, locating comics in media as diverse (and antithetical to the ontology of drawing) as sculpture, dance, live music, and site-specific art, to name only a few. Whether his analyses will prove compelling is as yet unknown, but I’d suggest that it’s always safer to err on the side of inclusivity rather than exclusivity—doing the latter is merely provoking an avant-garde or technology-driven artist to prove you wrong.<sup>15</sup>

Let’s now look at Lefèvre’s four “adaptation problems.” They are “(1) the deletion/addition process that occurs with rewriting primary comics texts for film; (2) the unique characteristics of page layout and film screen; and (3) the dilemma of translating drawings to

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<sup>15</sup> On the subject of medium specificity and the cinema, see Noël Carroll, “Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video, and Photography” (3-24).

photography; and (4) the importance of sound in film compared to the ‘silence’ of comics” (3-4). These are set up as the four reasons why “faithful” film adaptations of comics are impossible. In other words, Lefèvre’s entire essay can be effectively summarized in Stam’s concise statement that “an adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium” (55). Furthermore, this premise assumes that “fidelity” is the central criterion of value in an adaptation, a statement that is only reversed in Lefèvre’s concluding plea to “forget—for a moment—about the original work and evaluate the newly created work on its own merits” (12). We have already seen that the will to evaluate is one of the tenets of adaptation theory that has been disavowed prior to Lefèvre’s intervention here, by Stam, Hutcheon, Leitch, and others, and that viewing the adaptation as an autonomous work effectively strips it of its status *as* an adaptation. Lefèvre’s unconscious goal, perhaps, is to discard adaptation theory as a means of analyzing this corpus—a goal with which I find myself in accord, but that also seems to undermine the very premise of his essay.

Of the “adaptation problems” cited, (1) and (4) are not specific to the comic book—i.e., they apply equally to the adaptation of other media, especially novels—so I will leave them aside. (2) and (3), however, are only problems if fidelity is the primary criterion of value; I prefer to frame the gap between the form of the two media not as barriers to achieving fidelity but rather as opportunities for cinematic invention, aesthetic ingenuity, and consequently, formal interrogation. For an adaptation discourse centred on the issue of fidelity, they are dilemmas simply by virtue of the fact that *film and comics have different representational tools available to them*, that the aesthetic effects produced in one medium cannot necessarily be produced in the other. A remediation discourse, as we shall see, shifts the discussion to examine *how* film uses the representational strategies available to it to engage in media hybridization: not so much the “intertextual dialogism” proposed by Stam as the future of adaptation studies, but rather an *intermedial dialogism* (see chapters 2, 3, and 4) or even a *polymedial palimpsest* (see chapter 5).

Two related articles are worth considering in this discussion as well, including a follow-up by Lefèvre himself. In the same volume as “Incompatible Visual Ontologies,” Michael Cohen presents an aesthetic analysis of *Dick Tracy* (dir. Warren Beatty, 1990) that “demonstrates how the cinema can adapt the conventions and characteristics of a comic” (13). In so doing, he provides a corrective for many of Lefèvre’s points, including the “inherent visual ontology” problem: for instance, Cohen writes that “Comics do not possess a singular style, or a finite set

of visual attributes, which are either inherent to the medium or historically stable” (13). His analysis of *Dick Tracy* identifies three tendencies of the film’s style, which combine to form the film’s “cinematic comic aesthetic”: these include (1) “an aesthetic of artifice” that undermines the reality of the photographic image via a limited colour palette, deliberately flat-looking matte paintings, etc.; (2) “cartooning,” or the deployment of elements that interrupt the photographic purity of the image; (3) the “framing of the hero” in a self-consciously posed and often static manner; and (4) “paneling,” which Cohen defines as a way of staging complete actions within a single shot rather than resorting to shot/reverse shot editing and the like (13).

Cohen’s article seems to have had an impact on Lefèvre. Two years after the publication of *Film and Comic Books*—the anthology containing both of the previously cited essays—Lefèvre published a short article called “Coping with the Visual Ontology of Drawings and Revitalizing Cinema by an Aesthetic of Artifice.” While he maintains his hardline ontological definitions of the two media (using the difficulty of adapting Hergé’s *Tintin* into live-action as an example of the gulf between comics and film), he softens his position on the impossibility of a faithful comic book adaptation thusly:

filmmakers have nowadays the means to really grasp the stylization and mood of a comic [...]. Films that adapt or *translate* [emphasis added] comics need to focus a lot on mise en scène and art direction, because not only characters, but also the decors are being defined by the visual style of the drawing. Furthermore digital postproduction is becoming of increasing importance. With all of these technical possibilities available, filmmakers, inspired by comics, will probably continue to revitalize their proper medium and offer stunning images to the spectators of the early 21st century. (553)

Lefèvre is not the only scholar to make the terminological shift from adaptation to “translation” as a more appropriate framework for discussing comic book films. The move is perhaps inspired by Stam’s “Beyond Fidelity,” in which he writes that “the trope of adaptation as translation suggests a principled effort of intersemiotic transposition, with the inevitable losses and gains typical of any translation” (62). Also among these scholars are Greg M. Smith, who uses “translation” to refer specifically to the intersemiotic transposition of the comic book panel to the television frame in the TV adaptation of *The Maxx* (35), and Federico Zecca, whose “Comics in



(Intersemiotic) Translation” is influenced by the work of linguists like Roman Jakobson and Louis Hjelmslev (77).

For me, however, translation is just as troublesome a term as adaptation, largely because rather than sidestep the question of fidelity, it *assumes* fidelity: a translation that is not faithful to its source is, by definition, a *bad* translation or a *mistranslation*. Stam claims that “art renews itself through creative mistranslation” (62), which may be true, but it’s ultimately no different than saying that cinema renews itself through creatively unfaithful adaptations. Both contain value judgments in the implication that *something went wrong* in the adaptation/translation process (even if the “mistakes” result in a net aesthetic gain rather than loss). To this point, Rodriguez has preferred to use the word “translation” when describing his film version of Frank Miller’s comics (1991-2000) because he believes that his adaptation “leaves the original work entirely intact” (qtd. in Hassler-Forest). “Translating” is also not a process that typically applies to texts that go from one medium to another (though Jakobson’s “intersemiotic translation” is), but rather to texts being translated into another language *without a change in medium*. Using “translation” as a synonym for adaptation ignores the long debates in film studies over whether film constitutes a language, effectively decreeing that it is and was all along (and so is comics, by the way). If we use the terminology properly, the English language version of Marjane Satrapi’s French graphic novel *Persepolis* (2000) is a translation; the film version (dirs. Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, 2007) may be considered an “intersemiotic translation” (if we agree that comics and cinema both constitute languages), but this is merely another way of describing it as an adaptation: “accuracy of translation” and “fidelity of adaptation” are ultimately synonymous criteria, both of which lead to qualitative evaluation. It seems clear that “translation” is not our way out of the adaptation quagmire.

It’s almost humorous that it took until 2007 for an analysis of *Dick Tracy*, a film released seventeen years prior, to shift the discussion away from the adaptation of individual works to cinema’s remediation of comics’ unique representational system. Cohen’s continued (and unnecessary) reliance on the rhetoric of adaptation studies, however, further delayed the remediation project, resulting in a detour into “translation” on the way. I suggest that the most useful methodology for looking at the comic book film as an intertextual object is one that discards the baggage of adaptation theory altogether in favour of something closer to what Eisenstein was doing in the mid-1940s. We should examine how media interact, and how one

medium can stretch itself by exploiting the tropes of another, by subsuming its representational strategies and claiming them, in modified form, as their own, creating hybridized texts that might best be understood as a non-linguistic equivalent to creole languages. Cinema has been in the business of remediating comics at least since 1906, when Edwin S. Porter employed all manner of special effects and primitive Méliès-esque trickery to put a live-action version of Winsor McKay's *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* strip on nitrate film.<sup>16</sup> As this early film demonstrates, there's nothing particularly novel about the strategies being employed in contemporary comic book films, aside from the addition of digital technologies, which makes it all the more peculiar that academics have only recently caught on to the fact that these films are often more interested in remediating the medium of comics itself into that of cinema than they are in adapting individual works. In the next section, I will explore how the process of remediation has been discussed in the existing scholarship, and how I plan on using it in the chapters to follow.

### **Remediation as an Alternative to Adaptation**

As much as I would like to claim the shift to remediation as my own original intervention in the field, others have applied the ideas central to Bolter and Grusin's 1999 book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* to analyses of the comic book film genre before me. The two major works in this vein—Costas Constandinides' 2010 book *From Film Adaptation to Post-Celluloid Adaptation* and Drew Morton's 2012 doctoral dissertation "Comics to Film (and Back Again): A Study in Stylistic Remediation from 1978-2009"—however, both have oversights that render the present study both vital and significant. Furthermore, the theory of remediation as defined by Bolter and Grusin itself has some drawbacks, some of which it shares with adaptation theory, that need to be rectified in order to employ it in a rigorous study.

Constandinides' chapter "Bullet-Time, Blood Spraying Time, and the Adaptation of the Graphic Novel" addresses the stylistic remediation of comics and video games in the digital aesthetics of *300* and *Wanted* (dir. Timur Bekmambetov, 2008). Though he uses the rhetoric of adaptation studies, Constandinides nevertheless focuses on remediation rather than the adaptation of the films in question: "This chapter attempts to interpret or understand the copresence of more than one medium in digital cinema by analyzing the new mixed cinema

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<sup>16</sup> See Matthew T. Jones' article "Fiend on Film: Edwin S. Porter's Adaptation of *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend*" for an adaptation studies analysis of this film.

moments included in the case study examples [...]. [T]he main argument in this chapter [...] is that this mixed nature becomes visibly augmented through a multilevel dialectic between the graphic novel and moving images” (76). This dialectic manifests in what I have already called, taking cues from both Stam and Bakhtin, an intermedial dialogism that hybridizes the representational systems of film and comics in a cinematic context. If Constandinides’ analysis has a weakness—and I should say that I largely agree with his approach and findings—it is that he overemphasizes the role of the digital in enabling the process of remediation. In the case of the comic book film, the co-presence of media forms pre-exists and anticipates the advent of digital cinema: films like *Superman*, *Creepshow* (dir. George A. Romero, 1982) or even the aforementioned *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* demonstrate a marked copresence and “confusion” of media, even in their analog state. Comics, unlike video games (whose remediation in the cinema arguably begins with the primitive celluloid/digital hybrid *TRON* [dir. Steven Lisberger, 1982]), are not an inherently digital media format, so digital cinema was hardly a precondition for their remediation to occur. This overemphasizing of the digital is a natural byproduct of an aspect of Bolter and Grusin’s theory that will be addressed in more depth later in this section.

Like this very chapter, Morton’s dissertation also attempts to shift the framework from adaptation to remediation theory, though with mixed results. For instance, while he notes that “remediations are not necessarily adaptations” (5), he sends mixed signals by limiting his corpus to adaptations, neglecting other films that remediate the comic book medium without being explicitly based on a particular comic book narrative or character.<sup>17</sup> He also fails to fully extricate himself from the fidelity paradigm, classifying the period of comic book films from 2000-2009 as “the high fidelity cycle” (97), though he avoids indulging in evaluative criticism when doing so. Furthermore, his conceptualization of what constitutes remediation is, in my view, limited to the most obvious instances (roughly corresponding to levels three through five in the six level schema detailed in the next chapter). Consequently, he claims that “the majority of films based on comic books or graphic novels tend to avoid stylistic remediation” when, as I hope to demonstrate, all of them are involved in remediation to various degrees (36). Richly palimpsestuous films such as *Batman* (dir. Leslie H. Martinson, 1966), *Condorman* (dir. Charles Jarrott, 1981), *Creepshow*, *Tank Girl* (dir. Rachel Talalay, 1995), *Unbreakable* (dir. M. Night

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<sup>17</sup> He makes an exception for *The Matrix* (dirs. Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999), whose status as a comic book film I critique in chapter three of this dissertation.

Shyamalan, 2000), *The Losers* (dir. Sylvain White, 2010), and *Green Lantern* (dir. Martin Campbell, 2011), to name only a few, are unjustly excluded from his analysis on these grounds.

Despite some overlap in corpus, theory, and methodology, the goals of Morton's analysis are also somewhat distinct from those of this project: while I am primarily concerned with analyzing *how* these films remediate comics through close textual readings, Morton is as concerned with *why* these films are compelled to remediate comics style. His industrial analysis (based primarily on marketing strategies and box office figures) ultimately concludes that while remediation is usually a means of "appeasing a property's fan base," (152), "big budget" films containing a great deal of obvious stylistic remediation tend to crash and burn at the box office, leading him to be more pessimistic about the immediate future of such formal hybridization than those who analyze the trend from a purely formal perspective (296-97). Morton claims that his formal analyses are "[supplemented by] industrial and consumer responses" to the texts in question when in fact they dwarf them. Each of his case studies is bookended by an exhaustive detailing of the given film's production history and its critical and financial reception (usually limited to Roger Ebert's opinion and how the film fared at the box office and in awards season), neither of which adds much value to his stylistic readings. In the case of cinema's remediation of comics, I believe that formal analysis, rigorously performed and contextualized, gets to the heart of the matter on its own. Admittedly, contextual information can be interesting and useful, but it can just as easily derail a formalist interrogation: *The Spirit's* (dir. Frank Miller, 2008) status as a critical and box office failure shouldn't colour one's reading of its form, except perhaps as context for whether its particular approach to remediation proves influential to later films or not. To connect the film's critical and box office failure to one's formal analysis thereof is likely to veer the discussion in the direction of adaptation theory's tendency to categorize and evaluate; I would like to avoid these traps in the present study.

Despite all of these issues, the weakest element of Morton's argument is when he attempts to examine the reverse trajectory (i.e., the remediation of film by comics). His comparative analysis of Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) and Marvel Comics' *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger Born* (2007) centres on a tautological argument, whereby elements of Leone's film style that were inspired by comics in the first place reappear in a comic book inspired by Leone's film forty-one years hence. This strikes me less as an example of comics remediating film than of comics reclaiming a style native to it that had since

been appropriated by the cinema. Though I am sure that a compelling analysis concerning cinema's stylistic influence on comics could be performed, for the most part such discussions fail to move beyond superficial and observational comments like "the drawings are more realistic than they used to be" or "they use more 'widescreen-style' panels nowadays." One must consider issues such as lighting, "lens" effects (e.g. soft, selective or rack focus effects, flares, etc.), perspective/"camera" placement, narrative pacing and length, and a host of other subjects in addition to realism, mise-en-scène, and panel shape and orientation. In my view, the subject is vast enough that it warrants its own monograph; limiting the investigation to a single chapter can only give it short shrift. For this reason, I've deliberately limited the present study to how films remediate comics form, rather than attempt to examine both trajectories and end up doing justice to neither.

There are at least two other essays that use the language of remediation in the study of comic book films. Craig Hight's *"American Splendor: Translating Comic Autobiography into Drama-Documentary"* essentially uses "remediation," "adaptation," and "translation" interchangeably, and his methodology has more in common with adaptation studies than with remediation: he argues that the film's remediation of comics is "intended to increase the 'proximity' [...] of the film to [Harvey] Pekar's original work" (193). Jeffrey S.J. Kirchoff's "Beyond remediation: Comic book captions and silent film intertitles as the same genre" doesn't engage with adaptation, but instead combines remediation with rhetorical genre theory in order to compare the function and aesthetics of comic book captions of 1940s comics with silent film intertitles. Kirchoff's argument—that captions in comic books of the 1940s shared similar styles and rhetorical functions as silent film intertitles—is more interesting than Morton's on the subject of comics remediating film form, but it nevertheless falls beyond the scope of what is under consideration here.

Remediation, though, is imperfect as defined by Bolter and Grusin and requires some nuancing in order to be a maximally effective a tool for unearthing the formal complexity of the comic book film. As their book's subtitle makes clear, remediation is meant as a tool for *Understanding New Media*, and its biases definitely veer towards the digital (as I suggested in my discussion of Constandinides above), for reasons that I will discuss shortly. First, however, it's necessary to provide a brief overview of their argument and terminology in order to know which elements of their theory require revision. For Bolter and Grusin, remediation is a

dialectical process by which one medium takes the form of an already established medium as its content;<sup>18</sup> recalling the assertion made by Marshall McLuhan that served as this chapter's epigraph, they define remediation as "the representation of one medium in another" (45). The phenomenon is not only dialectical, but also dialogic: every medium is born and lives alongside every other medium in a kind of dynamic pool, similar to what Bakhtin imagines for linguistic utterances,<sup>19</sup> wherein each individual articulation (of media, of language) can only be understood through its countless associations and resonances with and against other like articulations. Unlike Bakhtin, however, Bolter and Grusin imagine a single Platonic ideal that all media strive towards: implicit or explicit in every act of media appropriation is a claim that the colonizing medium improves upon the colonized by giving its user more or better access to "the real" (65). They limit their focus to new (i.e., digital) media perhaps because their theory doesn't hold so well when applied to old media. Theoretically speaking, there is simply no reason why media—old or new—ought to necessarily evolve in a single, unified direction.<sup>20</sup> The history of modern painting is a compelling counter-example of a medium without a unified trajectory, with movements embracing new forms of realism being succeeded by radical breaks with representationalism altogether (e.g., the post-World War II abstract expressionist movement, which follows a period of Social Realism). Because painting is widely accepted as a medium without an inherent predisposition toward any single style of aesthetic expression, it has been mobilized in a variety of ways, by a variety of artists, toward a variety of ends. It has moved hither and thither, refusing to follow a straight line, and thus refusing to satisfy a teleology. There is no Platonic ideal that all painting strives towards. Moreover, Bolter and Grusin also tend to conflate "realism"—such as that advanced by Bazin or Stanley Cavell with regard to the cinema—and immediacy, or "the real." They refute Bazin's claim that the cinema satisfies "our obsession with realism" on the basis that digital technologies have since increased our access to "the real" (26), render the cinema of yesteryear antiquated and out of step with reality as perceived by contemporary eyes. However, Bazin and Cavell are discussing a different phenomenon than Bolter and Grusin: realism, unlike immediacy, is a *style*, a conscious

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<sup>18</sup> For "medium," they provide the somewhat tautological definition of "that which remediates" (Bolter and Grusin 65), begging a chicken/egg kind of question: how could an originary medium come into existence if media necessarily require other media in order to exist?

<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin terms this intermingling of utterances heteroglossia. See "Discourse in the Novel."

<sup>20</sup> Though new media have overwhelmingly tended to follow the trajectory outlined by Bolter and Grusin.

deployment of form used in the production of artworks; “the real” is precisely that which art—even realist art—is not.

Comic books are themselves a counter example to their teleological argument. In the early days of the medium, comics may have been viewed as a remediation of drawing, taking individual drawn images and “improving” them by placing discrete images in sequence to form relationships, be they narrative or otherwise; likewise, it could be viewed as a remediation of the novel, taking its approach to narrative and its linear, printed format and “improving” it with the addition of visual images. In neither case, however, is it clear that comics are “[refashioning the older medium] in the name of the real” (65). The mental images evoked by a skilled novelist’s prose may be more detailed, nuanced, “realistic,” or more immediate than the static, often crude, drawings of early comics; likewise, the sequential drawings of comics are undoubtedly adding *something* to the individual drawing, but there’s no reason why the sequential nature of comics should necessarily be mobilized in pursuit of “the real.” Cinema provides a similar case. Though cinema has largely been understood as progressing (by virtue of technological “improvements”) towards greater and greater realism, there is no reason why it must be thus. Indeed, one of the recurring arguments of this dissertation is that the remediation of comic books by the cinema often represents a marked increase in self-conscious mediation, in an increased visibility and awareness of the cinematic apparatus, and in a more qualified relationship to “the real.” In my view, Bolter and Grusin’s insistence that media evolve towards “the real” is misplaced, and is a definite weakness of their theory.

The dialectic between immediacy (in which the means of representation are completely effaced or transparent, seemingly placing the user in the immediate presence of what is being represented) and hypermediacy (in which the means of representation are of equal representational significance to that which is being represented through them) is also central to Bolter and Grusin’s theory. They write that

Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium. Thus, immediacy leads to hypermediacy. The process of remediation makes us aware that all media are at one level a “play of signs,” which is a lesson that we take from poststructuralist literary theory. (19)

Indeed, it is a lesson that we can find much earlier, for instance in the Formalist theory of art advanced by Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay “Art as Device”:

in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By “enstranging” objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and “laborious.” The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant.* (6)

In both articulations of this idea, there is a cycle whereby the arbitrary conventions of a given system of representation are first “enstranging” or hypermediated, which then, as we become accustomed to their particular brand of mediation, become more immediate, thus necessitating a new set of conventions to renew our perceptual and aesthetic experience. For Shklovsky, this was the process by which individual art forms maintained their vibrancy and urgency, whereas for Bolter and Grusin, it is the process through which new media come into being. The deep similarities between the two theories speaks to remediation’s concern with the formal qualities of media, and suggests that remediation might be a useful tool in formal analysis. In using it to these ends, however, one inevitably subverts Bolter and Grusin’s intentions; where remediation as they theorized it insists upon media’s relationship to “the real” and strives for immediacy, a formalist remediation approach necessarily privileges hypermediacy and is more concerned with the specific aesthetic qualities of the representation than its relationship to a real-world referent. Thus my rearticulation of remediation in this dissertation removes this insistence upon immediacy and “the real”: in my usage, remediation should be understood to refer only to a medium’s appropriation of “the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media” and the concomitant “[attempt] to rival or refashion them” using its own native representational system, resulting in a hybridized, intermedial expression. This understanding of remediation is, as suggested earlier, a contemporary rendering of Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism that refers to media and mediated utterances instead of prose and linguistic utterances. Rather than insist upon a more immediate relationship to the real in this combination, such dialogisms may (and often do) result in a more thoroughly and self-consciously mediated aesthetic experience.



How does remediation relate to adaptation? In Bolter and Grusin's own words, an adaptation is a text in which "The content has been borrowed, but the medium has not been appropriated or quoted" (44). A remediation is essentially the inverse, wherein the medium is the focus of the appropriation and the content is irrelevant. As suggested in my brief discussion of Hight, above, remediation scholars need to be careful to avoid falling back into the tropes of adaptation theory. Indeed, Bolter himself has invoked the evaluative language associated with adaptation when discussing Rodriguez's version of *Sin City* as a remediation: "The style of the film *Sin City* perfectly matches the dark vision of the original comic book: the film is probably the most *faithful remediation* [emphasis added] of a comic book in the history of the genre" (24). While remediation is undoubtedly a superior logic with which to confront the specific problems presented by the comic book film, it also represents a much needed escape from the baggage associated with adaptation studies: to continue to indulge in its negative features in this new context is surely less than ideal. The appeal of remediation for a project such as mine is that it provides a means of addressing the specific formal problems raised by intermedial texts such as *Sin City*; to abandon the analysis at the mere recognition of superficial resemblances between the versions simply squanders the theoretical promise of remediation for formal analysis.

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In this chapter, I have indicated the problems inherent in adaptation theory and have suggested an alternative approach: namely, remediation. In later chapters, however, using language associated with adaptation theory may be unavoidable: when films *are* adaptations, it simply makes sense to call a spade a spade. What is important is that I will not be discussing them *as* adaptations, but rather as remediations. Both approaches consider their objects of study as inherently palimpsestuous and intertextual, but when visual, stylistic, and formal similarities are at issue in the analyses to follow, they will not be discussed in terms of their fidelity, nor will they be evaluated using this criterion or on any other qualitative grounds. By the end of this dissertation, I hope that the reader will not have any sense of which films I personally like or do not like. I don't necessarily strive for scientific objectivity—I am a humanities scholar, after all—but I certainly endeavour to avoid "playing favourites."

The comic book film is a unique film genre that is not only inherently intertextual, but also intermedial; in other words, it embraces Bakhtinian dialogism not only on the level of content, but on the level of form as well. As such, it demands an approach that takes both of

these factors into account, exploring not merely how the themes, narratives, and characters in these films relate to those found in comic books, but also how the form of these films relates to the medium of comics. This genre, though often critically derided or dismissed under the rubric of “blockbuster entertainment,” contains a significant amount of intermedial play, truly embodying the logic of remediation. In the next chapter, I will further refine the theoretical approach that will be applied throughout the rest of this dissertation by establishing a six-tiered system for classifying and understanding how both intertextuality and intermediality manifest themselves in the comic book film.

## CHAPTER TWO

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### Levels of Remediation in the Comic Book Film

In the previous chapter, I proposed remediation as a theoretical alternative to adaptation with reference to the study of the comic book film. A key reason for this shift is that adaptation theory is simply ill-equipped to meet the challenges presented by this film genre, which is not only intertextual but also *intermedial* insofar as it subsumes the form of the comics medium in addition to (or instead of) the content of individual texts. Remediation allows us to better understand the formal exchanges between media that are embedded in these films, but it is insufficient on its own; as I suggested in the previous chapter, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's theory of remediation effectively (and perhaps unknowingly) contributes to discourses about intertextuality that can be traced back to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory of heteroglossia and the dialogic nature of language, presented in his 1934-35 essay "Discourse in the Novel," itself laid the groundwork for later work on intertextuality by Julia Kristeva, Gérard Genette, and others. In shifting the focus from adaptation to remediation, we become more prepared to analyze the comic book film's relationship to its hypotextual<sup>21</sup> medium—or, better yet, its hypomedium—and to film practice more generally.

In this chapter, my primary goal is to elaborate upon what makes the comic book film distinct as a genre of filmmaking. Films remediating comics cannot be viewed as autonomous works, but always as intermedial palimpsests that subsume the formal properties of the comic book, incorporate them, and express them in a specifically cinematic way—regardless of their status as adaptations of a particular work or character. After thoroughly considering the various approaches that these films take toward remediation, I have constructed a comprehensive system of six individual strategies, or "levels of remediation," that are available to the comic book film specifically. I have called them "levels" because they are presented hierarchically: the first level concerns the most superficial, content-based kinds of connections, while the sixth level concerns the most abstract formal resonances between the two media. Every comic book film engages

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<sup>21</sup> Genette uses the terms hypotext and hypertext to refer to "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*)" (*Palimpsests* 5).

with at least one level of this hierarchy—it's the prerequisite for inclusion within the corpus<sup>22</sup>—but many go beyond the minimum requirement, becoming more richly palimpsestuous with each additional level.<sup>23</sup>

Before outlining the history of these ideas and explaining each level in depth, I will first provide a brief outline of the six levels of remediation:

1. The first level is *diegetic intertextuality*, which describes the transposition of narrative or diegetic content, including characters and stories, from a comics text (or series of texts) into a film. For many superhero films in particular, this is the only level on which the film will engage with the medium of comics. For instance, aside from the character of Steel, Kenneth Johnson's 1997 film *Steel* borrows very little else from the comics in which the character originates. This level is the only one that addresses content rather than form; in short, it is only on this most basic level that adaptation theory can address issues presented by the comic book film. For this reason, it is the least relevant to the kinds of formal investigations that I want to pursue here.
2. The second level already moves beyond questions of intertextuality and content. Instances of *explicit intermediality*, which refers to the inclusion of actual comics art within a film, lay bare the intermedial concerns of the film in question, and often function as a clear indicator to the viewer (who may otherwise not be familiar with the film's engagement with comic books) of this interest. The comics art may or may not be *actual* art from comics; it may have been produced specifically for the film, but nevertheless is meant to recall an aesthetic associated with comic books. For example, *Tank Girl* often uses images from various comics to transition from one scene to the next, while *The Losers* provides images of each character drawn by Jock (who drew the comics series) as they are first introduced in the film.
3. The third level complicates our understanding of intertextuality by adding the problem of the quotation. *Compositional intertextuality* describes a filmic mise-en-scène that is directly parallel to a specific panel of a comic book. Such moments, which might loosely be called "compositional quotations," are not only direct allusions to the content of comics, but are also remediations of that content. Compositional quotations thus function as an index,

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<sup>22</sup> Prior to this intervention, the comic book film as a generic category was seemingly determined by its status as an adaptation of a comic book, excluding a great many films that remediate comics without being based on one.

<sup>23</sup> The levels don't necessarily "stack," meaning that a film may employ strategies from level one and three but not necessarily two, for example.

pointing at and bringing to the viewer's consciousness a particular hypotext. Films like *Daredevil* (dir. Mark Steven Johnson, 2003), *Watchmen* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, among others, are full of such moments and will be analyzed in such terms in later chapters.

4. The fourth level is *formal intermediality*, which refers to the manifestation of formal properties of comics in a film. Ang Lee's 2003 *Hulk* adaptation is riddled with examples of this type of remediation, including split-screen compositions (which echo the multi-panel matrix of a comics page), on-screen text (which recall the written caption boxes and dialogue balloons of comics) and freeze-frames (which echo the stasis of comics images).
5. The fifth level is *expressive intermediality*, which describes the addition or incorporation of the pictorial qualities of comics in an otherwise photographically produced film. Even before the widespread use of computer-generated imagery (CGI), comics films like *Batman* (1989) and *Dick Tracy* employed animation, set design, lighting, costume, and make-up to stretch the expressive capabilities of cinema beyond the mere photographing of reality into something more closely resembling the boldly-coloured and caricature-rich comics on which they were based. One need look no further than films like *Frank Miller's Sin City* and *300* to know that the age of CGI has only increased filmmakers' abilities to produce images that are not bound to the realms of realism or even the photographic.<sup>24</sup>
6. The sixth and final level of remediation in the comic book film is *figural intermediality*, which refers to filmic attempts at bridging the phenomenological experience of comics-reading and film-viewing by mimicking part of the readerly experience of reading comics. In discussing this approach to remediating comics, I will define a new cinematic figure which I designate the "panel moment," which has proven to be a key aesthetic strategy in the contemporary comic book film in particular. In panel moments, the filmic shot is treated as a temporally indeterminate space, wherein time is fluid rather than fixed, representing an on-screen depiction of the way comics produce meaning through the juxtaposition of panels. Films such as *300* and *Wanted* produce this effect through speed-ramping. Because this effect is widely used outside of the comic book film and has become associated with other media (e.g. video games, anime), I will only consider this effect when used in films that engage in other levels of comic book remediation as well.

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<sup>24</sup> This also flies in the face of Pascal Lefèvre's claims of ontological irreconcilability. See the previous chapter for a full discussion of Lefèvre's argument.

My analytical focus throughout the chapters to follow (and particularly in chapters three through five) will primarily be on those films that engage more than one of these six levels, simply because they're denser and more comprehensive in their remediation of comics, and thus provide greater opportunities for formal complexity and close reading.

### **A Brief History of Intertextuality**

This system is largely inspired by the structuralist project of Gérard Genette's *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, which provides an equivalent schema of textual relations for literature. Before elaborating on each of the six levels of remediation later in this chapter, a brief overview of the evolution of intertextual theory leading up to Genette's intervention in the early 1980s is required.

As suggested above, the theory of textual interrelations can be traced back to Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel," in which he first coins the term "heteroglossia." This term literally refers to a plurality of tongues, and it describes the multidimensionality of utterances, written or otherwise: no statement exists in a vacuum, and all statements necessarily interact with and, more importantly, gain meaning from the specific contexts in which they are both made and received. For Bakhtin, the novel's status as art was largely bound up with its use of heteroglossia: "The orientation of the word amid the utterances and languages of others, and all the specific phenomena connected with this orientation, takes on artistic significance in novel style. Diversity of voices and heteroglossia enter the novel and organize themselves within it into a structured artistic system. This constitutes the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre" (300). With an emphasis on the structure of the literary text and close readings that reveal its underlying structure, Bakhtin here defines the novel as the kind of text in which the author can and must cultivate a plurality of tongues whose co-habitation will contribute to the literary work's artistic achievement. It would be a mistake to reduce heteroglossia, however, to the individualized voices of a novel's many characters, each potentially speaking in their own unique vernacular; indeed, heteroglossia manifests on the level of form as well. Literary figures, imagery, and manners of speaking have rich histories and, for erudite readers, are likely to call

forth strings of associations to other works and situations in which they also appear.<sup>25</sup> All aspects of the novel also ring in harmony (or disharmony) with social discourse: all novels are read in some context or other, and this context necessarily colours the meaning of the work. In 1966, Julia Kristeva, a student of Bakhtin's work and an important contributor to structuralist and post-structuralist thought alike, picked up and modified this idea, transforming heteroglossia into what is now commonly known as intertextuality. Shifting her attention toward poetry rather than the novel, she defines the concept as such: "The poetic signified refers back to other discursive signifieds, in such a way that several different discourses are legible within a poetic utterance. Around the poetic signified, then, a multiple textual space is created, whose elements can be inserted into a concrete poetic text. We shall call this space *intertextual*..." (qtd. in Iampolski 17). This "multiple textual space" describes a single work whose meaning derives from its connections to other texts, from the various discourses that it unites in its own corporeal textuality; the emphasis is not on how a new text reproduces elements of an older one, but on how that new text produces meaning through the creative transformation and recontextualization of previously existing elements: a process that also necessitates tracing the genealogy of those elements.

While heteroglossia in the novel typically involves invoking the voice or style of another, it does not usually involve incorporating elements taken from other works verbatim (i.e., direct quotation). Per Bakhtin, such dialogic utterances are better thought of as belonging or owing to two parties at once, the speaker as well as the cited. Kristeva's reconceptualization of heteroglossia as intertextuality expands its purview to include direct quotation, as well as the invocation of more specific interplay between texts. It proved to be a productive move, as there are several ways in which existing texts can be made manifest in other works; to detail some of them I will turn now to Genette, whose book *Palimpsests* is largely dedicated to differentiating between and providing examples of the various means of textual imitation, appropriation, and transformation available to authors.

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<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin performs several close readings of sections from Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, in which he isolates shifts in stylization (e.g., from authorial to professional) and determines their function, which is often parodic (303-308). For a cinematic (though non-parodic) equivalent, I would suggest the opening tracking shot in *The Player* (dir. Robert Altman, 1992), which mimics the style of the legendary sequence shot that opens *Touch of Evil* (dir. Orson Welles, 1958). The shot represents a Wellesian intrusion, and thus an additional "voice," within the film's total stylistic system.

For Genette, all of these strategies fall under the umbrella category of “transtextual relationships,” defined as “all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (*Palimpsests* 1). Intertextuality, which he defines more narrowly than Kristeva as quoting or allusion—“the actual presence of one text within another” (2)—is but one of five separate categories of transtextuality. The other categories are hypertextuality, which refers to any relationship between two texts wherein text A (the *hypotext*) is transformed or imitated by text B (the *hypertext*); paratextuality, which refers to texts that set the stage for and surround the text proper (e.g., titles, book jackets, advertisements, etc.);<sup>26</sup> metatextuality, which refers to texts that provide commentary on a text (e.g., criticism); and architextuality, which refers to texts that describe the “architecture” of discourses, genres, and categories to which texts can belong (1-5).

As the reader has likely gathered by now, it is difficult to summarize Genette without ending up with something resembling a laundry list of literary terms. This is because his book effectively serves as a comprehensive catalogue of the various ways in which texts might relate to and build off of one another, with clear explanations, terminological taxonomizing, and textual examples for each. As such, Genette’s book lays the groundwork for subsequent studies of the phenomena he explicates, especially within the field of literary studies; it contributes to a theory of literary structuralism, insofar as it demarcates specific structures that influence, control, or determine the production of texts, as well as literary poetics. In fact, the two are not unrelated. The task of poetics, unlike that of criticism, is to consider the text in relation to other texts rather than in isolation (1). These marching orders are justified by Tzvetan Todorov’s original definition of the approach, which sees “each individual text as the manifestation of an abstract structure” (3) that is impossible to interpret “without leaving [the text itself] for a moment, without projecting it elsewhere than upon itself” (4). So in order to pin down the meaning and, more broadly, the set of laws that determine a work, we must look outside of the text itself and focus on the aforementioned overarching structures that unite all of literary discourse. When paired with strategies of close reading and textual analysis—one of Genette’s strengths is that he does not merely identify the structures, but also analyzes the texts that they generate—poetics can provide readings that give meaning to works in the context of the discourses out of which they arise. Rather than shutting down or closing off meaning, as pure structuralism is often

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<sup>26</sup> This category will become of greater importance in chapter five, particularly with relation to *Watchmen*.



accused of, Genette's "open structuralism" keeps texts nimble, always available for re-reading, recontextualization, and transformation in the form of new texts. It is my hope that this dissertation will perform an analogous task for the comic book film, perhaps even establishing a poetics of the genre.

Theorists of intertextuality have sometimes ventured into the territory of appropriations across media, though these are properly the domain of intermediality and remediation. In *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film*, for instance, Mikhail Iampolski claims that intermedial borrowing is one of the chief catalysts for the evolution of cinematic grammar: "The rapid growth of cinema is due not to its capacity to assimilate whatever resembles it but to its ability to assimilate things that bear no similarity to it whatsoever. At a later stage, however, these dissimilarities are retrospectively found to possess filmlike qualities that were in fact acquired only during this process of assimilation" (79).<sup>27</sup> Influenced by the work of literary scholar Michael Riffaterre, these new filmic devices are originally viewed as stylistic anomalies, and for Iampolski, they can *only* be explained and properly incorporated into the text by way of an intertext; I propose that they might also be recuperated into the text by understanding them as instances of remediation. Without such justification, one could easily dismiss these anomalous moments as empty stylistic gestures; understanding their roots in another medium—like the comic book, for example—allows us to understand them as allusions to that other medium, and thus ripe with meaning. Iampolski is not hyperbolizing when he writes that "This transformation of intertextuality into a stylistic device (today we would say into a figure of cinematic language) is fundamental. As in previous cases, it shows that intertextuality, while starting out as a principle for generating meaning, can end up generating the language of cinema as a whole" (220). Such stylistic uses of intertexts do "not dissolve into the narrative," instead retaining their "hieroglyphic" or palimpsestuous quality (248), which is precisely determined by the fact that they exceed the basic requirements of representation, and instead provide the viewer with an opportunity for intertextual or intermedial exploration. As Iampolski correctly notes, we no longer have this intermedial experience with well-worn narrative devices that first appeared in literary works before being transformed into cinematic tools, like the flashback or cross-cutting; the cinema needs to constantly remediate other media in order to evolve. I believe that the six

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<sup>27</sup> With this last comment, he is likely referring to Eisenstein's commentary on D.W. Griffith's debt to Dickens in "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today." See the previous chapter for a discussion of this essay.

levels of remediation, to which we will now turn, demonstrate the aesthetic riches that comic books have to offer up for cinematic exploration and appropriation.

### **The First Level: Diegetic Intertextuality, or From Adaptation to Remediation (Reprise)**

Of the six types of remediation in the comic book film, we must begin with the most general, which refers to the importation of the characters and narratives from comic books into cinematic texts. What I will call diegetic intertextuality operates entirely on the level of content, or within the diegesis; it is more concerned with how a character called “Batman,” having been created in and for the medium of comics, makes the transition into a film than how the character is transformed by the process of remediation that such a shift in medium entails. This first level of remediation thus has more in common with the work done in adaptation studies than any of the other five categories, each of which has more to do with how processes of representation, aesthetic strategies, and formal transformations pervade the comic book film than how the narrative or thematic content of those films changes what was contained in an original text. Since I have already addressed the failure of adaptation studies in the previous chapter, I will not repeat those arguments here; suffice it to say that diegetic intertextuality will not be of particular importance in this dissertation, although it hovers over many of the films that will be discussed.

### **The Second Level: Explicit Intermediality, or You Got Comics in my Movie!**

When a comic book film incorporates actual pieces of static art from (or in the style of) comics, it is participating in what I call explicit intermediality. This level of remediation can usually be found in predictable locations: in and before opening credits sequences,<sup>28</sup> at the beginning of scenes, or elsewhere in the opening moments of a film. (Comics art is also occasionally used to adorn a film’s closing credits.) In adaptations, the use of comics art in such moments functions as a declarative statement, effectively announcing to the viewer that the film is aware of the original

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<sup>28</sup> Some comic book films that employ a montage of comic book art during their opening credits include *Flash Gordon* (dir. Mike Hodges, 1980), *The Return of the Swamp Thing* (dir. Jim Wynorski, 1989), *Tank Girl*, *Judge Dredd* (dir. Danny Cannon, 1995), *G-Men from Hell* (dir. Christopher Coppola, 2000), *American Splendor*, *Spider-Man 2*, *Sin City*, *Ultraviolet* (dir. Kurt Wimmer, 2006), and *Super* (dir. James Gunn, 2010). *Spider-Man 2*, for example, features a montage of art by comics painter Alex Ross that summarizes the events of the previous instalment in the franchise. It should also be noted that both Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment have short animations that precede the opening credits in many film versions of their properties. These are modified for each film to include comic art featuring the characters being remediated onscreen.

comics, that the filmmakers have not ignored the source material, and accordingly that the film will not displease fans of the original. Because of these implications, explicit intermediality can be a valuable marketing tool. There is a reason why the advertising materials for comic book superhero films often employ the iconic logos of the characters, often to the exclusion of all advertising copy, including the title of the film. The Superman crest has such cultural currency that, coupled with a release date at the bottom of the poster, it is all that is required to sell a film to audiences. The same seems to be true of Batman's insignia, Iron Man's helmet, Spider-Man's mask, and Wolverine's claws. None of these images are dependent on the visage of a particular actor, which may stray from the non-photographic images of the comics; indeed, nowadays it is unlikely that these promotional images are even produced photographically. Rather, they are produced in the same way that comics images are: with pencils, paints, and pixels. As such, they provide an aesthetic entryway from the original comics into the film that may be reassuring to fans.<sup>29</sup>

Explicit intermediality may have a narrative purpose, as it can serve to orient or situate the comics reader within the film version; readers of *The Losers* are already well familiar with the appearance of each member of the ex-CIA team as drawn by Jock, but they may not recognize Clay as embodied by Jeffrey Dean Morgan or Jensen as played by Chris Evans. Helpfully, the filmmakers morph-cut to Jock's art (along with a title card detailing each character's name and his role in the team) as each new character is introduced in the film. By employing this visual shorthand, the film is effectively setting up a correspondence between the two versions: Chris Evans' Jensen = Jock's Jensen, and more broadly, Warner Bros.' *The Losers* film = DC/Vertigo's *The Losers* (2003-2006) comics. What seems to be at issue in this example is not only the equivalence the two texts but of the two media.

*Creepshow* uses comics art in a similar way. Each segment of the horror anthology begins with a static image drawn in the EC Comics style, which gradually dissolves into an identically composed live-action freeze-frame, which then begins to move. Explicit intermediality has two effects here. Firstly, the presence of comics art cues a certain set of

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<sup>29</sup> This is a strategy that has been central to the Japanese media mix model of convergence. Specific and iconic images of Astro Boy striking a particular pose originate in the original manga, are then repurposed for use in the animated television series (maintaining their stasis against a moving background), and then circulate via other media, including collectible stickers. See Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*.

expectations in the viewer that are specific to the EC brand of horror comics to which the film is an extended homage. Viewers familiar with the notoriously gruesome comics from the 1950s will know to expect similarly macabre morality plays from this film. Secondly, the way the film dissolves from the comics image into an identically composed live-action version again creates the impression that the scenes to follow are not merely a *filmed version* of a comic book, but rather that the camera has somehow penetrated the diegesis of a comic and brought it to life before our eyes: that is, that the film is itself, figuratively speaking, a comic book. The opening scene of *Superman* functions similarly. The screen is completely occupied with theatrical curtains, which slowly draw, revealing a cinema screen. The screen flickers to life, first displaying a black-and-white newsreel-style title card with the date “June 1938” before revealing an issue of *Action Comics* (**fig. 2.1**), the title in which Superman debuted in that month;<sup>30</sup> a child’s hand turns the pages (**fig. 2.2**); the camera tracks in to a close-up on the final panel of a two-page spread (**fig. 2.3**) before it wavily dissolves into a live-action version (**fig. 2.4**). Opening the film in this way is analogous to a similar moment in *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941), wherein a close-up scanning the text of Thatcher’s memoirs dissolves into the scene that those words describe, the implication being that the scene that follows is a visual representation of the subjective memoir. In *Superman*, the entire film is to be read not just as a comic book film, but as a visual representation of the contents of *this* comic book.<sup>31</sup> The film is not in fact an adaptation of any particular comic—it features characters that originated in comic books to tell an original story—but these opening moments gesture towards and embrace the inherent palimpsestuousness of the comic book film as a genre, framing the film not as an adaptation of a comic book but rather as a film that *is itself* a comic book come to life.

Explicit intermediality, then, is loaded with figurative value, though its narrative worth is sometimes limited to viewers already familiar with the films’ hypertextual and intermedial status. In the example from *The Losers* discussed earlier, the biographical details provided alongside Jock’s art are of far greater utility than the art itself, which is likely to be more

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<sup>30</sup> The comic depicted onscreen, however, features a different cover than *Action Comics* #1, indicating the film’s status as an alternative take on Superman’s origin. Indeed, the film’s narrative is very different from that of *Action Comics* #1.

<sup>31</sup> Two lesser known films, *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight* (dir. Ernest R. Dickerson, 1995) and *Tales from the Crypt: Bordello of Blood* (dir. Gilbert Adler, 1996), are also framed as comic books in this way. After a narrative prologue, the storytelling Cryptkeeper displays a comic book. A drawn image from this comic dissolves into the next live-action shot, with the same implication as in *Creepshow* and *Superman*.



**Figs. 2.1-2.4.** The prologue in *Superman* sets the stage for the comic book film to follow.

bewildering than enlightening to viewers unfamiliar with the original comics. Jock's art, while aesthetically interesting, adds no understanding to the film when considered as an autonomous work. Likewise, *Creepshow*'s cue to read the film as if it was an EC horror comic from the 1950s would be meaningless at best and confusing at worst to viewers unfamiliar with the reputation of EC Comics. As Iampolski suggests, in both of these cases the stylistic gesture towards comics must be put into dialogue with its intertext (or, in this case, intermedium) in order to be justified.

Ultimately, what does it mean to read a film as if it were a comic book? What does it mean for a film to stake its identity as a cinematic comic book? Predictably, it is about setting up viewer expectations more than it is about radically revising the way the film is designed. Films that self-identify as comic books are just as cinematic as any other film—how could they not be?—but the viewer should be attentive to how the film's intermedial palimpsestuousness reframes how we are to read its stylistic system, how each choice is charged with new meaning. The composition of elements in the frame may be an allusion to a particular comics panel; the frame itself may lose its rigidity in favour of the plasticity of the comics panel; the ontology of the photographic image itself may be augmented for that of the drawn image via compositing, digital animation, and other assorted post-production manipulations; and slow-motion and other cinematic techniques may be loaded with figurative significance. In short, explicit intermediality

(along with diegetic intertextuality) cues the viewer to be attentive to other levels of remediation that may also be in play.

### **The Third Level: Compositional Intertextuality, or Comics Come to Life**

In some of the examples discussed above, a comics image dissolves into a live-action image that is its photographic double. We saw that such a gesture is more an acknowledgement and incorporation of the comic book medium in general than it is an invocation of a particular text. The next level of remediation, which I call compositional intertextuality, is both subtler and more specific than explicit intermediality, insofar as it functions analogously to a paraphrase in prose writing, whereby another text is being specifically invoked, but without quotation marks and in the paraphraser's own idiom rather than in the exact form in which it originally appeared. The "compositional quotation," as I will call it, is stealthy in that it does not call attention to itself by explicitly citing or incorporating another work in its original form: as a result, compositional quotations are only likely to be recognized by the select few in the film audience who are familiar enough with the original comics to recall the composition of specific panels. Indeed, recognizing compositional quotations may require a great deal of knowledge not just of a particular issue but of the entire history of a character. A single Spider-Man film, because it is massively palimpsestuous at the same time that it isn't based on any one particular version of the character, can remediate panels featuring iconic poses drawn by Todd McFarlane in the 1990s in one scene and from the more classic interpretations by John Romita Sr. or Steve Ditko in the next. As such, a film version may function, as André Bazin suggests, as a "digest" version of the character's history, where the cinematic Spider-Man represents a condensation of various attributes given to him by various artists over several decades.<sup>32</sup> Whether the reference is obvious or obscure, however, the intention is the same: to foster a connection not only between two texts, but between two media and two fundamentally different aesthetics, one of which is based primarily on drawing and the other of which is based largely (though increasingly less) on photography. It is through such moments of allusion that the differences and similarities between the modes of representation available to these two media are laid bare, and moments of aesthetic compromise are achieved through remediation. These shots also lend the film a degree of

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<sup>32</sup> See the previous chapter for a discussion of Bazin's essay "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest."

credibility with audiences familiar with the comics, who tend to get a thrill out of seeing memorable panels replicated onscreen.

The artistic genesis of compositional quotations recalls a more classical and staid artistic tradition: the *tableau vivant*. In tableaux vivants, live actors recreate the mise-en-scène of a well-known painting on a stage for a live audience. The key differences between the compositional quotation and the tableau vivant are the addition of movement to the composition and the mediation of the film screen.<sup>33</sup> In a traditional tableau vivant, the performers appear in the same space as the audience, often on a stage, while in the compositional quotation, the performers are only present to the film camera. The “liveness” of the actors is thus replaced with the

photographic trace of their presence. Nevertheless, the similarities between the two practices are striking. Most notably, the invocation of this artistic tradition suggests that compositional quotations are engaging in a kind of fidelity discourse, since tableaux vivants were primarily judged on their faithfulness or deference to an original (Tweedie 256). I am not interested in how closely compositional quotations resemble the panels that they are invoking, but rather in how they take material designed in and for another medium and transform it into something specifically cinematic.

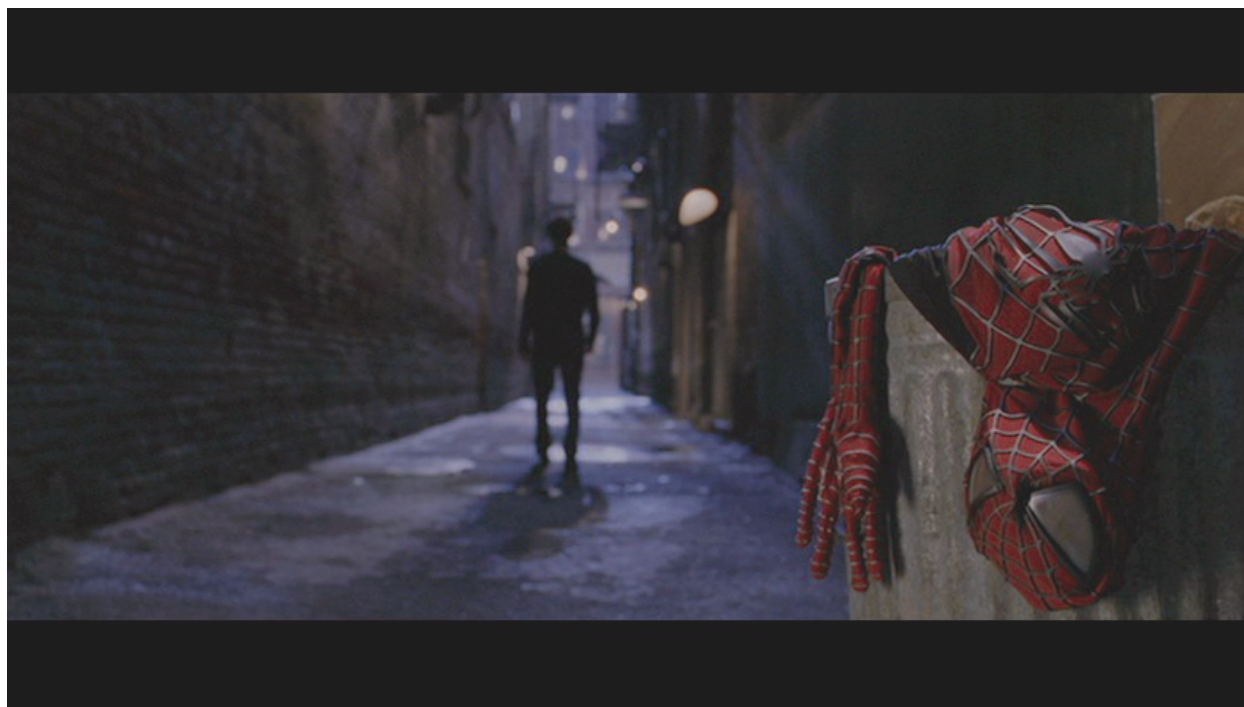
For the sake of brevity, I will limit my discussion in this section to one example: the famous “Spider-Man No More” shot in *Spider-Man 2*, which pays



Fig. 2.5. “Spider-Man no more.” Panel from *The Amazing Spider-Man* #50.

<sup>33</sup> Tableaux vivants have been remediated for the cinema screen in other genres. See, for instance, *Passion* (dir. Jean-Luc Godard, 1982).





**Fig. 2.6.** “Spider-Man no more” from *Spider-Man 2*.

homage to a panel appearing in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #50 (July 1967) drawn by John Romita Sr. In both the comic and the film, the composition functions as the culmination of a storyline resulting in Peter Parker’s decision to give up fighting crime as Spider-Man in order to better fulfill his civilian duties, like improving his grades at school and taking care of his Aunt May. The significance of both the panel (**fig. 2.5**) and the shot (**fig. 2.6**) within their respective works are indicated by their formal qualities: the panel occupies its entire page,<sup>34</sup> expressing the magnitude of Peter’s decision through form, while the importance of the shot in the film is indicated by its longer than average duration (twenty seconds) and its privileged position at the end of the scene, marked by a fade to black. There is no question that the shot is a compositional quotation of the panel, despite some differences (remember that a compositional quotation is closer to a paraphrase than to a quotation proper). In terms of *mise-en-scène*, the essential elements are the same in both: both take place on stormy nights, in a tight and darkly lit New York City alley; in the foreground on the right, we see a metal garbage can with the Spider-Man

<sup>34</sup> A comics page whose space is occupied by a single, large panel is known as a “splash page.” Because of their size, splash pages are often used for establishing shots (at the beginning of a comic or scene) or to lend a sense of grandiosity to the events being depicted. Because comics pages are usually divided into a multi-panel matrix, splash pages tend to automatically designate themselves as more noteworthy than the average panel.



costume draped over it; in the middle-ground just left of centre, Peter is seen from behind as he walks away from the costume, out of the claustrophobic alley and towards the light of the street. In both versions, the costume (and the mask, in particular) are the main focus: in the film version, the eyes of the mask, hanging upside-down over the rim of the garbage can, remain illuminated for a moment after the rest of the *mise-en-scène* has faded to black, drawing our attention there even though there is movement elsewhere in the frame.

The differences between the two versions are the result of the specific ways in which the film chooses to remediate the comic. For instance, the “portrait” dimensions of a comic book page beg fundamentally different spatial organization than the “landscape” dimensions of a widescreen film frame; while the comic book version emphasizes height and verticality, the film version emphasizes width and horizontality. In the comics image, Peter seems boxed in by his surroundings: going clockwise, an overhead fire escape, the costume-stuffed trashcan, a dark shadow and a brick wall are the graphic features that trap him inside the image. Furthermore, the costume itself is given primacy in the composition, occupying about two-thirds of the image’s height, overwhelming Peter’s comparatively diminutive frame. The glove of the costume lies on the ground, seeming to stretch out longingly toward Peter’s feet. The vertical composition allows for a greater sense of scope to the setting: we can see from the ground of the alley, below the base of the garbage can, to the buildings of a New York City street, all in sharp focus. By comparison, the film version stretches the composition out laterally and imbues it with a far greater sense of depth. Whereas in the comic the glove of the Spider-Man suit almost seems to touch Peter’s feet, in the film version he seems to be at least a few metres away from the garbage can; furthermore, he is actively walking away from it, moving further into the background with each step. The filmic alleyway seems much less claustrophobic in the foreground, but becomes increasingly tight as the walls recede toward the vanishing point. Each version suggests, albeit in different ways, that Peter’s problems will not be solved by retiring his superheroic alter ego: while the graphic elements of the comic page trap and diminish Peter’s body, his receding into the claustrophobic (and out of focus) background in the film version suggests the uncertainty of his future and his reduced status without Spider-Man. The shot’s lingering on the eyes of the mask after the rest of the image has faded to black further indicates the costume’s continuing importance to Peter’s ultimate destiny.

Compositional quotations, when read in conjunction with explicit intermediality (i.e., when considered as part of a film that not only resembles or adapts but purports to be a comic book), may be interpreted as the *telos* of the panel; while the panel can only approximate the event through a representative still image, the shot can give us the event itself as it occurs over time. In the previous example, the panel *suggests* Peter's movement away from the Spider-Man suit while the film shows us the actual process of him walking away. This temptation should be avoided. The panel is, within its own medium, whole and aesthetically complete; it functions perfectly within its own paradigm, which is precisely why it requires remediation to fit into a cinematic context. It is the process and results of remediation that should be interrogated, rather than the fidelity with which it replicates its source. The compositional quotation is one of the easier markers of "fidelity" for savvy viewers to spot and savour—indeed, promotional materials such as trailers are often laced with them as a way of luring the property's built-in fandom into theatres—but merely recognizing the reference is not sufficient to understand the influence that each medium has in giving expression to the same content; in order to understand the process of remediation, we must perform close readings between the two versions.

#### The Fourth Level: Formal Intermediality, or Panels Within the Frame



**Fig. 2.7.** "Klonk!" Visual onomatopoeia in *Batman*.

The fourth level of remediation specific to the comic book film concerns what happens when formal elements and devices associated with the comic book are transplanted wholesale into the medium of film. These, most notably, include dividing the film frame into panels, arresting moving images into stasis, and including textual features like captions, speech bubbles, thought

balloons, and onomatopoeia (**fig. 2.7**) within the cinematographic image. None of these devices are common enough in contemporary mainstream cinema to pass viewers by unnoticed: all of them represent overt and self-conscious stylistic choices by the filmmakers involved. Indeed, for many critics of comic book films, it is the very *absence* of these markers that signals a "successful" adaptation: by stripping away the markers of "comic book-ness" and replacing them with a more specifically cinematic style, the content of the comic book, supposedly, is elevated,

or at the very least brought in line with a uniquely cinematic mode of representation.<sup>35</sup> What was cartoonish on the page becomes photographic on the screen, caricatures take on the complexity of humanity, and what seems implausible is made plausible. It is argued that adaptations that choose to retain the medium-specific markers of the comic book, despite the content's migration into another medium, go against the grain of standard adaptation practice (to play to the strengths of the hypertextual medium, rather than attempt to retain those of the hypotextual medium); the effect may be similar to literally translating an idiom from one language to another, rather than translating the meaning of the idiom. Comic book films that aren't adapted from a particular comic, on the other hand, may be seen as "degrading" the cinema by drawing on an aesthetic associated with a medium with less cultural capital or perceived artistic refinement. Viewers may thus immediately reject these films as "bad" or "uncinematic"; however, it is my claim that the category of "the cinematic" is sufficiently elastic<sup>36</sup> to encompass the incorporation of forms native to other media, just as languages evolve through the influence of and interaction with other tongues. Nevertheless, comic book films that take this tact self-consciously foreground their artifice and may undermine any claim to realism they may have gained by virtue of (what's left of) film's photographic ontology. The film frame is a window onto the world, but the film frame divided into a multi-panel matrix shifts the representational emphasis to the *window itself* as a construct and to the world it displays as a carefully composed artefact. In Bolter and Grusin's terms, the image becomes hypermediated.

As in my discussion of the previous level, I will limit my analysis in this chapter to a single representative film: in this case, Ang Lee's *Hulk* provides one of the most comprehensive uses of formal intertextuality.<sup>37</sup> As in many comic book films, *Hulk* begins with a short montage of images featuring comics images (in the Marvel Studios logo animation), cueing the viewer to "read" the film as if it were a comic book via explicit intermediality. The film's unique editing patterns, which might otherwise be confounding or even incomprehensible, make a great deal more sense given this implicit instruction. The on-screen text in the opening credits (and

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<sup>35</sup> Recall Joss Whedon's comments regarding how to make a successful superhero film, quoted in the previous chapter.

<sup>36</sup> This is particularly salient at a historical moment such as thus, as celluloid increasingly gives way to the digital. See chapter six for a more in depth treatment of this issue as it impacts the superhero genre in particular.

<sup>37</sup> I find it particularly compelling that the "villain" of the film, insofar as there is one, is a variation on the Marvel Comics character Absorbing Man, since the film is so concerned with "absorbing" the medium of comics into its aesthetic.

throughout the film) is written in a handwritten-style typeface that should be immediately familiar to comics readers, further connecting the cinematic version to its comic book roots. As with many of the figures included in the six levels of remediation presented here, the inclusion of on-screen text is by no means exclusive to the comic book film; within the comic book film, however, it takes on additional connotative significance (that is, in addition to its denotative value) as a marker of medium hybridity. Thierry Groensteen posits that in comics “the cohabitation of the drawing and the balloon generates a tension, since the three-dimensional space constructed by the cartoonist is contradicted by the presence within it of this piece that is added, a stranger to the representative illusion” (*System* 69). So it is in the comic book film as well, with the amendment that the illusion of a three-dimensional diegetic space is even stronger than in the comic, because it is created not by a cartoonist but rather by a camera (or CGI that seeks to reproduce the effect of a camera). Provided that proper continuity is maintained from shot-to-shot, the sense of an ontologically whole space is also more cogent in the film than the comic book, broadly speaking. As such, the imposition of text onto the cinematic image becomes all the more intrusive, calling attention to the tension between an otherwise convincing “representative illusion” and the evidence that it is, in fact, an illusion that has been manufactured and manipulated; in other words, immediacy yields to hypermediacy.

Such disruptive strategies are not only evident in these moments where text intrudes into the cinematic image. From the opening moments of the film, the viewer is almost immediately put off guard by its unusual editing; it immediately becomes clear that *Hulk* is not edited in a classical, invisible style but rather in a what I will call a “comics montage” style, where panels converge, collide, and co-exist within the frame in a dynamic play of discrete images. Take, for instance, this short series of shots from the first scene after the credits. In the first shot, we see a close-up of Edith Banner on the right of the frame, standing in her kitchen, looking down-left (**fig. 2.8**). We cut to a medium shot of David Banner, standing in the same kitchen, in profile, occupying the right of the frame and facing downward as he pours a drink (**fig. 2.9**). At this point, the spatial relations between the two are not clear, though we can safely assume because of other visual and narrative cues that they are in the same room. Suddenly, the shot transitions, via two separate wipes that replace the left side of the frame with the close-up of Edith and the right side of the frame with a close-up of David, albeit from a different angle than before (**fig. 2.10**). As the wipes complete the transformation of the frame into this composite two-shot, Edith and



**Figs. 2.8-2.13.** Intraframe editing in *Hulk*.

David both turn to face each other; their eyelines, however, do not match, as Edith is seen in a three-quarters profile, facing right, while David is shot in full profile, facing left (**fig. 2.11**).<sup>38</sup> Between (and behind) them, a third panel intrudes into this matrix, this one a wide oval containing a close-up of Edith's face, upside-down and covered in sweat (**fig. 2.12**). As she screams, the oval panel swells in size, quickly overtaking the foregrounded panels and completing the transition to the new shot: a close-up of Edith's face as she gives birth to their son, Bruce (**fig. 2.13**). Throughout this sequence of shots, and indeed throughout the film in

<sup>38</sup> Such disruptions in traditional continuity can be read for their symbolic meaning—the characters literally do not see “eye to eye”—or as symptomatic of the comparative lack of continuity from panel to panel in a comic book. Groensteen writes that “In a comic, narrative *continuity* is assured by the *contiguity* of images” (117) rather than cinematic devices like eyeline matches, match cuts, sound bridges, etc.

general, *Hulk* undermines the ontological unity of the shot. More like a comic book page than a panel, the intraframe editing here forces the viewer to read the film as an organized series of panels that converge within the frame much as they would on a comics page. Groensteen refers to this as the *hyperframe*, wherein multiple panels co-exist in a limited, demarcated space (30). A film like *Hulk* effectively treats the film frame as a hyperframe—a space of fixed proportions which at any given time contains one or more “windows” onto the diegesis. The key difference is that while the comics hyperframe is divided and subdivided *a priori*, the film frame is only fractured *as we experience it*; the panels are themselves mobile, demanding active engagement from spectators who are expected to construct the diegesis as it schisms before their very eyes. Thus, as dynamic as the hyperframe is in comics, the cinematic hyperframe is more dynamic still, presenting us with a fluid space in which one view may, at any moment, give way to several competing or complementary views.

In comics, each panel has its own designated space; there is no competition for room or attention, as each discrete visual block will be read in turn. In the comic book film, however, panels actively compete with each other for the same space, violently forcing their way into the frame only by pushing others aside. Lev Manovich has identified a similar tendency within digital cinema in general, which he calls “spatial montage,” in which several discrete shots or images co-occupy the screen space. This editing strategy, he writes, “represents an alternative to traditional cinematic temporal montage, replacing its traditional sequential mode with a spatial one” (322). I want to stress that what I’m calling comics montage does not, as Manovich claims, *replace* sequentiality with increased spatial complexity. There is still a linear viewing logic in place, but the minimal unit of film “grammar” has shifted from the shot to the “sub-shot,” or panel, within the shot; when the frame contains two or more shots, each sub-shot assumes the status of the panel, effectively transforming the frame into an ersatz comic book page, comprised of several panels that are to be read in dialogue (if not in sequence) rather than in isolation. This is made explicit in *Hulk* in the moment after Talbot’s death, when the virtual camera tracks *out of the diegesis itself*, revealing a multi-panel matrix, organized like a comic book page (**fig. 2.14**). Though some films’ stylistic systems are founded on this kind of rigid matrix (e.g., *Timecode* [dir. Mike Figgis, 2000], *Conversations with Other Women* [dir. Hans Canosa, 2005]), *Hulk*’s is more fluid in its panel organization; therefore, the virtual camera selects and tracks into only one of the panels on display, which becomes the next narrative event. This “meta-shot” is a cinematic





**Fig. 2.14.** The multiframe in *Hulk*.

representation of what Groensteen calls the *multiframe*, which refers to the total comics work and all of the panel relations and hyperframes within it: “In distinction to the hyperframe, the multiframe does not have stable borders, assigned a priori. Its borders are those of the entire work, whether it is an isolated strip or a story of two hundred pages. The multiframe is the sum of the frames that compose a given comic—that is, also, the sum of the hyperframes” (31). This moment in *Hulk* recognizes that, as in a comic (or a database), while each narrative unit exists concurrently, they are only *experienced* through their (linear) organization within the hyperframe. The total sum of their relations (i.e., the total film, the total comic book, or the total database) comprises a multiframe, a small portion of which we can glimpse in this moment.<sup>39</sup>

One final way in which formal intermediality hybridizes film and comics is through the use of the freeze-frame. Like the previous examples, freeze-frames are not exclusive to the comic book film, but they assume an enhanced significance within it. While the famous freeze-frame that ends can be read in several different ways (e.g., as a statement about the character’s uncertain future after the film, as a Brechtian entreaty to the viewer, etc.), it should most definitely *not* be interpreted as an intermedial appeal to the medium of comic books; in *Hulk*,

<sup>39</sup> See chapter five for a discussion of DVD scene selection menus in similar terms.

however, such a moment could certainly be interpreted in this way, because there are other markers of remediation that make such a reading plausible. Indeed, there is such a moment in this film: the aforementioned death of Talbot that segues into the multiframe image discussed above. When the force of an explosion sends Talbot flying towards the camera, his movement is suddenly arrested and his body becomes surrounded by a thin white outline, a border separating



**Fig. 2.15.** Talbot in freeze-frame in *Hulk*.

his static shape from the flames still billowing behind him (**fig. 2.15**). This hyperframe contains two panels, or two discrete layers of action—the explosion (background, moving) and Talbot (foreground, static)—which are separated by a white border (or gutter, in comics parlance). In juxtaposing these two images—one moving, one still—within the

same shot, the film is revealing something about comics' form: a comics panel, though static, does not usually represent a single instant of time. Unlike a photograph, a panel represents a duration of time, possibly containing both action *and* reaction, cause *and* effect (**fig. 2.16**). In arguing that comics and film images are ontologically irreconcilable, Lefèvre asserts that a “viewer of a still image will always be reminded of the fragmented and frozen time,” whereas a moving image gives a “greater impression of realism” (“Incompatible Visual Ontologies” 6). On the contrary, the comics reader is presented with a composite image that collates events with a temporal duration. The Talbot shot in *Hulk* demonstrates that even in stasis, there is movement and duration; while Talbot's image is arrested, the background lives on, indicating that time in the comic book has not stopped, even though the image may be still. This is not, then, an “empty” stylistic gesture whose significance ends with visual imitation or similarity; rather, it is a remediation of a mode of representation native to the comic book that demonstrates the unique qualities of both media.

### **The Fifth Level: Expressive Intermediality, or Blurred Boundaries**

The fifth level of remediation in the comic book film focuses on the difference (or lack thereof) between cartoon/drawn images and live-action cinematography. Expressive intermediality addresses Lefèvre's third “adaptation problem” plaguing the comic book film, which is “the



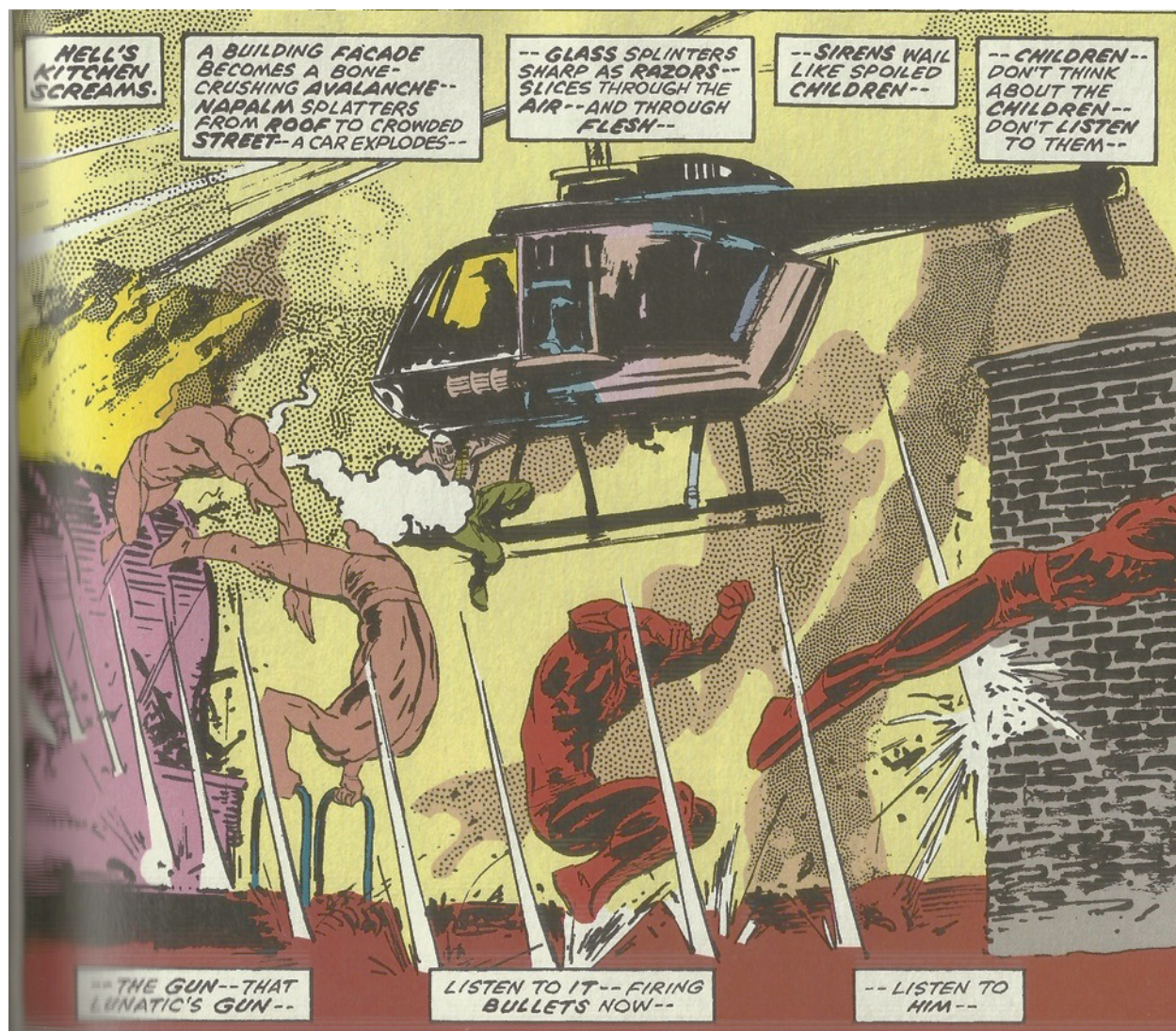
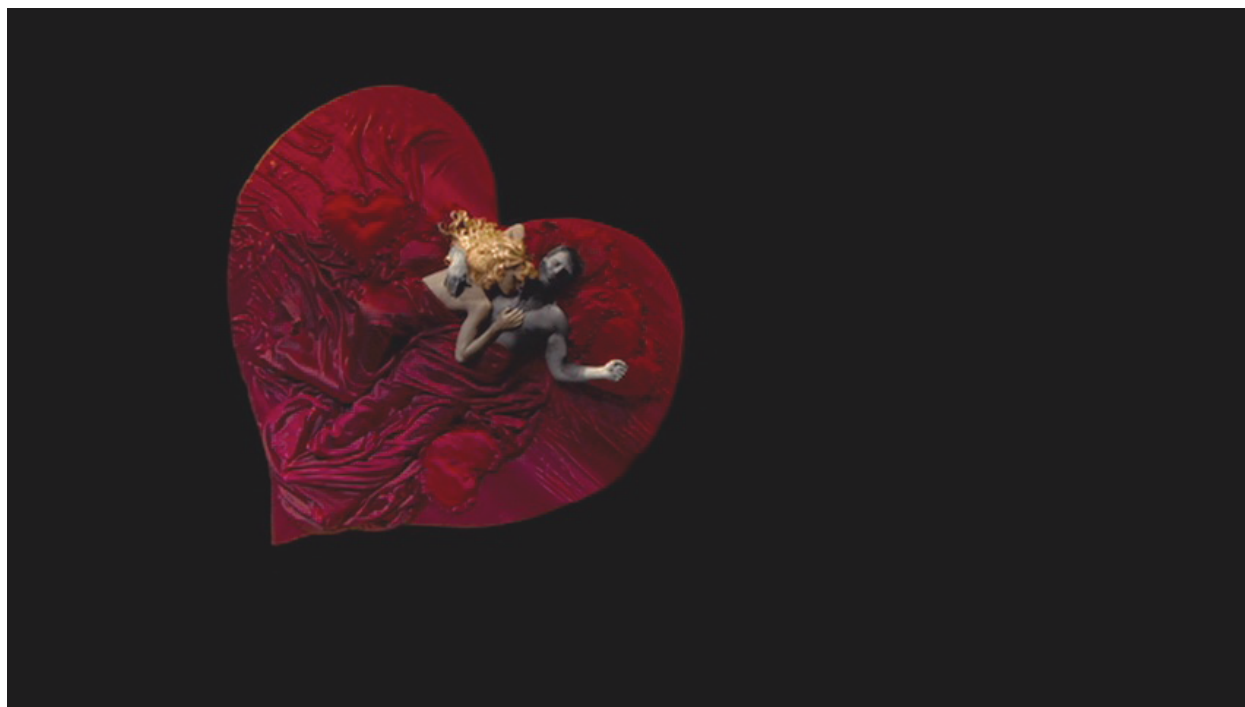


Fig. 2.16. Cause and effect represented simultaneously in *Daredevil* #233 (August 1986).

dilemma of translating drawings to photography” (4). There are three main factors to consider here, all of which play a part in bridging the gap between the diametrically opposed categories of “pure drawing” (associated with absolute artifice) and “pure photography” (associated with absolute realism) that Lefèvre associates with each respective medium: namely, *what* is being photographed (mise-en-scène), *how* it is being photographed (cinematographic technique), and how the photograph is *manipulated* after the instant of capture (digital/visual effects). According to Lefèvre, “A photographic image has, by its optic nature alone, a quite different visual ontology [than a drawn image]. Viewers do not react in the same way to a drawing as to a photographic image. Although photos can also be manipulated by using special software such as Photoshop, generally the viewer still accords more realism to a photo than to a stylized drawing”

(9). I disagree; in the comic book film, a highly artificial *mise-en-scène*, expressive cinematography, and visual effects such as CGI can combine to produce photographic images with an aesthetic of artifice whose basis in “reality” or “realism” is hardly central to the way we read or experience the image. The “ontology of the photographic image” as expounded by Bazin hardly applies to the contemporary comic book film; rather, we’re dealing with images that are far suppler in their representational capabilities, because they’re much less slavish in their reproduction of whatever is placed in front of the camera (when, indeed, there is a camera!). Nevertheless, these images tend to be incorporated into and subsumed by the live-action photographic flow, accruing a certain “residual realism” from their contiguity to photographic images; that is, even when the image in question is ontologically identical to a (computer-) animated cartoon, when images look photographic we tend to respond to them similarly to photographic images proper. Thus if a comic book film like *Sin City* has a greater “reality effect” than the comics upon which it is based, it is more a result of this residual realism and the addition of movement and synchronized sound than of its total commitment to a photographic ontology or realist (read: invisible or unstylized) aesthetic.

As in previous sections, I will limit my analysis of the fifth level of remediation in the comic book film to a single representative film, which in this case is the aforementioned *Sin City*. Before exploring the qualities of the image itself, however, a word on the difference between the cinematic frame and the comics panel is required: according to Stanley Cavell, the film frame and the painting frame (or, by extension, the comic book panel) surround fundamentally different kinds of images. While the film frame “functions less to frame than to mask... a segment of the world as a whole” (200), the comics panel presents the entirety of the image: there are no other possible angles, there is no visual data just outside the frame, and there is no equivalent to a pro-filmic reality of which the selected image is a segment. If the photograph presents a view—one of countless possible views—of a world that exists beyond itself, the comic book presents a view on a world that does *not* exist beyond itself; the comic book image is not representative of a world, but rather *is that world in its entirety*. Cavell’s argument, however, does not take into account the fact that the film, while constituted by photographic images that bear traces of the real world, represents a fictional world distinct from our reality. What lies beyond the film frame, while part of *our* reality, is not part of the *filmic* world; indeed, it often includes lights, cameras, crew members, extras, and other elements that point to the rupture between the fictional diegesis



**Fig. 2.17.** The rest of the world disappears in *Sin City*.

and our world. Most films, nevertheless, give us the impression of a larger world beyond the frame, even if that world doesn't exist; the borders of the image function as though they were masking a greater reality even if the fictional world stops at the edges of the screen. The comic book film, however, sometimes presents fictional worlds whose very shape are dictated by the demands of the specific image/shot rather than those of the film frame itself. Few comic book films attempt this, let alone achieve it, but there are moments in *Sin City* that do approximate this sensation. For instance, in an overhead shot of Marv and Goldie in a heart-shaped bed, the room surrounding them completely disappears, leaving only the image of the two post-coital lovers against a stark black background (**fig. 2.17**). In previous shots, we had seen the walls of the bedroom, but here the image is isolated, abstracted from its surroundings. In a film, it is unusual when such liberties are taken with the consistency of diegetic space from shot to shot, but in comics, isolating important graphic elements in the panel to the exclusion of non-essential details is *de rigueur*. "Bazin's suggestion that the screen works as much by what it excludes as by what it includes" does not apply to this image (*ibid.*); Marv's world begins and ends with the edges of the bed, so there is no need to show anything beyond them even though the shot, the shape of the frame, the lack of a mask or iris, and the distance of the camera from the subject would seem to demand that they be visible—that is, if photographic "realism" is the goal. (The room, after all,

doesn't literally cease to exist in the diegesis, though the representation would suggest that if taken at face value.) The black portion of the frame has, at best, an ambiguous relationship to photography. At the moment of capture, the black would have registered (in the digital camera, rather than on celluloid) as green; it was digitally replaced with black in post-production. While similar effects could have been achieved with older techniques and technologies (e.g., an optical printer, or simply a heart-shaped matte) that combine separate photographic elements, it is significant that certain image elements here are digital, rather than photographic, in origin, because it represents an erasure of ontological difference between the film and the comics. Indeed, the photographic process had no bearing whatsoever on the visual result of more than half of the film frame in this composition, effectively functioning as a digital iris. The effect of all this is that the film frame functions here more like the frame of the painting, or indeed of a comics panel, than the edges of a photograph. It would be overstating the case to propose that all comic book films function in this way at all times—indeed, it is rather rare, even in stylistically ambitious cases like *Sin City*—but it nevertheless represents a significant challenge to the way we differentiate film from comics, and photography from drawing more generally. Let's now move inside the frame to explore some of the qualities specific to the cinematic image itself.

As suggested earlier, the cinematic image assumes a hybridized cine-comic quality based on three factors: mise-en-scène (what is being shot and its arrangement before the camera), cinematographic technique (how the camera and other choices of cinematic style give particular shape to that content), and visual/digital effects (how the shot is manipulated after the moment of capture). A close reading of the opening scene of *Sin City* will demonstrate the potential of these combined variables to transcend a photographic ontology, in favour of the infinite possibilities of the drawn image. The scene begins with a long shot of a woman, at the centre of the frame, walking towards the edge of a balcony overlooking the Basin City skyline (**fig. 2.18**). She wears a backless red dress, which is the only burst of colour in an otherwise stark black-and-white palette. In the reverse shot, a man approaches her from behind (**fig. 2.19**). They converse in a shot-reverse-shot pattern that becomes increasingly tight on their faces. Their hard-boiled dialogue climaxes with a kiss, at which point the film cuts to a straight-on long shot of the two lovers embracing in profile (**fig. 2.20**). In this shot, the image design intensifies from the high-





**Figs. 2.18-2.20.** The cine-comic aesthetic of *Sin City*.

contrast black-and-white to pure blacks and whites, with no middle ground. The characters appear as pure white silhouettes against the black of the night sky, which is punctuated only by white skyscraper office lights and rainfall. The scene is clearly stylized, but what in particular imbues it with a *cine-comic* aesthetic?

Though our experience of *mise-en-scène* involves everything in the frame, including digital artefacts not present during shooting, I want to put aside anything added in post-production in order to more forcefully demonstrate how what was put in front of the camera—pro-filmic reality itself, the very stuff of photography—has been influenced by the aesthetics of

comic books.<sup>40</sup> In the opening shot, nearly the entire image—indeed, everything but the actors—is computer-generated, making it difficult, seemingly, to build a case for a comic book-influenced *mise-en-scène*. Elsewhere in the film, the actors are heavily made up to resemble the broadly drawn caricatures of Frank Miller’s art—Mickey Rourke as Marv,<sup>41</sup> Benicio del Toro as Jackie Boy, and Nick Stahl as the Yellow Bastard are all, to some degree, unrecognizable as themselves, so closely do they embody their characters from the comics. The two actors in this scene, however, are not exaggerated in this way; they look perfectly human. Even in such a case, however, we may note the striking way that the actors are lit in the two-shot: the edge lighting from behind the actors produces the “halo” effect often associated with soft-focus close-ups of the classical Hollywood era, but here it serves to outline the figures, to give them clear lines and edges like the drawings of a comic book. The outline effect is enhanced by the sense of estrangement between the live-action figures and their CGI surroundings; the composite is perhaps deliberately imperfect, resulting in a tangible sense that the live actors and the digital sets are distinct from each other. (The splash of colour on the woman accentuates the distinction between photographic and CG elements.) As for how the scene is shot, the camera is mostly immobile, lending the frame a sense of stability and stasis, like the comic book panel. In the shots in which the camera does move—there are two such shots in the part of the scene in question—the movement is unobtrusive. In the first instance, the camera very slowly tracks towards the actors, reframing them from a medium-shot to a medium close-up; in the second, the camera merely reframes to follow the male figure’s movement, keeping him in the frame.

Obviously, it is the third category in which the greatest challenge to the photographic ontology and the greatest strides toward achieving a cine-comic aesthetic are made. The post-production work on *Sin City* was clearly intensive, involving the addition of sets, props, and the film’s distinctive colour palette to each frame, resulting in a film that is arguably as much a work of digital animation as it is live-action photography. Any element that is purely digital (i.e., that has no basis in photographic reality whatsoever) is ontologically equivalent—that is, has equal status vis-à-vis its existence or state of being in the world—to a drawn comic book image: the

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<sup>40</sup> Though it discusses a different film, Michael Cohen’s article on the “aesthetic of artifice” in the CGI-free *Dick Tracy* is a useful exploration of a cine-comic *mise-en-scène*. See the previous chapter for a discussion of this essay.

<sup>41</sup> In the opening credits of the film, explicit intermediality is mobilized in order to associate the actors not with their own faces but with characters of the comic. As in previous examples, the film uses comics art to announce itself not as an adaptation of the comics but rather as *the comics themselves* in cinematic form.

only significant differences involve the addition of movement and sound. The so-called “photorealism” of the digital artefact is of no significance with regard to this claim; the sets in the *Sin City* film may appear more realistic than the backgrounds inked by Miller, but neither has a greater claim to being directly and unilaterally determined by “the real world” than the other. And while the computer-generated elements of the image are, indeed, fairly convincing, they are nevertheless in the same domain of infinite possibility as those of the comics. Neither is directly beholden to reality; both are blank slates that are filled in manually—line by line or pixel by pixel—rather than automatically in a photographic flash. The representative potential of these images is limited only by the skill (and time, and money) of those assembling them.

The film’s colour scheme may be its most distinctive element, and also the most obvious element of its cine-comic aesthetic.<sup>42</sup> The black-ink-on-white-paper images of the comic books are almost abstract in their simplicity; Miller’s inks are most often employed to create bold and blocky figures, frequently depicted as silhouettes against a contrasting, blank background. The film remediates this through its high-contrast black-and-white photography with isolated bursts of colour: red blood, golden hair, green eyes, or jaundiced yellow skin become particularly notable when contrasted against the harsh blacks and whites that surround them. Most striking are the moments when all of the greys disappear and the figures become silhouettes, as we saw in fig. 2.20. In such shots, the aesthetic effect of the two versions is nearly identical, with only movement and sound to distinguish one from the other. The level of detail that distinguishes Miller’s drawings from most photographic/cinematic images collapse in these shots.<sup>43</sup> Despite the presence of movement, the visual difference between drawn caricatures and actual human beings is reduced to the point of negligibility in these shots. The effect is similar to that of rotoscoping, in which drawn figures are animated based on the recorded movements of live actors. Though comic book films do not factor into her study, such moments are what come to mind when Kamilla Elliott proposes a kind of film that presents us with “a composite of textual and filmic signs merging in audience consciousness [...] and often lead[ing] to confusion as to which is novel and which is film” (157). Like earlier examples that intentionally presented themselves not as filmic versions of comic books but rather *as the comics themselves*, comic

<sup>42</sup> Colour films can also draw on the palettes of comic books. *Dick Tracy*, *Batman Forever* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1995) and, perhaps less obviously, *Spider-Man* are all abnormally bold in their colour choices.

<sup>43</sup> In fact, they weren’t filmed; these shots are entirely animated, making them ontologically equivalent to the comics.

book films that use techniques such as those described here in the name of remediation are challenging long-held distinctions between comics and film. A film like *Sin City* is not simply matching or imitating the comic book's aesthetic in its graphic design using cinematic means; it is presenting us with the *same* visual effect as the comic book (albeit with the addition of movement and sound), achieved using a hybrid of means both photographic and digital.

### **The Sixth Level: Figural Intermediality, or Reading the Film**

Another fundamental difference between film and comic books is challenged in the final level of intermediality, which is that watching a film is a different process and a different kind of experience than reading a comic book. The medium of comics necessitates reading in a more traditional sense than films, as well as the putting together of textual information with visual data, and finally for the reader to actively follow the narrative from panel to panel. For the purposes of figural intermediality, the most significant difference between comics and film is not one of visual ontology (addressed above with reference to expressive intermediality) or narrative style, but rather the difference between the readerly—internalized, personalized, and potentially non-linear—experience of comics and the linear temporal momentum of film watching. A comic, consisting of a series of still images that are only made coherent by the extrapolation and intervention of an active reading process, allows the reader a greater sense of freedom to linger on certain images as she sees fit; the stasis of the images also encourages the reader to contemplate each image individually for its individual aesthetic qualities in addition to its function within the narrative, while a film's temporality comes to the viewer predetermined and standardized for all viewers, regardless of their individual viewing styles or preferences.<sup>44</sup> The contemporary comic book film, often, will use the technique of speed-ramping in order to slow certain images down almost to the point of stasis, resulting in “panel moments” that allow for greater aesthetic contemplation of those images, as in the comic book. In this way, figural intermediality deploys film style as a means to visualize onscreen a key part of the internal reading process of the comic book reader, negotiating between the privileged instants of comic book panels and the narrative information that is representationally lost in the gaps between them.

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<sup>44</sup> Within its stricter temporal framework and notwithstanding the influence of perceptual cues, however, the film viewer is free to roam the image as she sees fit.



In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud explains that the gutter—the space in between each panel in a comic book—is a site of creative production on behalf of the reader. Because comics provide an incomplete representation, it falls to the reader to fill in the gaps between each image in order to create functional linkages from one panel to the next. McCloud calls this process “closure” (63). In *The Aesthetics of Comics*, David Carrier describes the same process thusly: “We construct a jumpy narrative, like a movie shown with the projector not quite in sync. Just as, when seeing a representation, we form and test some hypothesis about what is depicted, so, with comics, we construct and check a narrative that makes sense of the scenes” (51). This process of “construction” occurs internally, and usually unconsciously; if the reader had to consciously formulate and test an individual hypothesis for each panel transition, comics reading would be incredibly time-consuming and perhaps even unpleasant. Groensteen has argued, contrary to McCloud, that this process is—like the editing of classical Hollywood films—invisible, resulting in a sense of immediacy rather than estrangement: “Every comics reader knows that, from the instant where he is projected into the fiction (the diegetic universe), he forgets, up to a certain point, the fragmented character and discontinuity of the enunciation” (10). The comics-literate reader thus becomes an *unconscious* collaborator in the construction of the narrative, with closure occurring automatically. The story is, by the nature of the medium, “full of holes, but it projects me into a world that is portrayed as consistent, and it is the continuity attributed to the fictional world that allows me to effortlessly fill in the gaps of the narration” (11).

It is perhaps because of the automaticity or invisibility of this process that the panel moment has been present in so many comic book films and yet excluded, for the most part, from the literature concerning the genre’s strategies of remediation. Costas Constandinides is the only other scholar to relate the figurative use of slow-motion in films like *300* and *Wanted* to “comic art’s fractured imaginary” (87). He writes that “the action and choreography of the sequence... offers a staccato or fractured rhythm by inserting slow motion and then back to normal temporal rhythm within the same shot, effacing it in a way both the traditional montage sequence and comic book’s unconnected moments” (ibid.). I believe, however, that there is still much to be



**Fig. 2.21.** A panel moment in *Watchmen*.

theorized with regards to the panel moment. For instance, to understand this trope we must first differentiate between its denotative and connotative functions. Despite changes in representational abilities and strategies, the connotation of images in both comics and film is the same: that the events depicted are occurring in real-time, despite their fragmentary representation by whichever medium. What the panel moment does is allow film to denote in a way more similar to comics: though a series of (nearly) static images that represent, but do not embody, real-time. In the film, however, the images are not isolated in the same way that they are in comics; rather than being separated from each other by an empty space, which the reader “fills” automatically in transitioning from one panel to the next, the film gives us these moments on screen, providing a more complete representation that includes both the static images (the panel moments, presented in slow-motion) *and* what the comic book reader otherwise contributes unconsciously (presented at regular or enhanced speed). The comic book film, then, becomes a figural representation of the individual reading process of a comic. To demonstrate this with a concrete example, I will turn to a scene from *Watchmen*.

The film begins with a scene suggested by a few panels seen in flashback in the first chapter (and again towards the end) of the graphic novel, in which the Comedian is attacked and ultimately thrown out of his high-rise apartment window; his murder becomes the catalyst for the

rest of the narrative. The scene includes several panel moments, giving it a staccato, start-stop rhythm. The first true panel moment of the film occurs during this fight, when the Comedian's attacker punches him in the face (**fig. 2.21**). As the gloved fist makes contact, the shot ramps up into extreme slow-motion, allowing this critical moment to register on the viewer with increased impact, before ramping back to real-time. The technique emphasizes both the force of the blow and the aesthetic effect of the shot. Had it played out in real-time, the shot—which is only about a second in duration in slow-motion—would have been almost illegible, neutralizing its impact on the viewer. In a comic book, each panel is available indefinitely for the reader's contemplation, magnifying its importance from the banal to the sublime. In a film, however, each frame has exactly one twenty-fourth of a second to make its impression on the viewer; each shot has a predetermined number of frames—and a predetermined duration—to make an impression on the viewer. The panel moment does not challenge this so much as it remediates the comic book reading process within a cinematic editing paradigm. The slow-motion portion of the shot represents the panel, while the real-time (or, sometimes, fast-motion) portions on either side of the slow-motion represent closure (i.e., the connective tissue intuited by the reader whenever she transitions from one panel to another). Another example occurs near the end of the scene, as the as-yet-mysterious attacker throws the Comedian through the glass window, from which he falls to his death. The shot begins in slow-motion as the Comedian first makes contact with the window; as the glass shatters, the speed decreases almost to the point of stasis (**fig. 2.22**).<sup>45</sup> The frame-per-second rate decreases (i.e., the speed of the shot increases) as the Comedian begins his descent, until the smiley face pin that he had been wearing—which evidentially came off as he went through the window—falls into the frame. When the pin, which is one of the most iconic images associated with the graphic novel, is facing the camera, the speed once again ramps up nearly to the point of stasis, giving us the second panel moment of the shot (**fig. 2.23**). The film ramps down into real-time mere instants before cutting away to the Comedian's dead body on the sidewalk.

Snyder's contribution to the cine-comic aesthetic—first noted in *300*<sup>46</sup>—has been picked up by other filmmakers and used in other comic book films, including *The Incredible Hulk* (dir.

<sup>45</sup> This shot is also a compositional quotation of a panel from the comics, making this a particularly dense palimpsest of remediation.

<sup>46</sup> See Jeffries, "Comics at 300 Frames per Second."



**Figs. 2.22-2.23.** Panel moments in *Watchmen*.

Louis Letterier, 2008), *Wanted*, and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (dir. Marc Webb, 2014). In all of these films, the technique could be easily mistaken for bullet-time, the aesthetic trope introduced in *The Matrix* (dirs. Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999), or possibly even for slow-motion as an aesthetic choice devoid of any figural intent. There are subtle differences between these three techniques, though all three rely on increased shooting speeds (frames per second) to produce their effects. Firstly, bullet-time is actually produced by digitally combining still photographs taken from a variety of cameras into a single image capturing a 360° space, allowing filmmakers to make virtual camera movements (which necessarily have a duration and occur over time) within a single, seemingly frozen instant of diegetic time. Methods aside, however, bullet-time is a fundamentally *spatial* effect while panel moments are *temporal*; that is, bullet-time freezes diegetic time to allow the camera some temporal freedom in which to explore a space, while panel moments use slow-motion in order to emphasize (or even fetishize) a movement or pose without any implied change to the flow of time within the narrative. Put another way, bullet-time is a *literal* effect while panel moments are *figurative*. Not surprisingly, in most cases bullet-time represents a literal slowing of the diegetic time by characters with enhanced sensory capabilities (e.g., the representation of “spider-sense” in the original *Spider-Man* trilogy) or the supernatural ability to bend time to their whim (e.g., *The Matrix*). Panel moments, on the other hand, do not signify anything about the diegesis, but rather about the intermedial palimpsestuousness of the film; panel moments indicate a formal debt to comic books and represent a stylistic means of paying that debt. Panel moments, furthermore, are often

bookended by footage projected at regular speed in order to demonstrate the entire internal process of comics reading.<sup>47</sup>

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These six levels of remediation exhaust the means that the comic book film has at its disposal to forge intertextual and intermedial links with comics: not only specific texts (via diegetic and compositional intertextuality) but also the medium as a whole (via explicit, formal, expressive, and figural intermediality). Different comic book films employ different combinations of these strategies; some remediate on multiple levels simultaneously, while others never venture beyond the most superficial engagement with comics. As we'll see over the following four chapters, this medium offers no shortage of opportunities for creative filmmakers to play with film form, sometimes even pushing it into unexplored aesthetic territory.

Having now reviewed the relevant literature and solidified my methodological and theoretical approach over these past two chapters, it is now time to begin exploring the most salient issues presented by the comic book film. We will begin by more fully interrogating the difference between the film frame and the comics panel and their hybridization in the comic book film.

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<sup>47</sup> The much-heralded opening credits sequence of *Watchmen* provides an interesting counter-example to this claim that panel moments rely on the back-and-forth between slow-motion and real-time action. This sequence features a series of near-*tableaux* projected in extreme slow-motion, often depicting a single, fast movement drawn out well beyond its natural duration (e.g., a punch, a photographic flash, a gunshot). Each tableau is presented in a single shot, and is projected at a single, consistent speed. Because these are short scenes that play out within a single shot, however, they may still qualify as isolated panel moments; the real-time segment of the panel moment represents the transition to the next panel, which, in the case of these one-scene shots, does not exist. See chapter five for an extended discussion of this sequence.

## CHAPTER THREE

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### These Panels Have Been Formatted to Fit Your Screen: Remediating the Comics Page through the Cinematic Frame

#### **“This Film has been Formatted to Fit your Screen”**

So reads the disclaimer often preceding pre-digital televised or video-based transmissions of feature films. As a child, watching movies on either television broadcasts or VHS, I often wondered how the manufacturers knew how big *my* TV was. Surely televisions come in all manner of sizes, and there couldn't be a separate broadcast or video cassette for the 13" television in my parents' bedroom and the 25" "big screen" in the basement. My literal-minded confusion persisted until I saw a film which had *not* been formatted to fit my screen, a film presented on 4x3 televisions in its original widescreen aspect ratio, complete with the so-called "black bars" that were pervasive before the advent of widescreen sets and HDTVs,<sup>48</sup> which didn't gain widespread adoption until the first decade of the 2000s.<sup>49</sup> I suddenly understood that the "formatting" of the film image was not in terms of the screen's size, but rather of its shape or ratio: portions of the rectangular images were being excised to fit the different dimensions of home viewing screens. As film critic Gene Siskel once put it, "It's as if the ends of a painting were chopped off because they didn't fit on your wall" (Klawitter).

This analogy between painting and cinema, however, requires some nuancing, for which we'll call upon Jacques Aumont's study *The Image*, in which he devotes considerable energy toward understanding the form and function of framing. The kind of images that the cinema offers need to be isolated both perceptually and materially from the rest of the world, which is the function of the frame. Per Aumont, the frame is "the *edge* of this object, its material, tangible boundary. Very often, this edge is strengthened by the addition of another object to the object-image, which we will call an *object-frame*. For paintings exhibited in museums, an object-frame,

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<sup>48</sup> For trivia's sake, the film was a VHS copy of *Mrs. Doubtfire* (dir. Chris Columbus, 1993). On that particular edition, the first few minutes of the film were presented in widescreen (in order to preserve the text of the opening credits); with the cut following the presentation of the final credit, the aspect ratio changed from letterbox to a full-screen presentation, which remained in place for the rest of the film.

<sup>49</sup> See chapter two of Philip J. Cianici, *HDTV and the Transition to Digital Broadcasting: Understanding New Television Technologies* for a history of HDTV's emergence.

whether sculpted, ornately decorated, gilded, and so on, is almost mandatory” (106). He continues: “The frame is also, and more fundamentally, that which demarcates the closure of the image, its finiteness. It is the edge of an image in another, intangible sense: it is its perceptible limit. In that sense, it is a *limit-frame*. The limit-frame is where the image ends, defining its field by separating it from what it is not” (ibid.). Both functions are served by the edges of the screen, which is both the object that encases the image for presentation and that demarcates its limits. The dimensions of the cinematic frame are fixed, static, consistent from a film’s first frame to its last. After all, the surface that reflects these images is of fixed dimensions, be it the 4x3 (also known as 1.33:1, the “Academy ratio”) dimensions of television or classical Hollywood cinema screens, or the wider aspect ratios of contemporary cinema (1.85:1 or 2.35:1 are the commonest).<sup>50</sup> Of course, there are any number of ways that filmmakers may seemingly transcend the boundaries of the fixed frame without changing the size or dimensions of the screen itself: the iris shot, which was more common in the silent era than it is today, is but one example in which the image and the frame differ in their respective size and/or shape. Iris shots direct or narrow our focus within the frame by changing its perceptual limits; what Aumont calls the object-frame remains a constant. Or as Jean Mitry puts it, “the frame is no more part of the image than it is of the represented reality. Rather it is the other way around: the image is the product of the frame—at least as far as its compositional structure is concerned” (75).

In short, I was mistaking the cinematic frame, a box of fixed proportions functioning as a window onto a cinematic world, for something more dynamic, for something that changes not only its size but also its shape based on the avenue of its exhibition and the nature of the content being displayed; I was mistaking it for something more akin to a comic book panel, a vehicle of representation with which my young self was equally familiar. The mistake is not surprising, given the role each plays in its respective medium: both visually demarcate the boundaries between the diegetic and non-diegetic worlds. Of course, the obvious difference that cannot be transcended is that every image in a film appears in succession, one after the other at a mechanically predetermined rate, in the same frame, while every image in comics exists

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<sup>50</sup> Projectionists may be tasked with cropping the film image (using curtains or masks), and optical manipulations like scope result in differences between the shape of the projected image and the images captured on the filmstrip itself. My point is not that manipulations such as these don’t occur, but merely that the film frame—as a result of its projection on a physical screen of fixed dimensions—does not change and is indeed no more capable of changing than a picture frame in a museum.

simultaneously, arrayed spatially across the pages of a book, in its own discrete panel. Even in films that literally show us entire pages of comic books on the screen, as in the prologue of *Superman* or the opening credits of *American Splendor*, the duration of the page's appearance on the screen is not beholden to the viewer/reader, but is rather subject to the pacing choices of the film's editor; though comics direct the reader's experience through the text using various visual cues, the film viewer's attention is more forcefully (though still not completely) controlled due to the visual and sonic cues of cinema, such as camera movement.<sup>51</sup> Do not mistake this fact for a criticism or as a sign of filmmakers' failure: remediation, after all, is not reproduction, and attempts to reproduce or replicate the effects of one medium in another should not be judged based on the one medium's capacity (or failure, more often) to perfectly evoke another (Bolter and Grusin 45). To reiterate the thesis from the first chapter, it is for this reason that the criterion of "fidelity" and the entire paradigm of adaptation ought to be discarded, or at the very least set aside for the purposes of the present investigation. Indeed, my interest here lies not in the similarity or difference between two related texts, but rather in the creative combination and transformation that occurs through various processes of formal and stylistic transference: the *poetics* particular to the comic book film.

Given the impossibility of a perfect convergence between cinematic frame and comic book panel, then, what does it mean for a film to remediate this aspect of comics' stylistic system? What might it look like? Comics and film are different media, and thus the formal conventions that collectively constitute a "transparent" film style—ever-changing as they are—are surely distinct from those that would produce the equivalent effect in a comic book. In a film, for instance, when one character speaks we are most likely to hear their speech on an audio track, in perfect synchronization with the movement of their lips; in a comic, by contrast, the same speech would be made visible on the page, probably contained within a non-diegetic white speech balloon (non-diegetic in the sense that the balloon itself doesn't exist in the diegesis, but is rather a visual manifestation of a sonic feature that does exist diegetically). These are fairly

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<sup>51</sup> Roy T. Cook addresses this issue at length in his chapter "Why Comics Are Not Films," wherein he lays bare the formal differences between the two media. According to Cook, however, a film adaptation of a comic could maintain perfect fidelity to its source if "we project each entire page on to the screen, one at a time." "The fact that scenes in a film are projected—that is, their order and duration are controlled solely by the filmmakers (and perhaps the projectionist)—while panels in a comic can be perused in whatever order we decide," however, introduces a necessary and profound difference between the printed and projected versions (173), which undermines his claim.



transparent stylistic choices because they are the accepted conventions of the media in question. If we swap them, however, we would also certainly lose the transparency that they produce in their native medium. Indeed, a comic book that features audible dialogue, synchronized to moving images, would likely call into question its own status as a comic book: as a print medium, conventionally, comics are not typically capable of featuring movement or audio. The presence of a visible speech balloon in a film doesn't have quite as radical an effect, but it does consciously call attention to itself both as an aesthetic choice that undermines the "reality effect" of cinema and as a remediation of comics. As Robert Stam notes, "By calling attention to artistic mediation, reflexive texts subvert the assumption that art can be a transparent medium of communication, a window on the world, a mirror promenading down a highway" (2005: 12). And yet films that incorporate aesthetic effects and storytelling devices associated with a lower-culture medium like comics tend to be taken less seriously as works of art and are often associated with camp (read: "bad" taste) or children's fare, such as the visual onomatopoeia of *Batman* (see fig 2.7) or the use of speech balloons for Spider-Man's dialogue (but not for the other characters) on *The Electric Company* (Children's Television Workshop, 1971-77) (fig 3.1), rather than as works that critically interrogate and push against the medium's perceived limits of representation.



**Fig. 3.1.** A live-action Spider-Man speaks via speech balloon in *The Electric Company*.

Likewise, any self-conscious play with the framing of the image—like an iris shot, or a split-screen composition—has the potential to make the viewer aware of the frame as a construct, as a mediator that stands between the viewer and the diegetic world. However, the cinematic frame is never merely a window onto a reality that exists external to it; rather, it precisely determines and conditions the viewer's position vis-à-vis that world. As Mitry puts it:

*the film image is phenomenologically associated with its frame. It is all too obvious that the reality it seems to record is independent of the frame; not so the representation of that reality, however. Since the represented objects are produced*

by virtue of that representation, as image data, they become by that fact subordinate to the image-making data, i.e., the dimensions of the frame. (74)

Nevertheless, some compositions will make this fact apparent to the audience while others will obscure it, presenting them with the illusion that they are “inside the represented space” (77). We are more interested in the former, which can be considered as instances of hypermediation insofar as they draw attention to the very processes of mediation that conventional Hollywood style has largely devoted itself to obscuring. Mitry argues that the conventional deployment of the film frame “presents reality objectively and makes each of us, the audience, attentive observers ‘outside’ the drama. It establishes a sort of alienation between the characters and us, an alienation accentuated by the impossibility of contact or communication” (80). What’s distinctive about comics is that this sense of alienation between audience and diegesis is intensified, largely because the sense of continuity that enables the frame’s key representational illusion (its aforementioned status as a “window on a world”) is impossible. Comics doesn’t

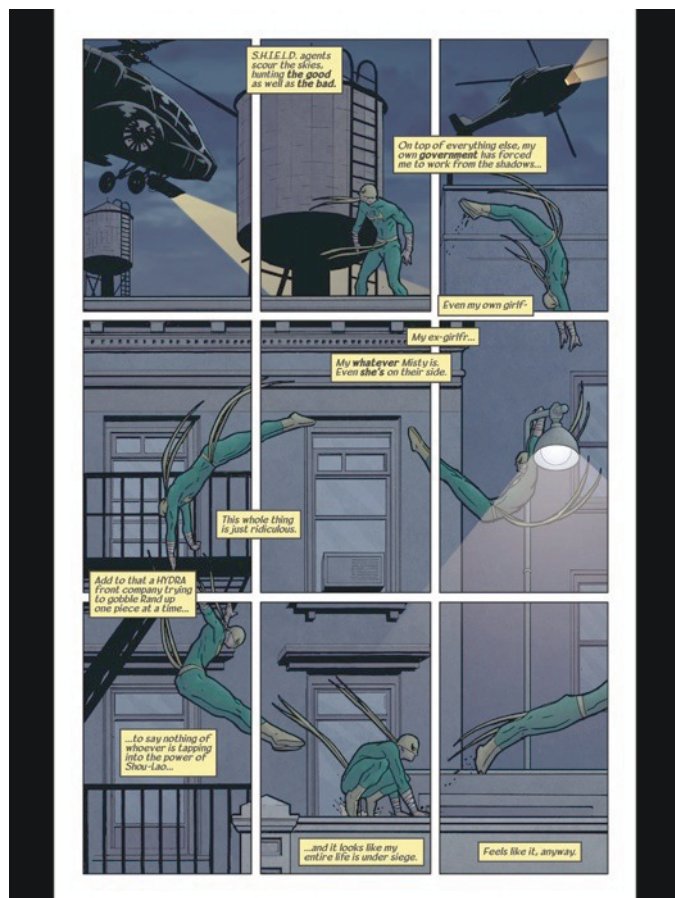


Fig. 3.2. Iron Fist traverses the hyperframe in *The Immortal Iron Fist* #3.

merely reveal this to the reader: it *insists* upon it. In the page from *The Immortal Iron Fist* #3 (February 2007) reproduced in fig. 3.2, for example, we are presented with nine sequential panels—read, unusually, in a reverse “S” pattern, as indicated by Iron Fist’s trajectory across the page and the placement of captions—in which the character appears a total of seven times. The hyperframe (i.e., the page as a unit of composition) presents a single space, fractured into panels that represent sequential moments as he navigates his way through it. The reader is thus invited to simultaneously view the hyperframe both as a unified space and as nine discrete images. The continuity of space represented herein—unusual, but by



Fig. 3.3 A highly aestheticized use of panels in *Batwoman* #5 (March 2012).

no means rare in comics—is belied, however, by the lack of continuity in character. The conventions of comics dictate that sequential panels follow each other in time (if not in space), which results in the reappearance of Iron Fist in multiple panels, thus undermining the unity of the composition (on the level of the hyperframe). Many instants, and many Iron Fists, exist simultaneously: the comic book thus represents time in a way quite distinct from how we experience it in our day-to-day lives, which is itself the basis for this alienation.

Contemporary mainstream films overwhelmingly tend to limit themselves to moving images that fill the entire frame at all times; shots don’t co-exist within the frame (except in hidden form, like composites and mattes), but rather follow each other sequentially. We shall call this the “single-image paradigm.” Any deviation from this standard (with some notable exceptions that have become conventionalized, such as the dissolve) tends to disrupt the transparency of the cinematic representation. By contrast, the comics page has more flexibility: it may be a “splash page” containing only a single image, or it may be densely filled with panels;



the size and arrangement of these panels may be consistent on every page (fig. 3.2) or they may be considerably more complex, becoming a very active and *noticeable* part of the image construction (**fig. 3.3**). Like the film frame, the size of the pages doesn't change from first to last, but the arrangement of (multiple) images across those pages tends to be more dynamic in comics than in film. Comic book films that attempt to remediate this aspect of comics—giving viewers access to multiple, simultaneous views within the film (hyper)frame—thus trade the kind of alienation Mitry associates with the cinema for that associated with comics. He continues:

Alienation, the impression of nonreality, even of artifice, becomes more pronounced as the image becomes more complicated, as the effects of the framing become more convoluted, the more the aesthetic qualities take precedence over the immediate content. By the same token, directing and editing which are overelaborate or broken up, a kaleidoscopic vision of the world and its objects, also destroy the perceptual reality of the content. Unless, of course, these effects have some other *justification*. And, in my opinion, it is this *justification* which is the key to the problem of an aesthetic of the cinema, the condition of compositional qualities and stylistic system, of whatever kind. (80)

The justification, in this case, is the film's intermedial relationship with the comic book, which literally favours style over substance, aesthetics over content. Intermedial (cine-comic) style becomes a substantive part of the meaning of these film texts.

It follows, then, that attempts to remediate the panel (or a page containing many panels) within the film frame would tend to draw the viewer's attention to the frame itself as a construct, and to the single-image paradigm as merely the dominant convention but not a necessary feature of the medium. If we can draw a distinction between the two levels of intertextuality and the four levels of intermediality identified in the previous chapter, it is that the intermedial strategies necessarily disrupt a transparent cinematic style, be it by breaking with the single-image paradigm, by introducing animation or static cartoons into otherwise live-action moving images, or by selectively slowing down the action for a "panel moment." The supposed goal of remediating the comics panel within the film frame is to appropriate some of comics' visual plasticity by interrogating, pushing, and possibly even transforming the notion that the film frame provides a single, fixed window onto the diegesis. The single-image paradigm may be challenged through the use of split-screen; even though the film viewer will never have the same



Fig. 3.4. A “zoom out” effect from *Watchmen* #1 (September 1986).



Fig. 3.5. A “montage” panel from *The Amazing Spider-Man* #127.

kind of autonomy that is granted to the comics reader, they are nevertheless able to read simultaneously presented images both in parallel and in sequence.

There has been some scholarly debate over whether the comic book panel is analogous with the cinematic frame, shot, or sequence. For instance, Henry John Pratt asserts that “Panels and the transitions between them are to comics

what shots and the transitions between them are to film” (“Making Comics” 153). This, however, is a reductive view that does justice to the expressive flexibility of neither medium. A page from *Watchmen*, for instance (fig. 3.4) clearly reproduces the effect of a cinematic zoom out—it maintains the perspective of a single shot, yet it is divided across seven panels—while a panel from *The Amazing Spider-Man* #127 (December 1973) presents a “montage” sequence within the confines of a single panel (fig 3.5). In its flexibility, then, we could more accurately say it is analogous to none of these cinematically specific terms. Thierry Groensteen offers a definitive counterpoint to Pratt: “the comics panel is not the comics equivalent of the *shot* in the cinematographic language. With regard to the length of time that it ‘represents’ and condenses, its loose status is intermediate between that of the shot and that of the photogram, sometimes

bringing together the one and the other according to what occurs” (*System of Comics* 25-26).<sup>52</sup> Thus we should understand an empty panel as a temporally indeterminate space whose duration will be collaboratively defined by its content (both visual and verbal), its placement in a (narrative) sequence, and the time devoted to it by a reader.

Since the prototypical comic book page features several images, each of which plays its part in advancing a visual (usually narrative) sequence, the film frame that remediates comics will often function less like a single panel and more like a page, or hyperframe. Each panel within a hyperframe is separated and demarcated by fixed and clear boundaries, often referred to in comics scholarship as the gutter. According to Scott McCloud, the gutter represents the space in which the reader performs the mental work required to connect one panel to the next (66-72). In cinema, something resembling a gutter only comes into being when the single-image paradigm is subverted and the frame is host to multiple discrete images simultaneously. Some of the examples that we’ll encounter in this chapter do make use of split-screen effects in order to emulate the co-presence of panels within a delimited visual field. But even when split-screen is employed in an effort to remediate comics—it can certainly be used in other ways, as we shall see—the relationship between the images tends to be different, since the movement within each individual image tends to usurp the traditional role of the gutter (and that of the reader).

When discussing the various ways in which filmmakers might potentially remediate the comics panel cinematically, we must start by asking questions. How and to what extent is the film evoking the comics page? Is the film playing with the size and shape of images within the frame, in an attempt to transcend what Greg Smith refers to as the “aesthetic tyranny” of the fixed frame (“Shaping *The Maxx*,” 34)? Is the frame being divided into two or more “panels” that co-exist within the film frame? If so, are these “panels” diegetic or extra-diegetic? If the latter, how does this usage of split-screen differ from its typical use in cinema? In the examples to follow, these questions will be answered in various ways.

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<sup>52</sup> A pretext to many films, the storyboard, is also often equated with comics, specifically in films that feature many compositional quotations. Insofar as the storyboard represents a drawn template for a particular film composition, comics panels may be *treated* as storyboards but they are not themselves storyboards. A comics panel is not an intermediary step between conception and representation: it is itself the final representation in its own medium. It is text, not pretext. Nevertheless, the fact that many shots require more than one storyboard to pre-visualize provides further evidence that sequential static images, like those of comics, are not necessarily equivalent to an equal number of cinematic shots.

Finally, we must distinguish between compositional and formal intermediality, as defined in the previous chapter. Instances of compositional intertextuality—in which the content of a comics panel is re-staged for the film frame—remediate the panel on the level of content while formal intermediality—in which the mechanisms through which comics communicates are evoked through the cinematic apparatus—remediate the panel on the level of form. It is the latter that we will be concerned with in this chapter. (Compositional intertextuality will be of greater importance in chapter four.)

### The Frame Undivided: The “Holistic” Approach

Despite the emphasis on split-screen techniques above, there are more comic book films (as well as television shows) that attempt to remediate the comics panel and/or page without dividing the screen into discrete images. One technique that is not often used is changing the aspect ratio of

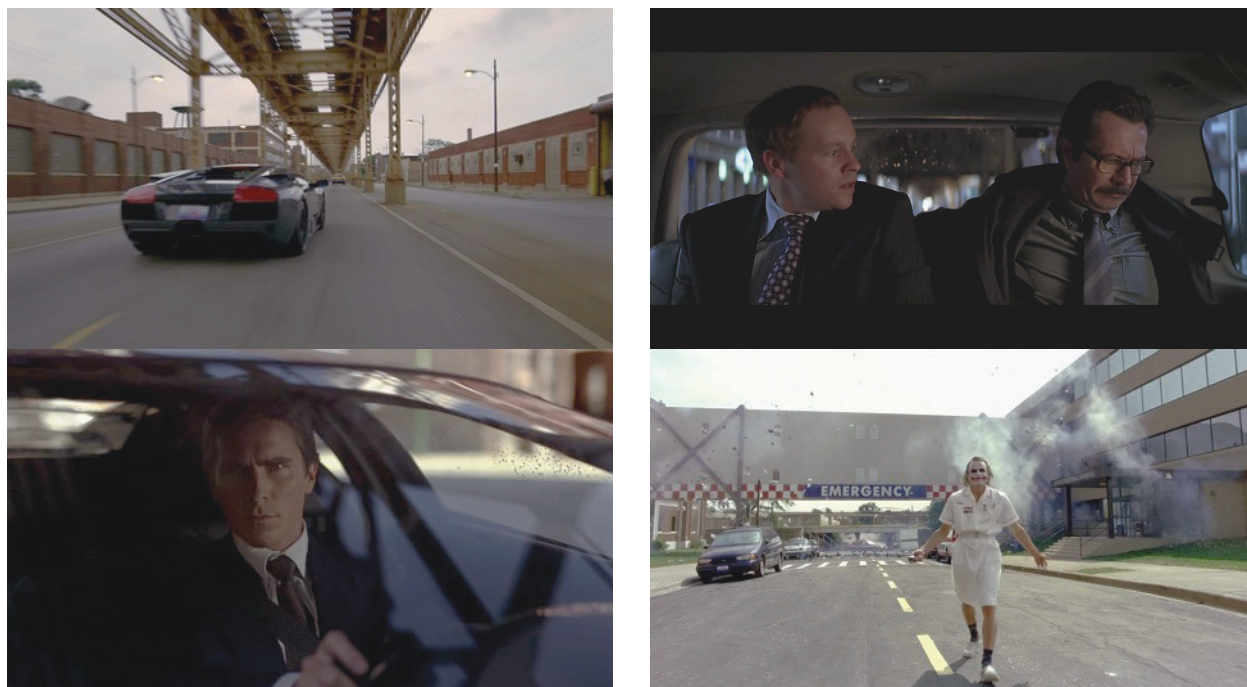


**Fig. 3.6.** One of several consecutive splash pages in *Watchmen* #12 (October 1987).

the film itself from shot to shot, just as different comics panels might vary in size and shape. Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (2009) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) both employ this technique, switching between 1.43:1 IMAX (70mm) film and 2.35:1 widescreen (35mm) aspect ratios. In both films, the opening sequences are shot entirely in large-format IMAX, imparting a sense of scope and grandeur to the proceedings not unlike opening a comic book with a splash page. For the remainder of the films, the IMAX is used more sparingly, usually for establishing or transitional shots (often of the Gotham cityscape) and some action scenes. In the former, the IMAX format briefly interrupts the widescreen presentation, jolting the viewer to attention through the drastic shift in scope (not to mention the increased amount of light given off by the projector); as such, these shots also tend to function like

slash pages, which command the reader’s attention not only by the increased size of the panel but by virtue of their novelty. The final issue of *Watchmen* is largely considered to contain some of





**Figs. 3.7-3.10.** Shifting aspect ratios in *The Dark Knight* (3.8 is letterboxed).

the most effective splash pages of all time (e.g., **fig. 3.6**), their grandeur owing largely to the complete dearth of splash pages throughout the previous eleven issues. The potency of splash pages is thus inversely associated with their frequency. As Groensteen puts it:

Although any infringement of the regular pattern is significant, it is obvious that the more it departs from the norm, the more it will stand out. In this respect, the first six pages of the twelfth and last chapter of *Watchmen*, the only splash pages of the whole work, have a remarkable impact. The rhythm of the narration freezes, and time is suspended over these images of devastation, an effect underlined by the title of the film being shown at the Utopia Cinema: *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Douglas Wolk has made the valid comment that the reader perceives these six outsize images like “six consecutive unexpected gongs of a clock.” (*Comics and Narration*, Kindle loc. 2595)

While many scenes in Nolan’s *Dark Knight* films are shot entirely in widescreen and are only punctuated at the beginning or end by these “splash page” moments, some scenes (particularly action set pieces, including chase scenes) relentlessly crosscut between widescreen and IMAX footage. Such a scene occurs in *The Dark Knight* in the sequence immediately preceding the destruction of Gotham General Hospital. The scene intercuts segments taking place at the



hospital, in Bruce Wayne's car, in his hideout, and in Commissioner Gordon's car. All of these are shown in 2.35:1 except interior shots of Wayne's car and select shots of its exterior (**figs. 3.7-3.9**). The sequence reaches its entirely IMAX climax as the Joker (Heath Ledger) walks out of the hospital, detonates the bomb, and boards a school bus, which drives away as the hospital goes up in flames (**fig. 3.10**). In these sequences and others like it, Nolan uses IMAX footage selectively in order to increase the impact of certain shots within larger sequences and especially to give added emphasis to the climatic moments of spectacle, not unlike how a comics artist might size his panels differently in order to create similar effects on the page.<sup>53</sup>



**Fig. 3.11.** The rearview mirror as sub-shot in *Danger: Diabolik*.

*Danger: Diabolik* (dir. Mario Bava, 1968), an English-language Italian-French co-production which adapts an Italian comic (or *fumetti*), takes a different approach to remediating the comics page while also maintaining the unity of the film frame. Throughout the film, Bava uses internal framing devices—that is, objects within the diegesis that visually divide the space of the frame into smaller sections—in a way that is seemingly meant to evoke the divided space

<sup>53</sup> Harper Cossar has written on new media's appropriation of widescreen aesthetics in non-cinematic texts (video games, online advertising, etc.) and the phenomenon of shifting aspect ratios more generally, a subject that will be revisited with reference to my analysis of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* in chapter five of this dissertation. See Cossar, "The Shape of New Media: Screen Space, Aspect Ratios, and Digitextuality."

of a comic book page. As Jochen Ecke writes, “the use of up to ten (!) additional frames that partition a given shot is clearly meant to draw attention to the screen’s spatiality and imitate the paneling of a comic book page” (15). One example occurs in a scene where Diabolik and Eva are staking out the location of their next heist. In a single shot from inside a car, we see the house where the robbery is to occur in the distance while a separate two-shot of Diabolik and Eva can be seen in the foregrounded rearview mirror (**fig. 3.11**). The placement, angle and shape of the rearview mirror collectively point towards the home’s turret, where the heist will take place specifically, while a lighted window adds visual emphasis to this section of the structure against the (day-for-)night sky. The rearview image itself contains only the heads of Diabolik and Eva against a pitch black background, cutting them off from their bodies while also abstracting them from their surroundings in a way that is common in comics. A few scenes later, a group of criminals conspire to capture Diabolik and director Mario Bava ups the ante on diegetically-motivated internal framing devices. In this scene, Bava shoots the action through an empty bookshelf that divides the frame into several “panels” of varying rectangular dimensions (**fig. 3.12**). The shelves, acting superficially as gutters, isolate and emphasize the heads of the scene’s key players while also “fragment[ing] and foreground[ing] the space of the screen” (ibid.). I use the caveat “superficially” here because the shelving unit doesn’t provide the opportunity for any kind of creative intervention on behalf of the viewer; there is no missing information to be “filled in” here because there is no sequential relationship between the “panels,” only a spatial one. In a comic book, the scene would be read one panel at a time with the understanding that they follow each other in sequence; in the film, by contrast, the frame is read in its totality, while the “gutters” work to emphasize certain areas of the screen. The doubled articulation of fig 3.2—wherein the hyperframe articulates a unified space while the gutters divide the space according to a temporal sequence—is absent here.

For Ecke, *Danger: Diabolik* is one example of how “mainstream cinema is catching up on the formal potentialities of the comic book page” (7). In my view, however, it’s difficult to see any revolutionary formal advances going on here; indeed, the only difference between these shots and, say, something from the house of mirrors sequence in *The Lady from Shanghai* (dir. Orson Welles, 1947) (in which each mirror functions as a frame within the larger film frame) or even one of Abbas Kiarostami’s many two-shots of a car’s front seat (in which the windshield acts as the internal framing device) is that *Diabolik* is based on a comic book, and the resultant



**Fig. 3.12.** A shelving unit functions as ersatz hyperframe in *Danger: Diabolik*.

intermedial relationship demands that we read such shots as attempts at remediation rather than merely ostentatious, economical, or visually-dense framing choices. Ecke argues that Bava “aims to reproduce the experience of reading a comic book page as, to again quote Groensteen, a ‘synthetic global vision,’ a space representing numerous simultaneous actions that the viewer can roam at will” (15). This is surely what Ecke means by “the formal potentialities of the comic book page,” but it also begs the question: doesn’t the film viewer always have the freedom to “roam [the screen] at will” as it presents “a space representing numerous simultaneous actions”? The fractured space of comics has a medium-specific function that is arguably superfluous to the mode of narration favoured by the cinema. The “synthetic global vision” that the comic book provides is not one of simultaneous *actions* but rather of simultaneous *representation* of *sequential* actions. Though Ecke does acknowledge some other divergences in form and function,<sup>54</sup> this point seems to pass him by. And as we will see throughout the rest of this chapter, it is this fundamental difference between how these two media communicate that is key to understanding cinema’s attempts to remediate the comics page.

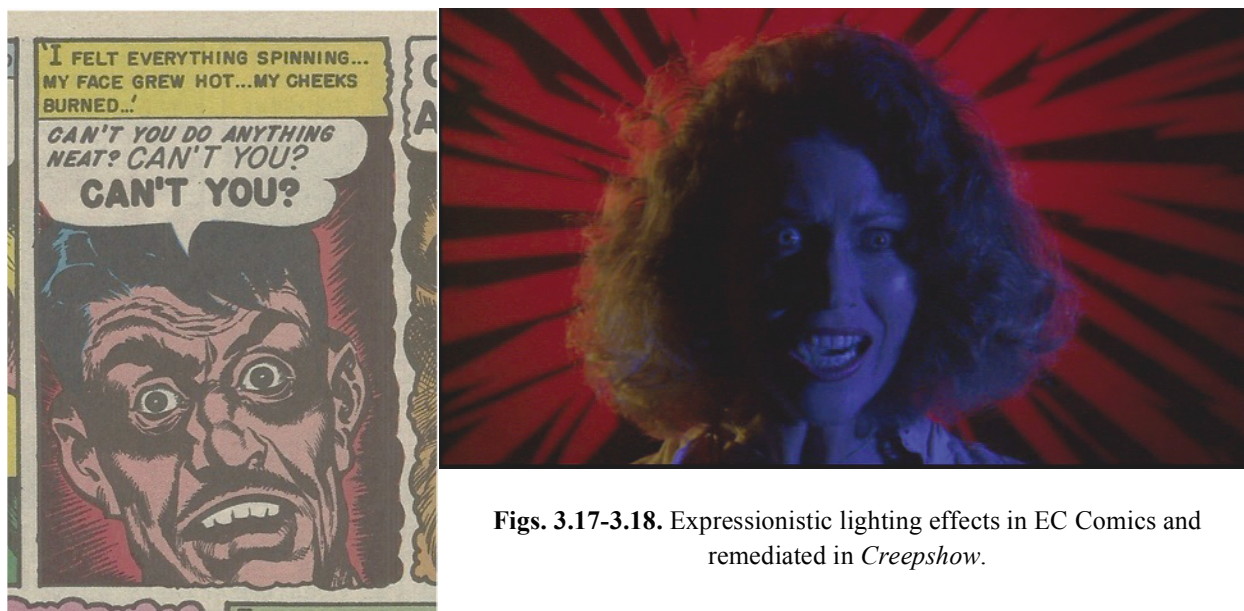
<sup>54</sup> Ecke does note that the film’s set duration and consequent control over this aspect of the viewer’s “reading” experience are significant differences between the two media (15).



**Figs. 3.13-3.16.** Explicit intermediality in *Creepshow*.

As overt as *Danger: Diabolik*'s remediation of the comics page may seem, there are several instances of films that take formal intermediality a step further by combining it with explicit intermediality. As we saw in the previous chapter, including actual comic book art—and, quite often, actual comic books—in an otherwise live-action film can communicate to the viewer that the film being viewed is a cinematic representation of a comic book's action, rather than a cinematic representation of "the real world." Put another way, such films take the world as already mediated by a comic and then *remediate* it cinematically. One example of this phenomenon that has already been discussed is *Superman*, but it's worth revisiting briefly in light of the present discussion. The film opens on a title card reading "June 1938," the month of Superman's first appearance in *Action Comics*. We then see said comic (albeit with a different cover than that actually published in June 1938). A child's hands turn the pages, which are not shown long enough or in sufficient detail to be read by the viewer; the camera tracks into a close-up on the final panel of a two-page spread, which dissolves into a live-action version of the same (figs 2.1-2.4). The dissolve is charged with the meaning suggested above, but the film doesn't return to this conceit—there is no bookend at the close of the film, wherein we dissolve back to

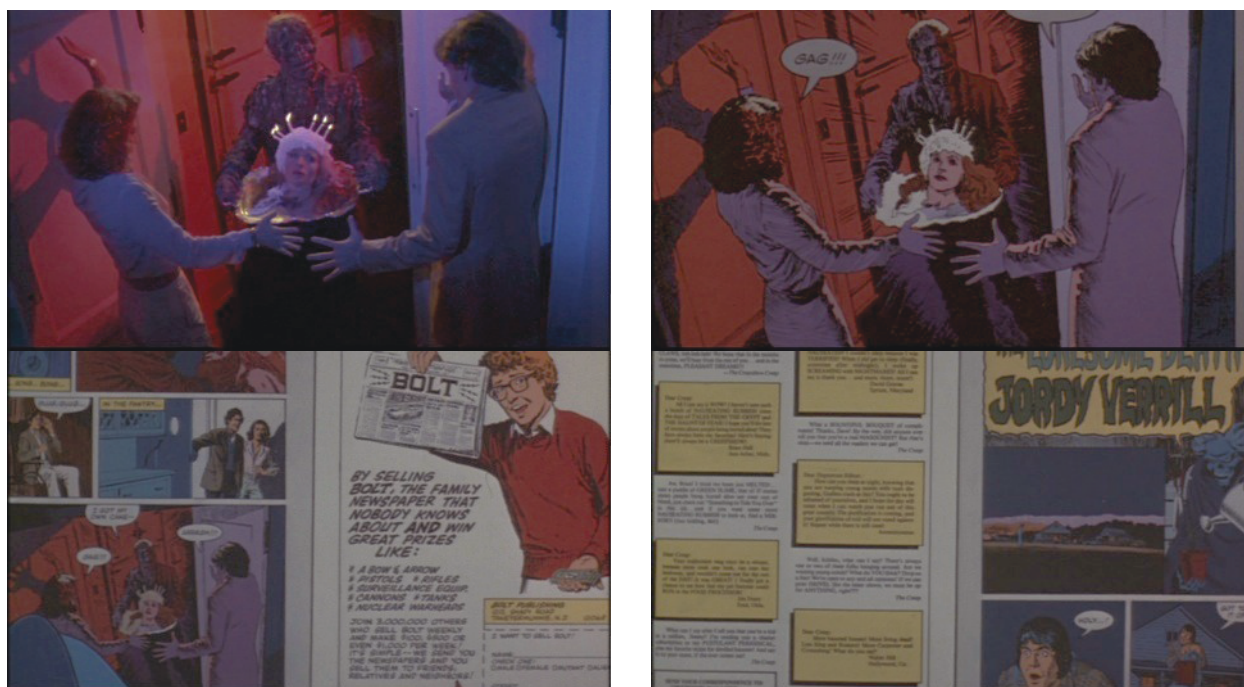




**Figs. 3.17-3.18.** Expressionistic lighting effects in EC Comics and remediated in *Creepshow*.

the comic book, and see the child's hand close the book.<sup>55</sup> This is barely an instance of explicit intermediality; once the dissolve is complete, the film fully adheres to a conventionally cinematic style, and any traces of comics disappear (save for the diegetic intertextuality that necessarily runs throughout the film due to its status as an adaptation). Another example from the previous chapter bears more fruit. George Romero's *Creepshow*, not an adaptation but rather an homage to the "New Trend" EC Comics of 1950-1954, adopts a similar strategy as *Superman* but expands upon it in several ways. This film presents its opening credits over a montage of horrific comics-style images, culminating in an image of "The Creep," a surrogate for EC Comics' Cryptkeeper, the narrator of *Tales from the Crypt* (**fig. 3.13**). As the camera pans to the left, we realize that we are looking at the opening page of a comic book story entitled "Father's Day" (**fig. 3.14**). The ghastly visage just off-screen narrates the text in a familiar, Cryptkeeper-esque parlance: "Heh, heh! Greetings kiddies, and welcome to the first issue of *Creepshow*, the magazine that dares to answer the question, 'Who goes there?'" What was implicit in *Superman* becomes explicit here: *Creepshow*, the film, is now understood by the viewer as *Creepshow*, the comic book series. The camera tracks downward to the opening panel of the story (**fig. 3.15**), which dissolves, as in *Superman*, into a live-action *tableau vivant* which shortly comes to life (**fig. 3.16**). Unlike *Superman*, however, the film doesn't abandon its concern with remediation at this point. Indeed, throughout the individual segments of this episode film, the aesthetics of

<sup>55</sup> I can only speculate that the lack of symmetry here is a deliberate attempt to suggest that Superman has now fully transcended the medium of his origin and become a figure of the cinema.



**Figs. 3.19-3.22.** Dissolving in and out of comic book worlds in *Creepshow*.

comics are brought to bear on the photographic world. For instance, a shot from the concluding moments of the first segment mirrors the expressionistic way comics images often abandon continuity of space in order to produce dramatic aesthetic effects (**figs. 3.17-3.18**). Not unlike the use of onscreen onomatopoeia in *Batman* (fig 2.7), the jagged, dramatic red and black lines emanating from the character in fig. 3.18 remediate an expressive tool often used in comics for the cinema. The film uses this device to transition the viewer back from a cinematic aesthetic (albeit a heightened, giallo-esque one) to a comics aesthetic. The next shot returns to a *tableau vivant* (**fig. 3.19**), which dissolves into its comic book double (**fig. 3.20**). Thus where *Superman* abandons its framing device after its brief prologue, *Creepshow* maintains its commitment to being a cinematic comic book. The camera tracks back, revealing a two-page spread with an advertisement on the right-hand page (**fig. 3.21**). The page then turns to the next two-page spread, which features the obligatory letter column on the left side and the beginning of the next story on the right (**fig. 3.22**). The camera pans across each page in isolation before settling on the first panel of the next story, which then dissolves into a live-action version, as in the previous story.

The film's ability to give aesthetic priority to the comic book despite its status as a film is noteworthy. Whereas *Diabolik's* intermedial play with the spatiality of the frame merely

produces some superficial visual similarities to the comic book page, *Creepshow*'s (and *Superman*'s, to a lesser extent) strategy treats the film frame as a cinematic surrogate for a comic book panel and the camera as the revealer of the comic book's diegetic reality. As a result, cinematic techniques can be read as equivalents for their comic book counterparts, regardless of the style of execution and how similar it may or may not be to a comic book. This is made clear in figs. 3.19-3.20, in which speech balloons manifest visually in the drawn image that were not present in the live-action *tableau*; some films remediate comics by including actual speech balloons in the image (as in fig. 3.1), but *Creepshow*'s framing strategy ensures that viewers understand that any dialogue on the soundtrack conveys the content of balloons without having to insert them into the frame itself.



**Figs. 3.23-3.24.** Opening credits as comic book in *American Splendor*.

The strategies employed in *Superman* and *Creepshow* become more complicated still in the opening credits of *American Splendor*, wherein the frame is entirely occupied by the architecture of a comics page, whose panels contain a combination of live-action moving images, comics-style text, and static comics images. As the camera moves to focus on one, it dissolves from a sepia-toned photograph to a full-colour moving image; and just as the camera moves on to the next panel (following a trajectory not unlike digital comics app ComiXology's "Guided View" mode, which allows readers to see only one panel at a time and provides animated transitions between each), the image arrests and dissolves back to sepia. Aside from the viewer's lack of autonomy over the pacing of the images (and inability to take in the entire two-page spread in a glance), *American Splendor* provides the closest cinematic approximation of the experience of reading a comic; each panel is a self-contained part of a larger narrative sequence, and only assumes its full meaning when read in conversation with those around it (rather than simultaneously or in isolation) (**figs. 3.23-3.24**). In other words, the gutters here function just as

they do in a comic book. Whereas *Danger: Diabolik* divided the image into a panel-like grid purely for its aesthetic effect and *Creepshow* elided the problem entirely by dissolving in and out of the comics page, *American Splendor* combines the paneled architecture of comics with moving images in a way that still allows the images to be read *as comics*.<sup>56</sup> What this sequence visualizes is that each panel—whether its content is drawn or cinematic—is “activated” one at a time, though they all exist simultaneously in their arrangement on the page. When a panel is activated by the camera’s attention, it has a set duration, contributes its part to the overall sequence, and then fades into the background as the reader forges ahead. While the camera in *Creepshow* functioned as a magical device, capable of penetrating comics so deeply as to reveal their underlying reality, here the camera simply functions as the eyes of a comics reader: scanning the page, and stopping to read each panel in sequence. The jazz music underlying the entire sequence also provides a sense of cinematic continuity that smooths over the jumps between media that occur between panels.

All of these comic book films remediate the comics page, often in a literal-minded way. Indeed, one might argue that *Superman*, *Creepshow*, and *American Splendor* are too explicit in their use of *actual* comics (i.e., explicit intermediality) to function as proper remediations, that they don’t evoke comics in a cinematic way so much as they show you actual comics on screen. I would counter that this is a valid form of remediation, but that there are also other films that take greater risks and yield more complex dividends. In the next section, I will focus on those comic book films that employ split-screen as a means of getting at something conceptually similar to the films discussed above, but with markedly different results.

### **Splitting the Screen: The “Hyperframe” Approach**

When one thinks of cinematic techniques that have the potential to evoke the comics page, split-screen photography is arguably the most obvious addition to the list. As defined by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, split-screen refers to when “two or more images, each with its own frame dimensions and shape, appear within the larger frame” (187). In short, it refers to

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<sup>56</sup> The placement of photographic images within the architecture of comics also calls to mind the related medium of the photonovel, which combined the narrative and visual conventions of comics (panels, word balloons, expository captions, etc.) with photographic stills from live-action films or television programs. This hybrid medium was most popular as an inexpensive alternative to dubbing or subtitling, or as a means of distributing filmic and televisual texts prior to the advent of home video technologies.



cinematic frames in which what I referred to above as the single-image paradigm is abandoned; the term “shot” no longer applies, given the multiplicity of co-existing shots, which I’ll refer to as “sub-shots,” within the frame. Bordwell and Thompson associate the technique with the staging of telephone conversations—such as those in *Suspense* (dirs. Philips Smalley and Lois Weber, 1913) or *Bye Bye Birdie* (dir. George Sidney, 1963)—or with building suspense, as in *Sisters* (dir. Brian De Palma, 1973) (ibid.). While the technique is arguably most commonly associated with Hollywood films from the late 1960s and early 1970s—including *Grand Prix* (dir. John Frankenheimer, 1966), *The Thomas Crown Affair* (dir. Norman Jewison, 1968), *The Boston Strangler* (dir. Richard Fleischer, 1968), *Woodstock* (dir. Michael Wadleigh, 1970), and several other films by Brian De Palma—more recent projects like *Run Lola Run* (dir. Tom Tykwer, 1998), *Timecode*, *Conversations with Other Women* and the television series *24* (Fox, 2001-2010) (not to mention several more recent films by De Palma) have given renewed visibility to the technique. Most significantly, however, the aesthetics of contemporary multiplayer video games—which split the screen horizontally down the centre for two players and into quadrants for four—and the ubiquitous desktop computer with its multiple “windows” have completely normalized the fragmentation of screen spaces in our daily interactions with digital media. The incorporation of new media aesthetics into filmmaking practice have given the subject of cinematic split-screen some renewed urgency, as is shown in works such as Anne Friedberg’s *The Virtual Window* and Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media*, both of which historicize the multiple-frame screen associated with the digital within a broader artistic tradition. Nevertheless, aside from an unpublished article by Jim Bizzocchi and a special issue of *Refractory* edited by Tessa Dwyer and Mehmet Mehmet, there has been little extended theoretical consideration devoted to the subject of the split-screen.

With regard to the comic book film, however, the subject has been covered extensively, primarily using Ang Lee’s *Hulk* as a case study.<sup>57</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, the film is rich with formal intermediality of all kinds, from the use of on-screen text captions, to freeze-frames (fig. 2.15), split-screens (fig. 2.12), and even a cinematic multiframe (fig. 2.14). While all of the split-screens used in *Hulk* are non-diegetic (i.e., there aren’t objects within the mise-en-

<sup>57</sup> See Booker xxxi; Ecke 17-19; Morton 120-132; and Rauscher 265-273 for scholarship concerning the use of split-screen in Lee’s film. Smith’s “Shaping *The Maxx*: Adapting the Comic Book Frame to Television” is also noteworthy on the subject of split-screen, though his subject is an animated television show rather than live-action cinema.

scène dividing the frame, as in *Danger: Diabolik*; rather, the divisions are imposed upon the images by some extra-diegetic force), we can nevertheless divide them into two distinct categories: “interlocking” and “discrete.” Interlocking sub-shots fit together like puzzle pieces, forming a whole image that is made up of separate components that combine to fill the frame completely (e.g., fig. 2.11-2.13). In this mode of split-screen, the visual similarity to the comic book page is obscured somewhat due to the lack of a surrogate gutter between the separate image elements; the effect is closer to a collage. In *Hulk*, the seamless juxtaposition of images often creates a jarring effect as eyelines that we would expect to line up (based on the conventions of continuity editing) do not, drawing the viewer’s attention to the independence of each component within the frame, to precisely how they *don’t* perfectly fit together (see fig. 2.11). Alternatively, discrete sub-shots function as autonomous “panels” that are read separately rather than as a single unit; in other words, they don’t intersect to form a single, composite image (though they may overlap, in some cases), and there is a visible negative space that separates each sub-shot from the others. While it is tempting to read this space as functionally equivalent to the gutter, the similarities between them are only superficial. The gutter only functions as such when there is both a sequential relationship between the panels that it divides as well as some action that is absent from (i.e., exists in between) the represented image-instants. The negative space in the split-screen film, by contrast, functions no differently from the “black bars” produced by letterbox presentations that I evoked at the beginning of this chapter; it’s just unoccupied screen territory that allows the frame/sub-shots to assume their particular size and shape.

Comics are, as Jared Gardner puts it, “in many respects the most inefficient” narrative form, because they depend “as much on what is left out as on what is included” as well as “an active and imaginative reader capable of filling in the gaps in time” (Kindle loc. 91). While cinema is not inherently less “gappy” than comics, continuity filmmaking is the dominant style for a reason: “The [film] industry trained audiences to privilege continuity, resolution, and closure—and to reject as ‘bad film’ the fragments, the gaps, the illogical connections of early film. The gutter that film and comics shared for their first decade was dissolved, so that film might become a very different kind of product, one that offers more easily regulated pleasures” (Kindle loc. 560). Though already more efficient than comics—because its soundtrack is heard rather than read, its actions are presented fluidly rather than reconstituted from a series of incomplete stills, and so on—cinematic split-screens are typically used to *further* increase film’s



**Figs. 3.25-3.26.** Conventional split-screens in *The Boston Strangler*.

efficiency by simultaneously cramming more unique information onto the screen at once. For example, a scene taking place simultaneously at two locations would typically have to be intercut, leaving the viewer to reconstitute their spatiotemporal relationship; using split-screen, both can co-occupy a frame for the entire duration of a scene, eliminating the need for much of this mental work. For instance, an early scene in *The Boston Strangler* (**fig. 3.25**) takes place in two locations simultaneously; the right side of the screen shows us two tenants in the hallway of an apartment building, talking about their mutual neighbour, whose door is visible; the right side of the screen shows us the other side of that door, including part of the tenant's lifeless body. Dramatic irony and suspense effects are thereby produced without any cuts, and the spatiotemporal relations between the two sub-shots is always clear (especially toward the end of the scene when the neighbours open the door, at which point they can be seen on both sides of the screen from different angles). Likewise, montage sequences can be denser, communicating more information to the viewer in less time (**fig 3.26**).

Paradoxically, then, split-screen fosters a superficial visual similarity between the comics page and the film frame while getting further away from comics' narrative inefficiency; as form converges, function diverges. Those who have attempted to understand *Hulk*'s remediation of the comic book frame have tended to either focus on the supposed "failures" of the film to match the comic book in both form and function (a symptom of an adaptation-centric mindset) or to naively equate the use of split-screen with a "comic book" aesthetic *a priori*. Drew Morton, for instance, ultimately judges the film's attempt at remediation to be a "media specific [...] compromise" (126), while Michael Cohen argues "that the use of split-screen in the cinematic *Hulk* is part of a conscious effort to recreate the aesthetic of the comic inside the film" (qtd. in Bizzocchi 9). Because our collective understanding of split-screen's unique poetics remain relatively inchoate, these have remained some of the most authoritative accounts of remediation



**Figs. 3.27-3.28.** Conventional and unconventional split-screens in *Hulk*.

in *Hulk* to date. I would like to intervene in order to give some nuance to our understanding of the film's formal advances. While Morton claims that the film merely "[provides] us with an embellished use of the split-screen" (127), there is actually a tangible difference between how conventional films use split-screen and how it is employed at various moments in *Hulk*. Morton is perfectly right to point out—as I have above with regard to other films—that using split-screen to present multiple perspectives at the same moment in time is the conventional way that the technique is used (as in fig. 3.25) and does not mirror the way that comics employ their hyperframe (127-129). Indeed, the film features several telephone conversations, usually between Betty and her father, General Ross, that use split-screen in lieu of cross-cutting—in other words, in the prototypical, efficiency-promoting way noted by Bordwell and Thompson (**fig. 3.27**). However, the film also flouts this standard implementation of split-screen with some regularity. Indeed, in many cases, the film actually uses split-screen to reproduce the visual dynamics of the comics hyperframe at the *expense* of narrative efficiency, showing the viewer more information than they require or, often, redundant information given simultaneously from multiple perspectives; re-editing such shots into traditional cross-cutting patterns would make no sense! Andreas Rauscher claims that such redundant compositions are “meant to be reminiscent of the way in which panels are arranged in comic books” (269), which is a superficial reading that misses the fact that the narrative inefficiency that Gardner associates with comics doesn't come from a surplus of visual information but rather from a deficiency. This redundancy, rather, is a specifically cinematic product that results from the remediation of the comics page. **Fig 3.28**, for example, is a frame containing two sub-shots that is singled out by Morton as an “illusory”

hyperframe,<sup>58</sup> “at least with regard to how it functions spatiotemporally in the narrative.” He continues:

Rather than giving us two images portraying separate instances of time (or space) as a comic book would, Lee gives us two images of space [...] that are taking place simultaneously. [...] 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 [sic] provides the structure. (127)



**Fig. 3.29.** A helicopter convoy represented via redundant split-screens in *Hulk*.

What Morton fails to acknowledge here, however, is that the remediation of one medium in another may result in the formation of new expressive tools that are inspired by medium-specific conventions (e.g., the hyperframe and multiframe, the gutter, the cinematic split-screen) but that also differ from them significantly. Such instances are no less legitimate as remediations, though they may be (unjustly) dismissed as “unfaithful” adaptations. In fig. 3.28, the young David

<sup>58</sup> Morton mistakenly uses Groensteen’s term “multiframe” instead of “hyperframe,” which I’ve corrected here for clarity’s sake. The hyperframe refers to the structure that includes the panels on a given page, while the multiframe refers to the meta-structure that includes the hyperframes (e.g., a book). Fig. 3.28 is plainly not an attempt to remediate more than a single comics page.



**Fig. 3.30.** Non-simultaneous split-screens in *Hulk*.

Banner can be seen activating a countdown timer from two different perspectives. Naturally, this is not how a comic book would present this information, but neither is it a typical use of split-screen. Lee is both invoking the comics hyperframe in a superficial way (i.e., through visual similarity) and also in a more complex way by sacrificing film's claim to greater narrative efficiency.<sup>59</sup> We see something similar in **fig. 3.29**, in which a helicopter convoy carries Bruce Banner to a military installation for testing. Throughout this sequence, “panels” appear hither and thither in the frame, each containing different views on the same action, none of which adds any narrative information. Indeed, the superfluousness of these images is itself the point; rather than guide the reader through a series of sequential image-events, as it does in comics, here the hyperframe functions to undermine the tendency of split-screen to increase cinema's narrative efficiency. Thus *Hulk* gains the superficial resemblance to the comics page afforded by split-

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<sup>59</sup> There are also consequences in terms of how point-of-view is constructed. As Aumont writes, “The notion of framing, by way of the fantasy of the visual pyramid, invites us to establish an equivalence between the eye of the image-maker and that of the spectator. It is this assimilation of one to the other that also informs the many forms of the concept of point of view” (115). Moments such as the one seen in fig. 3.28 make this equivalence more complex, given the plurality of perspectives offered by the filmmakers.



screen while also dragging its narrative economy closer to that of comics.<sup>60</sup>

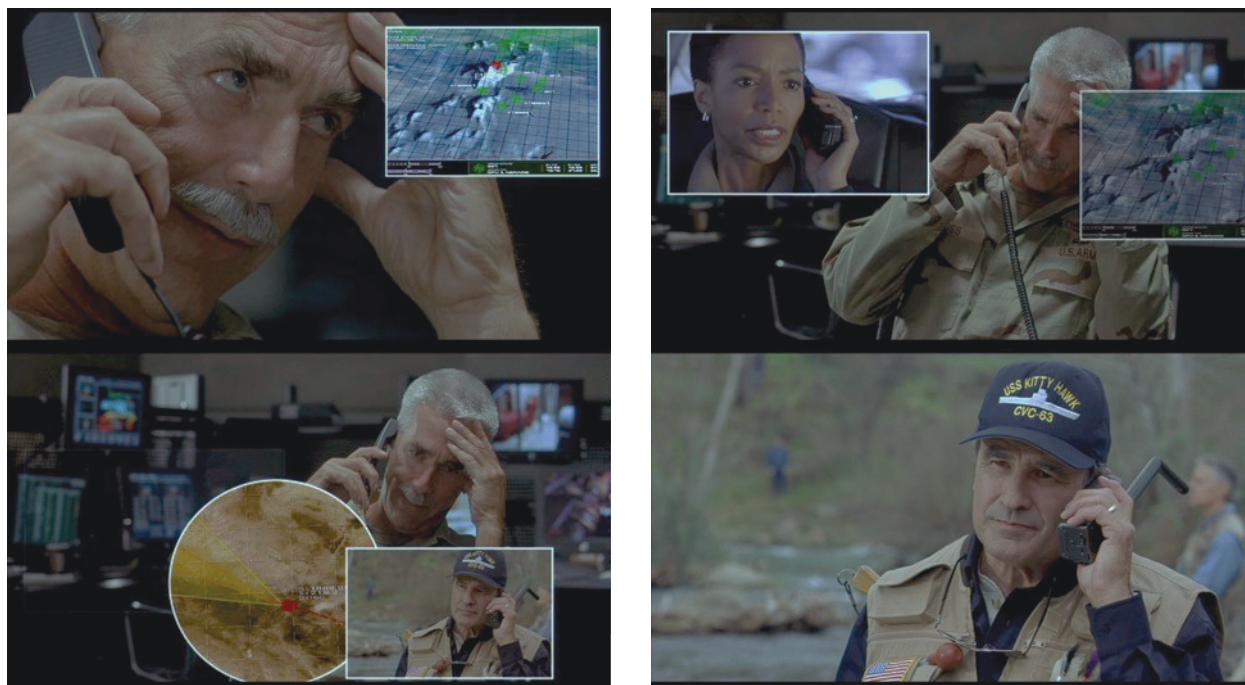
The film is also more complicated in terms of its treatment of sequentiality versus simultaneity. As Malte Hagener notes in his article on split-screen and remediation,

In a scene when the Hulk is transferred to a secret underground research centre under heavy security measures, this trip is shown in multiple windowed shots overlapping spatially (within the visible frame, but also within the filmic space represented) and temporally (they emerge and vanish at different moments, while also depicting overlapping timespans). Constantly changing in size and position, the shots are presented in rough chronological order yet nevertheless sometimes overlap temporally, creating an impression similar to scratching in music. This effect, which is not easily detectable on first viewing, points out the basically arbitrary and manipulable nature of the filmic images. (“The Aesthetics of Displays”)

**Fig. 3.30** displays what seems at first glance to be two simultaneous views on the helicopter convoy, but closer inspection reveals that the helicopters in the upper sub-shot have some ropes dangling from them that aren’t present in the lower image. As the scene continues, the lower sub-shot dissolves to reveal more of the diegesis at the later moment that the upper shot depicts; when the dissolve is complete, the small strip of negative space disappears and the unity of the frame is reestablished. The looser treatment of simultaneity in this sequence is itself a departure from conventional usage of split-screen cinematography, but there is another element that must also be addressed: the sheer dynamism of how the sub-shots appear, disappear, interact, overlap and generally compete and collaborate for screen space, or what Bizzocchi calls the “visual flow” of the graphic elements in play (16). In most cases throughout the film, the “panels” don’t appear onscreen at the same moment, but *sequentially*. It’s not like turning a page in a comic book: the panels don’t all exist at the beginning of a scene and remain static for its duration. Regardless of whether the action in each of the sub-shots *occurs* simultaneously, the viewer will nevertheless *read* them sequentially due to how they appear on the screen.

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<sup>60</sup> It’s quite possible that a less redundant use of split-screen—one more in line with comics—would risk becoming borderline illegible to viewers. The redundancy of the various sub-shots in figs. 3.28 and 3.29 provides viewers with a multiplicity of perspectives without multiplying the number of narrative events contained within them.



**Figs. 3.31-3.34.** A dynamic, shifting hyperframe in *Hulk*.

A three-way telephone conversation between General Ross, a national security advisor, and the President should demonstrate how the complex sequencing of “panels” transcends their simultaneity. The scene begins with conventional full-frame shots, cutting between Ross, the president, and the advisor. As the scene cuts back to Ross, who announces that “‘Angry Man’ is unsecure,” an inset “panel” with a digital map readout appears in the upper right corner of the screen (**fig. 3.31**). Unlike conventional sub-shots, however, the panel begins to move downward on a diagonal slope toward offscreen right as Ross talks, guiding the viewer’s attention in that direction. When the full-frame shot cuts, the panel begins to fade away. As if a comics reader had turned a page with the cut, a new panel has appeared in the upper right corner (**fig. 3.32**), in which the advisor chastises Ross for what she interprets as a blasé attitude towards civilian casualties. It too fades away just as a circular inset panel appears with another military computer readout of the Hulk’s location. Immediately following the appearance of this round panel, the President appears in the scene’s final rectangular panel at the bottom right of the screen (**fig. 3.33**). Thus the panels have been carefully sequenced to follow a particular reading logic, knowing that the film viewer—like the comic book reader—can focus on a particular panel while also taking in the whole of the hyperframe that contextualizes it. The final panel finally expands to fill the whole screen, bookending the scene with full-frame images (**fig 3.34**).





**Fig. 3.35.** Panel boundaries are selectively ignored in *Hulk*.

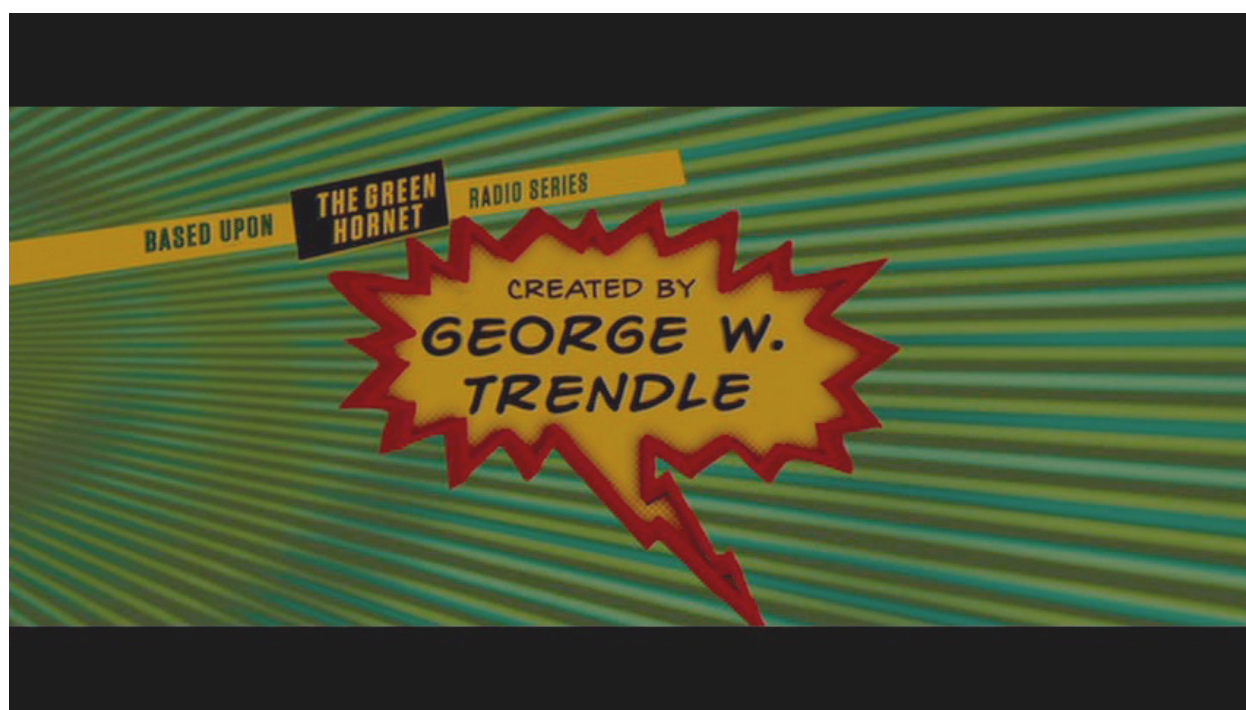
There are at least three other instances of split-screen that are particularly striking in terms of their debt to comic book aesthetics and their departure from the traditional cinematic use of the technique, one of which I already discussed in the previous chapter (fig. 2.14). This moment, which like a comics page is comprised of sequential narrative events represented by still images, is as close to the explicit intermediality of *Creepshow* and *Superman* as *Hulk* gets. As in those examples, the camera gives us with a god's-eye view on the diegesis, from which vantage point it looks more like a comic than a film. Tracking out of one shot (a heavily stylized freeze-frame, significantly), the frame becomes full of image-instants; as it swoops in to select the next shot proper, the chosen image begins to move. Here the camera fulfills a role in between what it does in *Creepshow* and *American Splendor*: while it scans around the narrative-encompassing multiframe like the eyes of a comic book reader (as in *American Splendor*), it also brings the images to life with its gaze (as in *Creepshow*). Furthermore, it affords the viewer a fleeting sense of the omnipotence that the comics reader enjoys. While the film doesn't give the viewer the same degree of choice that the comic does, it's nevertheless usually beyond the scope of a film to show a past moments outside of narrative flashbacks, let alone a multiframe of past and future moments.



**Fig. 3.36.** The Hulk leaps across panels in *Hulk*.

This multiframe may be the most radical moment of remediation in *Hulk*, but there are two additional instances of split-screen that warrant special attention. The first occurs during Hulk's rampage through the military facility, immediately preceding the multiframe discussed above. Ross's men are spraying Hulk with a quick-drying foam that will hold him in place long enough for Talbot to get a blood sample. The scene features a dynamic array of sub-shots, similar to the three-way telephone conversation analyzed above. A few frames in particular, however, feature one subtle effect that is usually impossible in cinema, but that is afforded by the split-screen technique. In **fig. 3.35**, we see the foam stream from the central panel extending beyond its own borders, intruding into the next panel. Typically, the boundaries of the film image are also the boundaries of the screen, precluding the possibility that the images might spill over. In comics, the boundaries of the individual panel are always contained within that of the larger hyperframe, allowing such breaches to occur with some regularity (as in **fig. 3.2**, for example). The fact that the foam stream is a digital element facilitates this, as the animators have the same freedom as the comics artist to colour within or outside of the lines. Similarly, in **fig. 3.36**, we see Hulk jump across three panels that exist independently but that collectively form a coherent chunk of diegetic space. They appear on the screen sequentially, sliding in from offscreen left (though the final panel slides in from above) one at a time as the Hulk jumps

through them from right to left. As the panels slide into place, the background fades to black, leaving only the three panels framed against negative space. The fact that this reverses the usual reading order of a comic doesn't negate this hyperframe's status as a remediation thereof. (As fig. 3.2 demonstrates, the reader order of panels is determined by a combination of convention and the specific layout of elements within a given hyperframe.) Comics often divide a coherent space into panels in order to present a passage of time; the result is a "panning" effect as the reader moves through both the space and time of the scene together. In Lee's remediation of this technique, the panning effect occurs—as it does in comics—only through the viewer's eyes as she scans the screen, following the Hulk from right to left.



**Fig. 3.37.** Radio via comics via cinema: formal intermediality in *The Green Hornet*.

In concluding this chapter, I'd like to move from one green outlaw to another: namely *The Green Hornet* (dir. Michel Gondry, 2011). Though the character did not originate in a comic book, the presence of formal intermediality in the film's closing credits suggests a greater engagement with comics than many of the other media in which the character has appeared.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> The Green Hornet and his partner Kato made their first appearance, on the radio, in 1936. They made the transition to film serials in 1940 and 1941. The character is perhaps best known for the Bruce Lee-starring television series (ABC, 1966-1967), which was contemporaneous with *Batman* (ABC, 1966-1968); the two franchises even crossed paths in two notable episodes of *Batman*'s second season. The Green Hornet has also made appearances in





**Figs. 3.38-3.41.** Split-screen continuity in *The Green Hornet*.

The film's cast and crew are presented through captions and speech and sound effect balloons; for instance, creator of the radio series George W. Trendle's name appears in a jagged speech balloon, such as would be used in a comic to denote speech coming from an electronic device such as a radio (**fig. 3.37**). This represents the way that comics remediate the medium in which the character originated. Aside from the film's frequent use of expressive slow-motion in its fight scenes,<sup>62</sup> the film's tour de force split-screen sequence stands out as the most explicit integration of comics into its cinematic aesthetic. The sequence begins with a single criminal, a subordinate of crime lord Chudnofsky, who passes his boss' instructions to kill the Green Hornet along to two women (**fig. 3.38**). As soon as they are given their marching orders, lines of negative space intrude into the image, dividing the frame into three sub-shots, each of which continues as its own autonomous shot, as if the camera spontaneously trifurcated (**fig. 3.39**). Each character continues along their own individual trajectory until they encounter another character, at which point their sub-shot divides again (**fig. 3.40**). This continues until there are, at its most complicated, thirteen sub-shots on the screen simultaneously (**fig. 3.41**), many of which—if you

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several comics since 1940. The print rights to the character are currently owned by Dynamite Entertainment, who have published several miniseries, including one that serves as a prequel to the 2011 film.

<sup>62</sup> The next chapter will be concerned with temporal effects, such as slow-motion, as a means of remediating comics.

watch closely—have proceeded seamlessly (i.e., without a cut) since the beginning of the shot represented in fig. 3.38.<sup>63</sup>

Just as *Hulk*'s use of split-screen was more complicated than the technique's typical cinematic use due to the influence of comics, so too is *The Green Hornet*'s, but in yet another way. While Lee seemed primarily interested in exploring the dialectic between simultaneity and sequentiality associated with comics and film, respectively, Gondry is more interested in the related dialectic of continuity versus discontinuity. Groensteen summarizes the typical role of each in both media thusly:

Unlike those in a film, comics images do not create the illusion that the events are taking place as we read. Several factors work against this—in particular: the visible discontinuity of the sequential flow of the narrative; the fact that readers cannot forget the physical, concrete situation in which they find themselves, that of having a book in their hands (or in front of them), and turning the pages, at a rhythm that is not imposed but under their control; finally, the fact that each new image does not obliterate the previous one, does not take its place, but is added to it on the mode of accumulation, collection, with the totality of images remaining easily accessible at any time. For all these reasons, graphic monstration, in contrast with filmic monstration, does not create the impression of a story unfolding before our eyes. (*Comics and Narration*, Kindle loc. 1437)

Much of narrative cinema's expressive potential emerges out of the continuity created between subsequent images, both on the level of the shot (allowing discrete still images to be seen by viewers as continuous moving images) and between shots (allowing individual moments to be read in conversation with each other, creating a coherent diegesis). In comics, by contrast, is it precisely the discontinuity between images wherein the medium's expressive potential lies. We thereby return to the sense of alienation invoked by Mitry at the outset of this chapter. Per Groensteen, "The discontinuity that is the basis of the language of comics forces the reader to make inferences in order to interpret each new image appropriately, that is to say to ensure that it correlates with the previous one and to the wider context of the whole text within which it

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<sup>63</sup> This incredibly novel sequence is impossible to adequately describe in prose. On the DVD, the sequence begins at 1:12:06 and ends at 1:13:47. In its theatrical 3-D presentation, the sub-shots were further distinguished from one another by their depth, an effect that is lost in its 2-D version.

occurs” (Kindle loc. 616). In the sequence in question, the line is thoroughly blurred between the varieties of continuity and discontinuity typically offered by these media. The images do not replace each other sequentially but rather accumulate on the screen, remaining accessible for the entirety of the sequence, as they do on the pages of the comic book; and yet despite the fractured, discontinuous nature of the screen space, the images are inextricably connected because of a lasting sense of continuity that pervades from the first shot in fig. 3.38 to many of the thirteen sub-shots that make up fig. 3.41. Thus, again, we see that *The Green Hornet*’s remediation of comics—like those offered by *Hulk*, *American Splendor* and the other films held up for analysis in this chapter—assimilates one element of comics’ form, including the sense of alienation thereby produced, but without replicating its medium-specific function, instead offering something atypical of either medium.

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In the case of the comic book, one image dominates the reader’s attention at any given time, while others float around the periphery of her attention, waiting to play their part in the reading experience. This is the ontology of the hyperframe that makes up most comics pages. When films attempt to remediate this element of comics, they may vary the size and shape of the frame, as in *The Dark Knight*; they may introduce diegetic elements that partition the frame, as in *Danger: Diabolik*; they may even introduce an actual comic book as a framing device, through which cinematic style is interpreted as a surrogate for a comic book, as in *Creepshow*. Rarer but more visibly obvious attempts at remediation draw upon the technique known as split-screen, as in *Hulk* and *The Green Hornet*; certain scenes from these films, viewed out of context, may equally resemble the sequential panels of a comic book or the coexisting windows of a new media object, like a computer’s desktop. In fact, however, cinematic remediations of the hyperframe tend not to follow either the strict sequentiality of comics or the alinear simultaneity of the desktop, nor do they merely follow the rules of traditional split-screen cinema. There is an increased sense of play, a more dynamic interaction between the sub-shots or “panels” that co-exist onscreen. They stake out the territory between simultaneity and sequentiality, between continuity and discontinuity, between subjectivity and omniscience—in short, between comics’ mode of narration and that typically associated with film. The next chapter will continue in this vein, exploring another dialectic that has hovered at the margins of the present discussion, and

whose remediation results in some of the images most closely associated with the comic book film in the popular imaginary: that between movement and stasis.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### The Privileged Instant: Remediating Stasis as Movement

Douglas Wolk opens his book *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* with a discussion of *Showcase #4* (October 1956) (**fig. 4.1**), the comic book in which Barry Allen/The Flash made his first appearance, thus inaugurating the “Silver Age” of superhero comics.<sup>64</sup> He describes the cover illustration thusly: “Its cover shows a strip of film, with a superhero called the Flash racing along each of its frames and bursting bodily through the last one” (Kindle loc. 96). He struggles, however, to pin down the meaning of this image, beyond obvious signifiers like the Comics Code Authority logo in the upper-right corner.<sup>65</sup> He asks:

Is this comic a showcase for art, as in a museum? A series of frozen representations of reality or representations of something so unreal that a body moving at high speed leaves parallel lines of ink behind it? A movie that isn’t really a movie, made out of individual images that the eye can see in or out of sequence or at the same time? Something that breaks destructively out of attempts to fix it in place? (Kindle loc. 104)

At the time of its release, readers probably wouldn’t have had such semantic crises: the superhero genre was already well established, as were the conventions of the comic book medium. Readers implicitly understood its differences from film and other narrative media. (A more likely response would be confusion: “is this a character I should know from the movies?”) At its most basic, the cover provides a striking and dynamic introduction to a new character, conveying his defining characteristic—super-speed—via a series of well-understood and oft-used visual conventions: most notably “motion lines” (the “parallel lines of ink” to which Wolk refers), which indicate a trajectory of movement and simulate photographic motion blur without distorting the subject, as well as the slanted green type that announces the character’s name,

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<sup>64</sup> The Flash had previously been introduced in the “Golden Age” with the alter ego Jay Garrick in *Flash Comics* #1 (January 1940). The “Silver Age” saw the reintroduction and refinement of the superhero genre about ten years after its popularity fell sharply with the end of World War II.

<sup>65</sup> The definitive academic work on the emergence and history of the Comics Code Authority is Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*.





Fig. 4.1. The Flash debuts in *Showcase* #4.

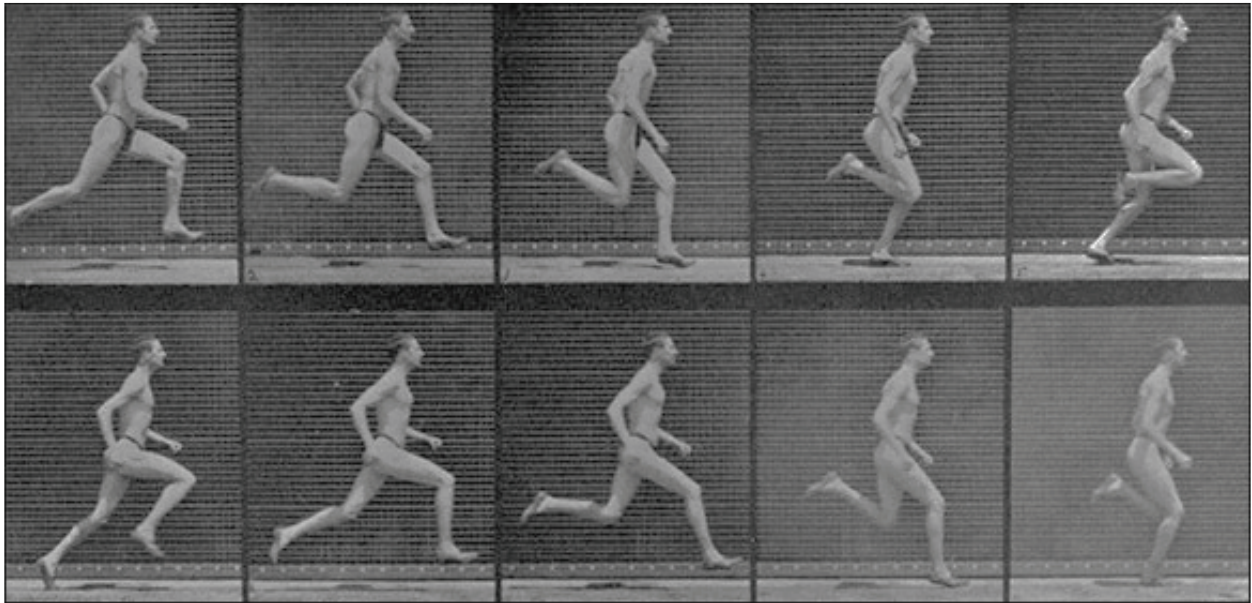
which seems to burst forth from the whirlwind created in the Flash's wake; in the bottom right corner, the text "Whirlwind adventures of the fastest man alive!" reinforces the image's content.

But what can we make of its evocation of the cinema? Wolk is correct to note that the image may be commenting on the relationship between the two media, but it's perhaps more complicated than even he realizes. The represented film strip, which implies duration by depicting the Flash at various instants, owes more to the proto-cinematic motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge than to cinema as we know it today (or in 1956 for that matter). Using a series of deliberately positioned individual camera set-ups, Muybridge captured subjects in motion via a series of discrete images,

which could then be studied independently as instants (e.g., revealing the moment at which all four of a running horse's hooves are off the ground at once) or reconstituted as moving pictures via Zoopraxiscope projection (fig 4.2). Scott Bukatman has compared some early comics—specifically those of Winsor McCay—to Muybridge's chronophotography, noting that they produce "visual continuity, dynamic flow, and, importantly, credible naturalistic detail" in similar ways, and that the left-to-right reading procedure and "graph-like configuration" of panels allows readers to interpret a strip's discrete images "as stages in a single movement, as in a chronophotograph" ("Comics and the Critique of Chronophotography" 86). He continues, engaging with scholar Marta Braun and chronophotographer Étienne-Jules Marey:

Braun emphasizes the difference between Marey's scientism and Muybridge's formalism: 'Muybridge's concern [was] with narration, not with movement' (p. 249). For Braun, Muybridge's use of multiple, spatially organized cameras, as well as his characteristic array of discretely bounded, pleasingly composed images, privileged a sense of time as divisible and discrete. Contained parcels of space become analogous to contained parcels of time. Marey's single plates, by

contrast, emphasized a temporal continuum, with the chronophotograph capturing instants along the axis of time's arrow. (88)



**Fig. 4.2.** Not the fastest man alive: Muybridge's chronophotography.

While comics occasionally dole out time on an instant-to-instant basis in a way that recalls Muybridge's sequential images—for instance, the McCay strips that Bukatman analyzes—more often they leave larger temporal gaps in the narration. In either case, however, the images are arranged in such a way that they relate to each other both sequentially (as a narrative unfolding over time) and spatially (as images on a page). If anything, however, comics are even more concerned with narration and less concerned with time than Muybridge. Most comics panels represent what we might call an “image-event”—a chunk of narration rather than an instant of time—whose “duration” is not fixed (e.g., one twenty-fourth of a second) but is rather a combination of two variables: the diegetic length of the event narrated (including action, dialogue, narration, etc.) and the non-diegetic time devoted to it by the reader. In the McCay comics that mirror Muybridge's chronophotography, each panel's image-event represents an instant of a greater movement, but this is not typical of comics.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, it's true that “comics more clearly resemble what Muybridge produced than what the Edison Company and

<sup>66</sup> Scott McCloud would classify these Muybridge-esque panel transitions as “moment-to-moment,” which his analyses reveal are among the least used transition types in all of comics (their scarcity is rivaled only by “non-sequitur” transitions) (74-75).

the Lumières followed it with” (89), at least in terms of their spatial juxtaposition of static images.

With this context in mind, let’s take another look at *Showcase #4* (fig. 4.1). We see the Flash running; his position changes slightly in each frame, just as in Muybridge’s set of photos. The reference to chronophotography suggests that something about the Flash’s movement is beyond the capacity of normal human perception, that, like the horse’s gallop, it requires mechanical eyes to view clearly. In the final frame, however, the “real” and “present” Flash (as opposed to the “photographed” representation) bursts through the celluloid, suggesting the failure of even this technology to represent and contain him. The Flash’s movement is ultimately *too* fast—faster, certainly, than a camera shutter—which prevents his movement from being captured mechanically. This image thus conveys the speed and dynamism of the new and improved character, as well as a somewhat counter-intuitive commentary on the two media involved: because the Flash’s extreme speed exceeds the representational limits of cinema, his exploits might be better (though still not perfectly) represented in the static images of comics. How can we account for this? Rudolf Arnheim notes that “Motion, like any other kind of change, is perceivable only within a limited range of speed. The sun and the moon travel so slowly that they seem to stand still; a flash of lightning is so fast that its entire course appears simultaneously as a line” (384). The lightning bolt adorning the Flash’s chest is thus evocative of both his superpower as well as the medium that represents him. In short, comics represent movement like a lightning bolt streaking across the sky: motion so fast that it appears to our perception as stasis. Angela Ndalians pins down comics’ relationship to movement thusly:

To a certain extent, yes, the comic book is a static medium: comics do not succumb to the phenomenon of the persistence of vision [sic] that typify media like praxinoscopes or film animations, despite the fact that all three forms are famous for favouring the drawn image... [The] ontology of the comic book (and comic strip) is quite different to that of media such as live action and animated films, which rely more literally on the illusion of motion. However, [...] the comic book form is anything but static. The panels that litter its pages are riddled with a dynamism and motion that present their own unique articulation of time and space. Certainly, some of the narrative action represented within a comic book panel can ‘freeze’ time, but other panels—while remaining visually static as

still images on a page—open up complex depictions of time and space that create modes of perception that are particular to comics. The contradiction, of course, is that the comic represents the animated flux of time and space through stasis. (238)

The “dynamism, kineticism and energy” (ibid.) associated with superheroes makes them excellent representatives of comics’ formal potential, but as Martyn Pedler has pointed out, the Flash is superlative in this regard. In an inversion of Arnheim’s description above, the Flash moves so quickly that to him all human endeavour moves as slowly as the sun and the moon—in other words, the world around him appears as static as a comic book panel. (As a result, the writers and artists of these books need to be especially careful to differentiate between movement and stasis, since both are represented via static images.<sup>67</sup>) The static images of comics therefore also convey the character’s unique subjectivity.

Pedler writes, “superheroes are born into a medium that appears to consist of static images. Without the ability to show literal movement, superheroes like the Flash are instead animated by the powerful techniques employed by comic book artists to create time and motion across the page” (250). Motion lines are one such technique that suggest movement (and therefore duration) within a single static image; another is the visualization of multiple instants within the same panel, whereby a subject is seen at different stages of movement simultaneously (as seen in fig. 2.16 and fig. 3.5). The most basic representation of movement in comics, however, relies entirely on the collaboration of the reader, who synthesizes B (*movement*) from the given visualizations of A (*static image 1*) and C (*static image 2*) in a process known as closure.<sup>68</sup> For Mary Ann Doane, “the positions of the figures were too far apart” in Muybridge’s photographs, making it “often impossible to determine how the figure moved from one position to the next. Too much time was lost” (60). Closure thus has some historical precedent in chronophotography. But it is fundamentally in their relationship to this closure-necessitating “lost time” that comics and cinema make a radical break from each other, with the former

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<sup>67</sup> Pedler notes that this is the reason why Captain Cold or Mr. Freeze’s victims must be visibly covered in icicles, otherwise readers wouldn’t be able to tell who’s frozen in place, since from the reader’s perspective everybody’s motion in the comic book is “frozen” already (253).

<sup>68</sup> In order to make sense of a comic book, readers very rarely have to *literally* imagine what happens between panels; more often, the visual information provided is enough for the reader to synthesize a coherent narrative automatically. Following McCloud, comics theory has perhaps overstated the *experiential* aspect of closure, though the symbolic significance of the process cannot be overstated. This issue will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

medium widening the gap between Muybridge's instants while the latter narrows it. As Bukatman puts it, "Cinema reconstituted the movement that one could infer from [Muybridge's] sequence[s] of still images, while comics retained the synchronous spatiotemporal array [...] but both media were fundamentally bound to the explorations of time, rhythm and tempo so characteristic of modernity" ("Comics and the Critique of Chronophotography" 90).

It is this relationship to modernity that Doane is particularly interested in while tracing the history of cinematic time. She writes that the "emergence of mechanical reproduction is accompanied by modernity's increasing understanding of temporality as assault, acceleration, speed. There is too much, too fast. From Georg Simmel to Walter Benjamin, modernity is conceptualized as an increase in the speed and intensity of stimuli" (33). It is this experience of the world that necessitates Muybridge's photography, and ultimately cinema, which captures segments of time and organizes them, often according to aesthetic rules that ensure their coherence.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, however, "Modernity was characterized by the impulse to *wear* time, to append it to the body so that the watch became a kind of prosthetic device extending the capacity of the body to measure time. The acceleration of events specific to city life was inseparable from the effects of new technologies and a machine culture made possible by developments in modern science" (4). Freer than the rigid, linear, and unstoppable temporality of the watch, as well as the technologically-determined photograph and cinematograph, comics might be considered as an opposition to these technologies, as a means of asserting one's agency over time, of controlling the duration of represented events oneself: comics' time (as opposed to cinematic time) is not determined by the apparatus alone, but rather through the collaboration of the text and the reader, as is thereby tied to pre-modern media such as literature, painting, and drawing. In its "elastic temporality" (Pedler 253) we find some resistance to time's standardization, mechanization, industrialization, and rationalization in modernity.

It's clear, then, that comics and film have fundamentally different relationships to movement, time, and duration, having pursued opposite agendas in the wake of Muybridge. The primary interest of this chapter is in how those differences are effaced—or, if not effaced, negotiated—when comics are remediated by the cinema. How do comic book films remediate

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<sup>69</sup> Jared Gardner argues that the "cinema of attractions" that didn't abide by these rules "was relegated to the form's primitive past" while "Comics, always rooted in the narrative structure of shocks, fragments, and discontinuities, found itself increasingly defined as primitive and childish" (Kindle loc. 274).

comics' relationship to time and representations of movement? How do they transform comics' paradoxically kinetic stasis into (the illusion of) movement proper? Because comics' panel-to-panel or page-to-page relationship to temporality is mercurial, films remediating the same do so in a variety of ways, with a variety of results. (It is important to remember that there is no such thing as a "perfect remediation," since *fidelity* to comics' form or content is not the goal. The result of remediation will always be something of a hybrid, of two media "meeting in the middle," so to speak.) Doane reminds us that

For the most part, visible time in the cinema is equal to 'real time,' and any manipulation or troping of time takes place in the invisible realms of off-screen space or the interstices between shots. (Fast motion, slow motion, the freeze frame, and other distortions of time become, precisely, *special* effects, relegated to the marginal status of the heavily coded—and rare—moments.) (189)

It is largely through these kinds of special effects where much of the remediation that concerns us in this chapter occurs, resulting in such heavily coded moments. Whereas the remediation of the panel discussed in the previous chapter largely drew upon the categories of explicit and formal intermediality for its effects, the remediation of movement will primarily employ compositional intertextuality, expressive intermediality, and figural intermediality.<sup>70</sup> As before, we will see that the use of such aesthetic strategies brings film further away from the immediacy of photographic representation and the invisibility of cinematic style in realism and closer to the hypermediacy of comics, in this case usually by disrupting the uniformity of cinema's temporal flow in some way.

Any discussion of the "movement image" in cinema is incomplete without some reference to Gilles Deleuze, as well as the work of Henri Bergson that inspired him. The concepts that are particularly relevant here are the "privileged instant" and the "any-instant-whatever," which represent two distinct means of representing movement. The privileged instant refers to the division of movement into discrete and significant images, between which the actual movement occurs. As Deleuze writes, "Movement, conceived in this way, will thus be the regulated transition from one form to another, that is, an order of *poses* or privileged instants" (4). It's easy to see how we might conceive of the comic book in this way, given how each panel

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<sup>70</sup> Refer back to chapter two for a full description of the six levels of remediation.



provides an instant that is literally privileged over all other instants by virtue of its very representation (not to mention how the “instant” represented in the panel may be a composite image representing a span of time: i.e., an image-event). The process of closure represents the “regulated transition” (though comics are perhaps defined by a *lack* of regularity here) between poses. The any-instant-whatever, conversely, considers each individual image as a part that collectively reconstitute a whole; no single image is privileged over any other and, furthermore, each functions as one cog in a mechanical process that relies upon their equidistance from each other in a machine, such as a projector. For this reason, Deleuze and Bergson consider film as the medium most exemplary of the any-instant-whatever: “cinema is the system which reproduces movement as a function of any-instant-whatevers that is, as a function of equidistant instants, selected so as to create an impression of continuity” (5). Deleuze adds, however, that the cinema properly thrives on both, using any-instant-whatevers to produce privileged instants. The “privilege” here, however, exists not on the level of form—all snapshots are equidistant, and play an equal role in the production of the movement—but rather on the level of perception (e.g., though it doesn’t stand out formally, the frame in which Muybridge’s horse’s hooves are all off the ground simultaneously would be considered a privileged instant). The two strategies discussed in the following pages both represent a subversion of cinema’s any-instant-whatever in favour of the privileged instant of comics; the any-instant-whatever doesn’t disappear in either case, but is rather redeployed to create images (often poses, as in a choreographed dance) that stand apart from the temporal flow. More specifically, the compositional quotation (explicit intertextuality) presents privileged instants by virtue of their indexical relation to a previously existing and familiar comic book image, while the panel moment (figural intermediality) manipulates the ebb and flow of time, allowing—even forcing—the viewer’s attention to linger on certain images in the temporal flow. We’ll begin with the least explicitly “coded” instance of temporal remediation, which uses the compositional quotation—an explicitly intertextual moment in the comic book film in which the composition of the film frame directly mirrors or recalls a particular panel from a comic book—for its effect.

### **Compositional Quotations: Indices of Memory**

Aside from diegetic intertextuality, which is a necessary feature of any comic book adaptation, compositional intertextuality may be the commonest interaction between the two media in this

genre, perhaps because it's a direct and unambiguous way to point at and pay homage to the "original" text, regardless of how many creative departures are otherwise made from it. You'll note, however, that I don't classify this phenomenon as *intermediality* per se, because it fosters a relationship between a film and a *particular text* rather than the medium of comics and its form in general. Within that relationship, however, content is not merely appropriated or adapted but is also transformed by its new formal context. (See, for instance, my analysis of the "Spider-Man No More" shot in *Spider-Man 2* in the second chapter of this dissertation.) What is interesting about these moments, however, is not merely how they restage a familiar image in live-action, nor how they animate those compositions—usually movement is kept to a minimum in order to better reproduce the comics image—but rather how they create a layered palimpsest that uses the film image to reproduce a memory image of the comic book version in the viewer's mind. In this way, I argue that they serve an indexical function, implicitly pointing to the previous text.

It may not be immediately apparent how the relationship between the compositional quotation and its comic book source is indexical in nature. Indexicality is a term that is often misunderstood in film studies, so it's worth spending a brief moment to explicate my use of it here. As advanced by Charles Sanders Peirce, signs are "how we come to know things about the world by representing it" (Lefebvre, "Art of Pointing" 221), be they verbal or visual in nature. Indexical signs—the index refers to the finger used for pointing—point toward something and are also existentially connected to the thing they represent. (The concept of "existential connection" is often mistakenly conflated with causation.) Pronouns like "that" or "this" are indices of whatever they stand in for; my first name is an index of me. (To clarify, the proper name "Dru" doesn't exist as a direct result of me—I precede the name; I existed before I was called "Dru"—but when someone says "Dru" and means to refer to me, the word takes on an indexical quality.) Photographs are understood as indexical because of how light imprints itself on celluloid, similar to an inked fingerprint pressing against paper. Through the lasting influence of Bazin, Kracauer, Barthes, Cavell, and others, indexicality has become the photograph's, and therefore cinema's, defining characteristic and the guarantor of its veracity. The shift to digital imaging practices, whether alongside or to the exclusion of emulsion-based photography, has largely been conceptualized as a loss of the image's indexical relationship to the world. For many, this represented a crisis because "digital imaging operates according to a different ontology than do indexical photographs" (Prince, "True Lies" 273). Lev Manovich has perhaps



stated this most boldly in his pronouncement that “cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a subgenre of painting” (295). This kind of claim is the result of a widespread misunderstanding of indexicality as a narrower category than it is. Indeed, it makes little sense to say that a representational digital photograph is less indexical than a pointing finger, which is the index’s namesake. As Martin Lefebvre notes in his attempt to course-correct the discourse around indexicality in film studies,

since any worldly thing whatsoever—whether it be a photograph, a film, a painting, or a CGI—is dyadically connected to the world (or reality) in a potentially limitless number of ways, each one of them can form the basis for an indexical function. This implies that it is absurd to pretend that a photograph is *more* indexical [than] a painting or a CGI, since it is impossible to quantify the number of ways in which something may serve as a sign. (“Art of Pointing” 228).

For instance, a CGI is existentially connected to a number of digital artists that worked on it at various stages, as well as the programmers who created the programs used, the computers on which the image was created and refined, and so on. A representational painting is existentially related to the object on which it is based through the painter (231-32).<sup>71</sup> In short, “An index represents an object by virtue of its real, existential connection with it. It makes no difference whether the connection is natural, or artificial, or merely mental” (389n34).

The compositional quotation, however, represents a slightly more complex process than this. When a shot in a comic book film (e.g., fig. 2.6) makes the viewer conscious of a particular panel from a comic book (fig. 2.5), it serves an indexical function because the shot depends on the prior existence of the panel—not in the sense of direct causation, but nevertheless the shot’s composition wouldn’t exist as such without the panel. However, this connection between the two images—one filmic, one drawn—is only recognizable to the viewer by virtue of their mutual resemblance: in other words, the film shot also bears an *iconic* relationship to the comics panel, and it is through its iconicity that we recognize the index. This is distinct from the pointing finger or the pronoun, but not from the photograph, whose indexicality we also recognize by virtue of (and whose documentary value depends) on its likeness to that which it represents. The comics

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<sup>71</sup> I use the caveat “representational” in these examples because non-representational images don’t intend to point toward something in the world, though they may still be indexical (e.g., Jackson Pollack’s abstract expressionist paintings provide an index of his movements).

panel is to the compositional quotation as pro-filmic reality is to the photograph (though without the automatic and mechanical aspect). In other words, the film version *represents* the comics panel just as a photograph represents whatever was in front of the camera. This also takes us back to Julia Kristeva's original articulation of intertextuality, in which "The poetic signified refers back to other discursive signifieds, in such a way that several different discourses are legible within a poetic utterance" (qtd. in Iampolski 17). Mikhail Iampolski's *The Memory of Tiresias* is useful in developing an understanding of filmic quotation, which will guide my inquiry here. Quotation has been traditionally understood as an intra-medium phenomenon: e.g., one work of literature quoting another, or a piece of music repeating a snippet of another song's melody.<sup>72</sup> In written texts, quotations are designated by the use of quotation marks; the reader doesn't necessarily need to possess familiarity with the quote beforehand in order to be aware of its borrowed, multivalent, or intertextual status. However, in musical works or films, quotations are only activated by the listener or viewer's memory and knowledge. Per Iampolski, "only the viewer or the reader can unite a text, using his cultural memory to make it one" (3). This is how the compositional quotation functions in the comic book film. Iampolski defines quotation as "*a fragment of the text that violates its linear development and derives the motivation that integrates it into the text from outside the text itself*" (31). Thus, he focuses on illogical or incongruous moments in films (the "violations," similar to Michael Riffaterre's notion of agrammaticalness) and attempts to justify their presence by assigning them intertextual significance. I believe that this is too broad a definition, as it leads him to classify all manner of allusions, even those with which the author could not possibly have been familiar, as quotations.<sup>73</sup> A quotation, even when the medium prohibits the use of quotation marks, should at the very least be plausibly intentional (impossible as it is to presume authorial intentionality with certainty). In the case of the comic book films under examination here, however, there is no

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<sup>72</sup> Roman Jakobson's concept of intersemiotic translation, however, refers to the related process of translating works from one a verbal language to a non-verbal language.

<sup>73</sup> This results in some very tenuous and unconvincing intertextual connections. For example, in his analysis of *Vampyr* (dir. Carl Th. Dreyer, 1932), Iampolski claims that a shot of a hotel signpost is simultaneously a quote from both *The Aenid* and a poem by Baudelaire. He argues that "*An anomalous moment can reenter the text organically only if it is recognized as a quote*" (35). My issue is primarily terminological: the shot may very well be an allusion to *The Aenid* and an homage to Baudelaire, but a quote implies a more specific, directed reference than those described here by Iampolski. Moreover, a quote cannot be accidental, as Iampolski claims: "Even if Dreyer had something else in mind, Baudelaire and Cocteau allow us to inscribe the signpost into the film, creating an intertextual link that exists irrespective of the director's intentions" (35). In order to function as a quote, the reference must be *specific* and *deliberate*. What Iampolski describes is a looser form of intertextual reading.

ambiguity as to what texts are being invoked and we can proceed with a degree of confidence that any compositional quotations are deliberately intertextual (rather than accidentally or coincidentally so).<sup>74</sup> Regardless of which creative agent placed the reference in the film, the final product can be said to function similarly to a quotation, given the specificity and deliberateness of the reference. At the beginning of this section, I stated that compositional quotations were the “least obvious” of the strategies discussed in this chapter; this is precisely because of their lack of quotation marks, because they don’t *necessarily* call attention to themselves by disrupting the “linear development” of the film, as Iampolski suggests. Rather, they become privileged instants only by virtue of their recognition by the viewer.<sup>75</sup>

What happens when a compositional quotation is deployed in a comic book film? If the viewer doesn’t recognize the reference, then the shot recedes into the flow of images like any other.<sup>76</sup> However, if the viewer *does* recognize it, a perceptual combination occurs, resulting in the creation of a palimpsest image in which the film image offered to the viewer’s consciousness is combined and contrasted with one stored in memory. Bergson’s understanding of how memory effects perception is appropriate here: “In concrete perception, memory intervenes, and the subjectivity of sensible qualities is due precisely to the fact that our consciousness, which begins by being only memory, prolongs a plurality of moments into each other, contracting them into a single intuition” (qtd. in Doane 77). The image originally experienced within the comic book, as well as its context therein and the feelings associated with it, are suddenly brought to bear on the film image—a fairly complicated process that necessitates close readings of both versions.

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<sup>74</sup> Even if the director is basing his shots on storyboards produced by a separate artist, it’s extremely likely that the artist would be using the comics panel as a source.

<sup>75</sup> Compositional quotations do not appear to viewers as incongruous or agrammatical moments in need of external justification, because their recognition is predicated on the viewer’s knowledge of the cited text: their justification is created through their identification. As we’ll see later in this chapter, shots that remediate the comic book cover represent a more incongruous element since they disrupt the narrative flow of the film without also necessarily quoting any specific image.

<sup>76</sup> As we’ll see later in this section, compositional quotations are often granted privileged status in the narrative, serving as act break markers (as in fig. 2.6) or coming at the beginning or ending of a film (as in figs. 4.3 and 4.4). If the viewer intuits the added significance of these images without knowledge of their intertextual status, I believe it can be largely attributed to this and potentially the use of other stylistic devices. Additional levels of remediation, such as slow-motion, may also seem to “insist” that the viewer give added consideration to a particular composition.

Let's look at some specific examples and how they function.<sup>77</sup> *Daredevil* is a film based on the blind Marvel Comics superhero, and it's arguably among the most reverent comic book films with regard to its source material. The story, as is often the case in superhero films, is not an adaptation of a particular work but is rather a hodgepodge of elements taken from decades' worth of monthly comic books, including the accident that robs the adolescent Matt Murdock of his sight but also imbues him with a superhuman "radar" sense, allowing him to assume the costumed alter ego of Daredevil; the murder of his father, boxer Jack Murdock;<sup>78</sup> Daredevil's first encounter with Elektra;<sup>79</sup> and Elektra's death at the hands of Bullseye.<sup>80</sup> More general elements from the comics are also incorporated, including the narrative's setting (Hell's Kitchen); Murdock's day job (lawyer), religion (Catholic), and general lack of luck with romantic relationships; playful banter with his friend and fellow lawyer "Foggy" Nelson; reporter Ben Urich's pursuit for the truth behind the Daredevil vigilante; and Kingpin as the hero's arch-nemesis. Additionally, a host of minor characters are named after key creative personnel spanning the history of the character, including Kirby (for artist Jack Kirby), Quesada

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<sup>77</sup> Two films that rely on compositional quotation to a considerable extent are *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* and *Watchmen*, both of which will be analyzed extensively in the following chapter. I have deliberately excluded them from consideration here in order to draw upon a greater diversity of examples overall. Additionally, *Sin City* perhaps uses compositional quotations more than any other comic book film to date, but the sheer glut of familiar images that results dulls the individual impact of each. The reader may refer to chapter two for an analysis of scenes from *Sin City* with reference to expressive intermediality.

<sup>78</sup> All of these events have been narrativized numerous times in the comics, but perhaps most notably in *Daredevil* #1 (April 1964), *Daredevil: The Man Without Fear* #1 (October 1993), and *Daredevil: Yellow* #1-6 (August 2001-January 2002).

<sup>79</sup> From *Daredevil* #168 (January 1981).

<sup>80</sup> From *Daredevil* #181 (April 1982).



**Fig. 4.3.** The opening shot of *Daredevil*.

(for artist Joe Quesada),<sup>81</sup> Father Everett (for Daredevil co-creator Bill Everett), and boxers Colan (for artist Gene Colan), Romita (for artists John Romita Sr. and Jr.), Mack (for artist David Mack), Bendis (for writer Brian Michael Bendis), and Miller (for writer/artist/Elektra creator Frank Miller, who also appears in a cameo role as one of Bullseye's victims).

Daredevil co-creator Stan Lee also makes a cameo, as he does in most films featuring Marvel characters. All of these could be described as diegetic intertextuality (or metatextuality, in some cases), and thus make the importance of the comic book texts perfectly clear to those familiar with both (while passing by undetected by those unfamiliar with the references). The film is also loaded with quotations, both of lines taken verbatim from the dialogue balloons of comics and of compositions taken from specific comics panels. Obviously, it is the latter that interests me here.

I will limit my analysis to three key moments: the opening and closing shots of the film and the moment of Elektra's death, all of which are already privileged moments in the narrative whose impact are further heightened by their appeal to the privileged instants represented in comic book panels. The compositions for the opening<sup>82</sup> (**fig. 4.3**) and closing shots (**fig. 4.4**) are both taken from Kevin Smith and Joe Quesada's "Guardian Devil" arc; specifically, they are the cover images to *Daredevil* #3 (January 1999) (**fig. 4.5**) and #1 (November 1998)



**Fig. 4.4.** "A guardian devil": the closing shot of *Daredevil*.

<sup>81</sup> Kirby is played by Kevin Smith, who wrote the "Guardian Devil" arc for which Quesada provided the pencils. See *Daredevil* Vol. 2, #1-8 (November 1998-June 1999).

<sup>82</sup> To call this image the "opening shot" of the film is somewhat misleading, since it is a digitally-assisted tracking shot that begins at ground level, then scales up the side of a church, and finally settles on Daredevil clutching the crucifix at its spire. In the midst of the upward camera movement, there are five brief cutaways to various of the film's fight scenes. Though the trajectory of the camera is consistent, sometimes we are closer to the church upon returning from these cutaways (notably in shot #7, which is a close-up on a stained glass portrait). A shot-by-shot analysis would technically identify this as the eleventh shot of the film (after credits).

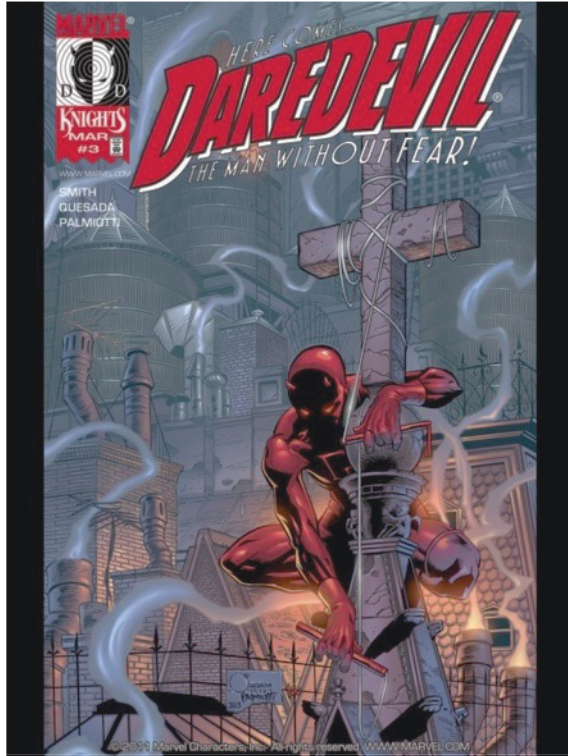


Fig. 4.5. The cover of *Daredevil* #3.

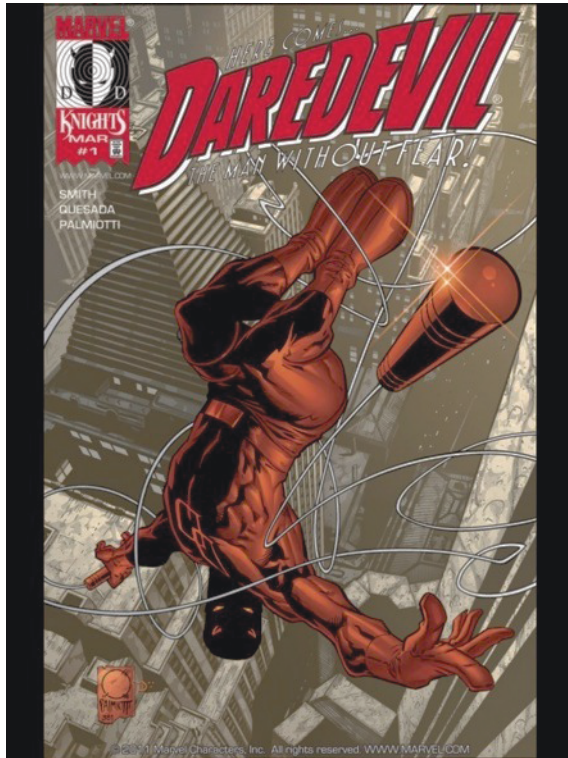
(fig. 4.6), respectively. The images that appear on the covers of comics are often particularly iconic in that they exist outside of the narrative but must embody it and/or the character's identity as a whole; it is their job to attract eyes to the book and, hopefully, get would-be readers—not only existing fans of the character but also neophytes who may be randomly browsing—to purchase it. It's not hyperbole to state that among the many privileged instants represented in a comic book, the cover image is the most privileged by virtue of its placement at the beginning of the book and its relative isolation from other images. Indeed, it's roughly equivalent to the opening or closing shot of a film in terms of its significance.<sup>83</sup> Therefore

it's no surprise that *Daredevil* would begin and end with compositional quotations from such iconic covers as these. The film begins *in medias res*, near the chronological end of the narrative before flashing back to Murdock's youth and proceeding linearly from there; we see Daredevil, clearly hurt and grasping onto the crucifix at the spire of a Catholic church. The contrast between the man in the red devil costume and the religious imagery is obviously intended to grab viewers' interest; for comics readers, however, the image is the first of many indications that the film is fully engaged with the history of the character (Smith and Quesada's eight issues are hardly as revered by fans as Miller's "Born Again" arc<sup>84</sup> or the aforementioned *Man Without Fear* miniseries, but these cover images rival anything in Miller's books in terms of sheer distinctiveness). The transition from drawing to live action, however, necessarily results in some

<sup>83</sup> A movie's poster or "one-sheet" may arguably serve this function as well, but whereas comics readers necessarily interact with the cover as a component of the comic book itself, a movie poster is a marketing paratext that remains textually separate from the film it's selling. It's perfectly plausible to imagine someone watching a movie without having seen its poster, but it's difficult to imagine a comic book reader reading an issue without poring over its cover. In terms of similarities, however, both comics covers and movie posters provide extra-diegetic spaces in which characters appear in particularly striking poses that don't need narrative justification—often surrounded by copy detailing the title of the comic or film, a tagline hinting at the plot, etc.—and whose primary purpose is to attract an audience to the text itself; in these ways, they serve similar functions.

<sup>84</sup> See *Daredevil* #227-233 (February-August 1986).





**Fig. 4.6.** The cover of *Daredevil* #1.

differences: reformatting from a vertical rectangular image to a horizontal rectangle means that Daredevil is considerably smaller in the film frame than in the comic (though the camera movement and a helicopter searchlight emphasize him in the shot) and he is centred; the camera angle frames the crucifix against the moon and clouds, while the cover image uses a mass of industrial buildings and steam as its backdrop; and most notably, almost all of the colour has been drained from the image, resulting in a shadowy black figure (we only see the red of his costume when the searchlight hits him) against a shadowy black night sky.

The most significant difference is not aesthetic, however, but narrative. The cover image of *Daredevil* #3 is essentially non-diegetic; it doesn't advance or contribute to the issue's narrative in any way (other than perhaps thematically), and indeed doesn't reappear within the narrative proper. It falls to the film version, then, to narrativize the image of Daredevil grasping the crucifix atop the church. On the issue's cover, Daredevil appears to be monitoring the area below; the church roof presumably offers him a convenient vantage point. This, of course, is speculation, since the image exists outside of the narrative. In the film, Daredevil is beaten and bleeding; he holds onto the crucifix to support him before falling through the roof, landing in front of the pews in the church's main hall. It's totally unclear, however, where in the narrative this event occurs; it cannot be after defeating Bullseye, because he is shown leaping away from the scene; it cannot be after defeating Kingpin, because he loses his mask in the skirmish. To some extent, then, it seems that we're meant to read this image as both inside and outside of the narrative, almost as a "cover image" that represents something about the character without fitting neatly into the narrative of the film. Christopher Nolan's "Dark Knight" trilogy (discussed in greater depth in chapter six) regularly engages in a similar practice, using spectacular helicopter shots of Batman overlooking Gotham City from the peak of a tall tower or skyscraper as transitional images between scenes (**fig. 4.7**). Taken in the



**Fig. 4.7.** The comic book cover remediated in *Batman Begins*.

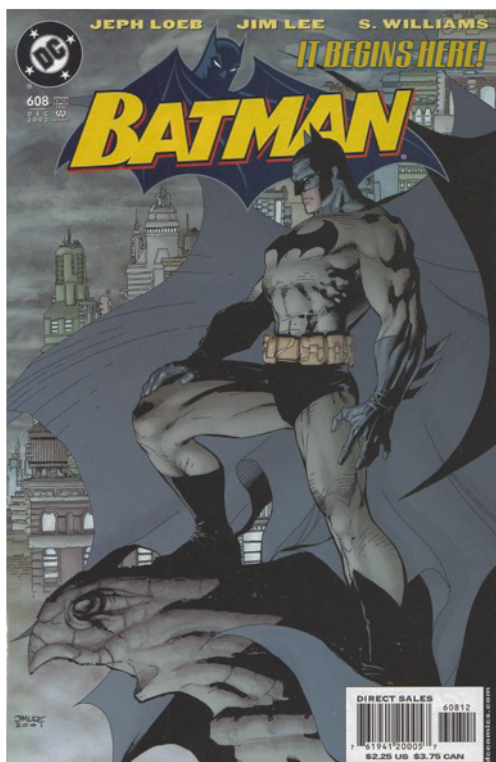
“Gosh, wow!” spirit they’re given—ultimately these shots halt the narrative in order to impress the viewer visually—they present no problem, functioning as iconic moments that resemble cover images from comic books (e.g., **fig 4.8**).<sup>85</sup> Narratively, however, these shots make little sense: How did he climb so high? How does he intend to get down? What’s he looking at from up there? However, such shots are not problematic within the comic book film genre; tweaking Iampolski, these moments can be integrated into the film not by recognizing them as intertextual quotes, per se, but rather as intermedial gestures to the aesthetics and function of the comic book cover, whose purpose is not to advance the narrative, or even to participate in it, but rather to provide a striking, iconic image that establishes characters, content, or themes in an quasi-diegetic space, attracting attention based largely on its aesthetic qualities.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup> A film like *Tank Girl* takes this practice to another level, using actual comic book art to transition between scenes.

<sup>86</sup> Superheroes are often depicted in gravity- and logic-defying poses within comic book narratives as well; such imagery is not exclusive to covers. In comic book films like *Daredevil* and *Batman Begins*, however, I am referring solely to those moments whose relationship to the narrative falls somewhere between ambiguous and nonsensical.



The closing shot of the film is a compositional quotation of an even more abstract image in terms of its relationship to narrative. *Daredevil* #1's cover, also drawn by Quesada, is part of a tradition of comic book covers that don't even provide the slightest hint of the narrative within, but only display the protagonist in a dynamic, often physics-defying pose. (Figs. 4.1 and 4.8 are other examples of this phenomenon.) *Daredevil* #1 depicts the red-horned superhero suspended in mid-air above the New York skyline, his face obscured in shadow but his eyes and horns glowing red; his eyes peer directly at the reader (ironically, given his blindness). In free fall, he strikes an upside-down acrobatic pose as the cable attaching the two ends of his billy club



**Fig. 4.8.** Batman overlooks Gotham on the cover of *Batman* #608 (December 2002).

gracefully swirls around him in an intricate pattern. The red of the costume and billy club are the only colourized elements in the image (aside from the company and title logos and artists' signatures); *Daredevil* thus stands out against the black-and-white, almost sepia-toned background. A slight lens flare on the tip of the billy club evokes the medium of photography, emphasizing that this is a moment frozen in time: a snapshot rather than an image-event with duration. And even without motion lines or any other signifiers of movement, the image is incredibly dynamic due to the intricate pattern woven by the billy club's trajectory. The film version (fig. 4.4), naturally, adds movement to the composition: the building rushes past as *Daredevil* falls through the air toward the streets below; the cable thrashes through the air as the grappling hook end rushes directly at the camera, echoing the direct address of *Daredevil*'s gaze

from the comic image. As in the previous example, the film's limited palette strips almost all colour from the original drawing. The final lines of the film, spoken in voiceover over this image and those preceding it, make the connection to the "Guardian Devil" story explicit: "I prowl the rooftops and alleyways at night, watching from the darkness. Forever in darkness. A guardian devil."

Given the vast difference in sales between contemporary comics and blockbuster films, it's fair to say that the film versions of long-running comics characters are, for most viewers, points of entry to these narrative worlds. Smith and Quesada's run on *Daredevil* was framed similarly, ending the numbering of the previous series (after three-hundred and eighty issues in thirty-four years) and starting again at #1. In the bottom left corner of the cover, however, below the artists' signatures, reads the number "381": this is the "true" issue number, beginning from 1964. Thus *Daredevil* #1 brands itself as part of the old tradition as well as the beginning of a new one simultaneously. Pointing to *this* cover specifically is thus charged with significance beyond the aesthetic force of the image itself, since the film adaptation operates in the same way as the re-launched series, telling a story with both new and familiar elements; it's an entry point for new viewers, but long-time fans of the character will have their knowledge of the comic books rewarded as well. It's a continuation of what has come before as well as a "new #1."

In the case of both the opening and closing shots, based as they are on comic book covers that exist outside of narrative, the memory images that they bring forth produce associations that are primarily aesthetic. The viewer gets a Proustian charge of reminiscence, but divorced as these images are from any narrative context, the experience may not go much deeper than that. This is



Fig. 4.9. Bullseye kills Elektra in *Daredevil* #181.

not the case with the third and final compositional quotation that I want to analyze, which is the climax of Elektra's fatal battle with Bullseye. The image in question depicts Bullseye impaling Elektra with her sai, and was originally featured in *Daredevil* #181, an issue whose cover boasted "Bullseye vs. Elektra: One Wins, One Dies." In the comic (**fig 4.9**), this image appears in a borderless panel against a white background (with a pink stripe that dissolves to white as it approaches the characters): in this way, it is abstracted from both time and space as conventionally depicted in comics. The lack of dialogue or sound effects on the entire page emphasizes its slow, almost timeless quality. The dimensions of the image on the page also lend it additional significance, especially when contrasted



**Fig. 4.10.** Bullseye kills Elektra in *Daredevil*.

against the series of thin, horizontal panels on the other side of the page: it stands out by virtue of its difference. In other words, the image's stylistic features encourage the reader to slow down and contemplate the significance of this narrative event. It's this context that the reader imposes on the film version (**fig. 4.10**), a shot that appears onscreen for less than two seconds. While the previous two examples existed somewhat outside of the narrative, both in their comics and film versions, this compositional quotation represents a crucial turning point in the plot whose narrative significance is only heightened intertextually. The film's intensified continuity editing seemingly demands that the film not rest on any one shot for longer than a few seconds; and though the equidistant snapshots continue to fly through the projector, this image stands out amidst the flow and lingers in the viewer's memory, if not perception. This is because its particular indexical quality calls upon the viewer to participate, or more specifically to "look at" the original comics image at which the compositional quotation points, and to read them dialogically. As Doane writes, "The index, more insistently than any other type of sign, is haunted by its object" (94): it may be read in isolation, but this would ignore precisely what makes comic book films like these such intriguing intertextual and intermedial objects.

All of the remediating strategies discussed in this dissertation necessitate that the viewer actively negotiate between comics and film in one way or another. The specificity of

compositional quotations—*this* shot recalls *this* panel from *this* comic—puts this practice into stark relief, clearly demonstrating how the comic book film is read as a palimpsest composed not just of multiple texts but of multiple media. *Daredevil* is an interesting case study because, for the most part, it eschews the more stylistically self-conscious strategies of remediation (e.g., split-screen, as discussed in the previous chapter) and relies primarily on textual references that would slip by unnoticed by anyone not already in the know. Unlike a film like *Sin City*, whose extreme stylistic choices are only rationalized with the understanding that it's based on a comic book, *Daredevil*'s quotations are not stylized in such a way that they call attention to their intermediality; rather, they simply add another layer of textuality that enhances the meaning of the film for those already fluent in its language, so to speak.

### **Motion Lines: A Brief Analysis**

A second mode of intermediality that is deployed in the remediation of stasis in the comic book film is what I earlier termed expressive intermediality, which involves using film style to approximate the aesthetics of certain expressive elements of comics form. This is not something that has to do with the representation of movement per se, but rather the ontological difference between drawing and photography. To reiterate my sentiments in chapter two (and anticipating themes central to chapter five), the comic book film renders that difference effectively meaningless due to the many manipulations that photographed images undergo. Expressive intermediality can encompass a fairly broad range of effects, including impossible lighting or use of colour; the abstraction of objects from their surroundings (i.e., the elimination of backgrounds); the caricaturing of reality through larger-than-life props, sets, and make-up; and the imposition of effects particular to or predominantly associated with comic book representations onto an otherwise live-action (or seemingly live-action) shot. In this case, the effect being remediated is motion lines, which are used in comics to give the reader a sense of movement and trajectory within a single image (as already discussed relative to fig. 4.1). Unlike the previous section, the results here should be very evident to any viewer of the film, for two reasons. First, no prior knowledge of another text is required; i.e., these aren't quotations that refer to a specific text. Second, the effect is not a natural feature of cinematography or a common feature in live-action cinema, and therefore stands out as a deliberate stylistic addition. Scott McCloud points out that motion *blur* is produced in films whenever the object filmed moves



**Fig. 4.11.** Visible bullet trails—distinct from comics’ motion lines—in *The Matrix*.

faster than the camera shutter (113), but motion *lines* are distinct from this phenomenon. They are clearer, cleaner, and more precise than blur; moreover, they serve a very different purpose. Whereas motion lines in comics are always a deliberately used stylistic choice, motion blur is an inherent and unavoidable quality of cinema. In fact, it’s often seen as a *defect* of the medium, especially by technically-minded filmmakers like James Cameron and Peter Jackson who have spearheaded an attempted transition from twenty-four to forty-eight frames per second that would effectively eliminate motion blur from cinema (Owano).

Neil Cohn asserts that motion lines are one of many conventions of comics’ visual language that are understood because of their widespread usage, not because they resemble their meaning (10): in other words, this is a symbolic effect, rather than an iconic one. Cohn writes, “Conventional representations like motion lines... are all understood better with age and more experience reading comics” (134). While this is certainly true of dialogue balloons, which do not in any way *resemble* spoken speech, motion lines are a more complex case. Take what has been mistakenly interpreted as a remediation of motion lines in *The Matrix*, about which Costas Constandinides writes, “Motion lines are actually reproduced for [...] the bullet-time effect in *The Matrix* in a style that can only quote motion lines in comic books” (84), referring to a scene in which bullets fired at Neo leave a visible trace in their wake (**fig 4.11**). Rather than lines, however, the trails left by the bullets in this scene look more like visible sound or heat waves; as a result, they appear as natural (if usually invisible to the naked eye) translucent ripples in the air rather than an artificial and arbitrary addition to the scene; their visibility seems to be a product





**Fig. 4.12.** Remediated motion lines in *V for Vendetta*.

of the slow-motion rather than an imposition of a comics convention onto the film. Expressive intermediality, by contrast, represents a break with photographic reality in favour of representing a world as it would appear in a comic book, through that medium's particular idioms and conventions. *The Matrix* example, because it naturalizes motion lines within that world and makes them appear organic to the image, does not qualify. A related film, *V for Vendetta*, does remediate motion lines, however.<sup>87</sup> Motion lines only appear in one scene of the film, in which V dispatches a squad of special operatives and a government official in slow-motion. As we'll see in the next section of this chapter, slow-motion is also key to the remediation of stasis in the comic book film, but what's significant about this scene is the use of motion lines following from the tips of V's knives (**fig. 4.12**). In contrast to *The Matrix*, these motion lines are patently artificial and cannot be interpreted as an effect of the slow-motion or a natural (if usually invisible) feature of the environment. Rather, this is a deliberate stylistic intrusion that remediates the motion lines of comics.

According to McCloud, Ndaliansis, and others, motion lines are largely responsible for the dynamism of comics art (McCloud 111; Ndaliansis 245), an assertion difficult to argue with.

<sup>87</sup> *V for Vendetta* is related to *The Matrix* insofar as its director, James McTeigue, was the first assistant director on *The Matrix*. *The Matrix*'s directors, Andy and Lana Wachowski, also wrote the screenplay and produced.

Additionally, motion lines represent a possible counter-argument to Jared Gardner's assertion that comics are the least efficient narrative medium (Kindle loc. 91). Indeed, motion lines are an efficient means of representing a span of time in a single privileged instant, showing the final result and using motion lines to suggest the path taken on the way to that state; a film, by contrast, would typically be beholden to the duration of the pro-filmic event. To date, very few live-action films have remediated comics' motion lines, especially compared to the compositional quotation, which runs rampant throughout the comic book film genre. This is most likely because motion lines are redundant in a moving image medium; since movement in film is explicit rather than implicit, the only cinematographic purpose of motion lines would be purely aesthetic and ornamental, as opposed to the comic in which they provide information that helps the viewer make sense of the image. This is certainly the case in the *V for Vendetta* scene discussed above. Thus, it seems that motion lines in cinema have a similar overall effect as the split-screen compositions in *Hulk* (e.g., fig. 3.28): the result is both more stylistically self-conscious—i.e., less immediate, more obviously mediated—and somewhat superfluous. Just as *Hulk* would employ split-screen to show the same action from two different angles, *V for Vendetta*'s motion lines suggest movement where movement is already plainly perceivable to the viewer.

### **Panel Time: Visualizing the Reading Experience through Slow-Motion<sup>88</sup>**

The final manifestation of temporal remediation in the comic book film is also the most complex and yet, increasingly, among the most common. Its complexity lies in the fact that it doesn't remediate the *aesthetics* of the medium but rather the *reading process* unique to comics. How does the reader interpret and synthesize a narrative from the series of discrete static images offered by a comic book? According to McCloud, closure—which refers “to the mental process whereby readers of comics bridge the temporal and spatial incompleteness of the diegesis that occurs in the gutters between panels, thereby participating in the creation of narrative” (Pratt, “Narrative in Comics” 111)—is the most fundamental process of reading comics, performing tasks equivalent to cinematic movement (between frames) and editing (between shots): “in a very real sense,” McCloud writes, “comics *is* closure” (67). And just as gutters play a salient role

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<sup>88</sup> This section includes some previously published material. See Jeffries, “Comics at 300 Frames Per Second: Zack Snyder's *300* and the Figural Translation of Comics to Film.”

in the construction of comics, closure plays a salient role in the experience of reading them. In film, the rapid succession of still images allows viewers to perceive uninterrupted movement on the screen: due to the lack of perceivable visual downtime between each frame, the brain automatically performs a process analogous to closure when watching a film, connecting what are actually discrete images into what is perceived as fluid motion. McCloud argues that comics readers must consciously work to produce the same effect of seamlessness whenever they read comics, actively filling in the gaps between panels and thereby turning the gutter into a site of productivity and collaboration (68).<sup>89</sup> Though this theory has assumed prominence in comics scholarship, in my view McCloud is grossly overemphasizing the reader's participatory role between panels; indeed, the vast majority of comics are expressly designed so that readers *don't* have to perform the kind of mental work he describes.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, the concept of closure as conceptualized by McCloud has taken firm hold in comics studies, perhaps because it allows us to understand the medium in a way that brings it closer to cinema, a medium with a greater body of scholarship and theory than comics, not to mention critical prestige and cultural currency.<sup>91</sup> The theory of closure smooths over the gaps inherent in comics, imbuing it with a sense of aesthetic unity, while also granting the reader a significant degree of agency: both are very

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<sup>89</sup> McCloud does not take different reading practices into account. In the novel, some readers visualize written material more than other more "conceptual" readers; the same is doubtlessly true of comics as well.

<sup>90</sup> This kind of mental work only becomes relevant in cases of interpretive difficulties caused by visual or narrative ambiguity (whether deliberate or not). McCloud's example of closure is a two panel series in which the first panel shows an angry man swinging an axe at another man, screaming "NOW YOU DIE!"; the second panel is a long shot of a skyline with the exclamation "EEYAA!!" superimposed above the buildings (66). McCloud claims that every reader will consciously imagine the specifics of the murder; I would counter that knowing a murder took place (we already know that an angry man was swinging an axe) is sufficient to understand the scene and that most readers will be willing to proceed with the narrative accepting this minimal amount of ambiguity (e.g., how quickly the axe was swung, where it made contact, etc.). If the victim is shown alive and well later in the narrative, then the representational gap becomes significant (and deliberately misleading), but otherwise we are given enough information to proceed without confusion.

<sup>91</sup> Henry John Pratt lays out the ways in which McCloud exaggerates the differences between comics and film: "Greg Cwiklik contends that all of McCloud's illustrations of the operation of closure in comics could just as easily be done with film: 'closure is essentially what is referred to in film as montage.... the use of these dramatic transitions originated in film and migrated to comics.' Bart Beaty has noticed that McCloud tends to think of closure as operating in film only between frames. However, the more salient equivalent to closure in film is between shots, 'and shots—like panels—are linked by transitions which are "far from continuous and anything but involuntary."' Indeed, the intimacy which McCloud ascribes to comics as a result of viewer involvement has long been held to be a hallmark of film and television.' And Ng Suat Tong points out that the types of narrative transitions that McCloud finds to occur between panels are not unique to comics at all. Film excels at portraying the next moment in time in a narrative sequence, but a film can also easily shift between multiple temporal and spatial locations" ("Narrative in Comics" 114). Pratt, it should be noted, tends to exaggerate the similarities between comics and film: see "Making Comics into Film."



appealing ideas for those looking to justify comics' aesthetic value.<sup>92</sup> Even if closure is not a necessary *fact* of reading comics, it has certainly influenced the way we *conceptualize* the act of reading them post-McCloud.

There are other less controversial aspects of the comics reading experience that are also relevant to the present discussion. For instance, it is unambiguously the case that comics are composed of series of static images. They may be dynamic static images, per Ndalians, but they are static nonetheless. Luca Somigli, translating scholarship on Italian *fumetti*, writes:

As Daniele Barbieri explains in his excellent structural study of the comics medium, the panel itself is not simply an image frozen in time, but it can be used to represent a duration through a number of different techniques (use of motion lines, repetition of the image as with an overexposed photograph, particular arrangements of the balloons, and sound effects, etc.): “Therefore, we have one image—traditionally corresponding to one instant—within which there is a duration. With the comics, the panel no longer *represents* an *instant*, but a *duration*: just like cinema.” (280-81)

The difference between cinema and comics, then, is not in what they each represent (a duration of time) but in how they represent it: via the static privileged instants (or image-events) of comics or via the flow of any-instant-whatevers of cinema. Although movement is absolute—an object is either in motion or at rest—there are degrees of movement, and slow-motion cinematography inarguably works to bring photographed movement *closer to* stasis than it otherwise would be (if shot and projected in “real time”). In other words, film’s representational flexibility allows viewing duration and diegetic duration to be distinct from each other, just as they are in comics. Thus any cinematic intervention that divorces viewing duration from diegetic duration may potentially qualify as figural intermediality, which refers to the cinematic remediation of the reading experience of comics.

Though “real time” is rarely adhered to by films for their entire running time (i.e., a two-hour film usually represents much longer than two diegetic hours), it is usually the default mode

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<sup>92</sup> Gardner makes the connection between the gutter between panels and the cultural “gutter” in which comics has existed for most of its history. In filling in these gutters, I argue that the theory of closure hopes to pull comics out of the cultural gutter as well. See *Projections*, Kindle loc. 91.

of representation within each shot because it most closely mirrors our natural perception of the world. Doane's explanation of cinematic "real time" is worth quoting in full:

In the technical language of filmmaking, the term *real time* refers to the duration of a single shot (assuming the shot is neither fast nor slow motion). If the physical film is not cut and its projection speed equals its shooting speed (usually somewhere between sixteen and twenty-four frames per second), the movement on the screen will unfold in a time that is isomorphic with profilmic time, or what is generally thought to be our everyday lived experience of time—hence the term *real*. The time of the apparatus matches, is married to, the time of the action or the scene. (172)

There is no equivalent to real time in comics; there will never be a perfect or guaranteed correlation between the diegetic duration of the narrative and the reading time of its narration. Indeed, the reader's ability to advance through the narrative at her own pace suggests a closer relationship to psychological time, which may be closer to "our everyday lived experience of time" than cinematic real time (which, in the case of static long-takes, can feel psychologically longer than their "real" duration). The cinematic remediation of comic books, thus, often manifests in a disavowal of real time, in an increased sense of temporal flux that results in a phenomenological ebb and flow.

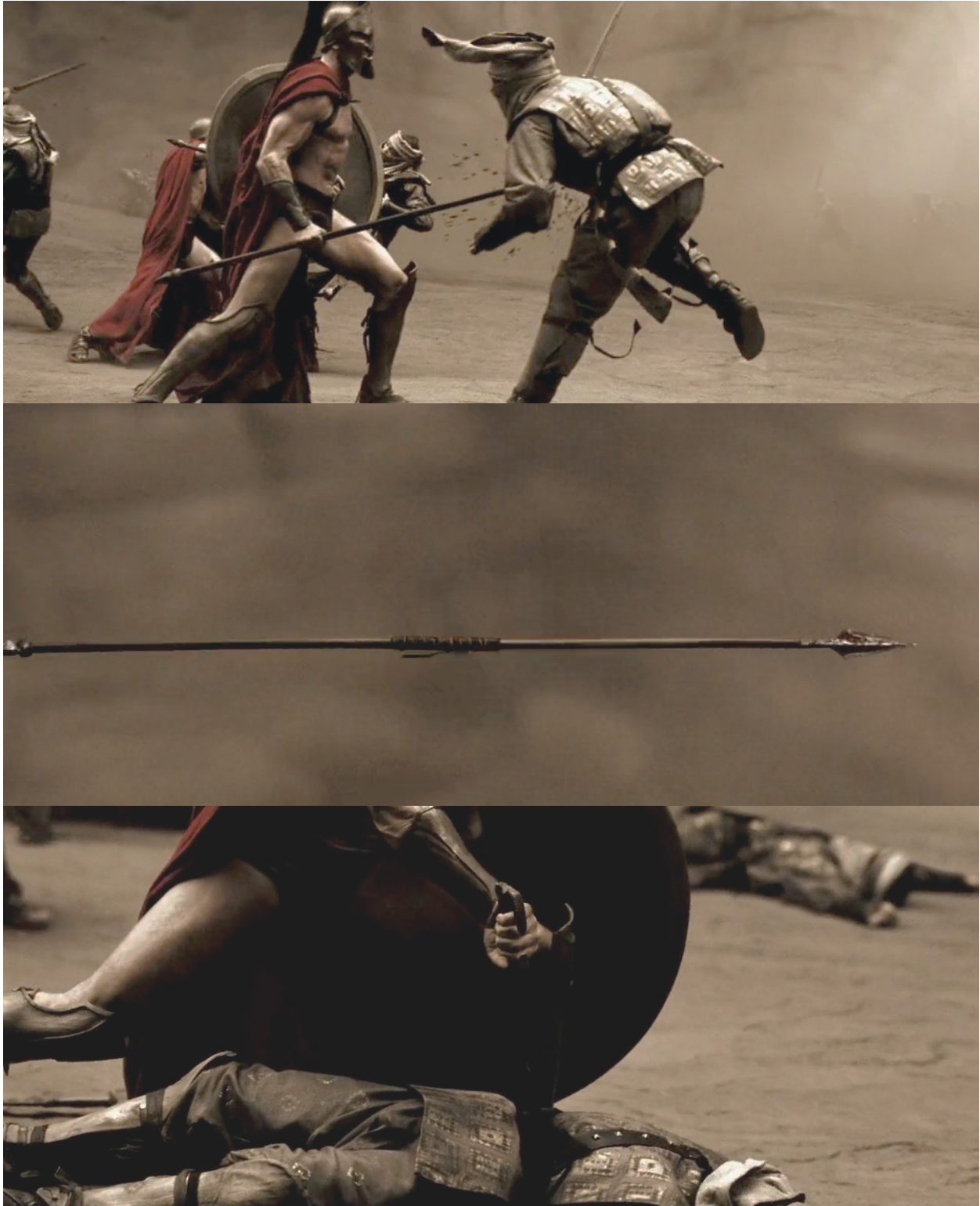
In the wake of *The Matrix*, which popularized a unique variation on slow-motion that became known as "bullet time" (using, it should be noted, a variation on Muybridge's multi-camera set-up), extreme slow-motion photography became a popular and common visual effect in Hollywood blockbusters. What I refer to as the "panel moment"—a shot in a comic book film in which the frame-rate alternates between real time and slow-motion, replicating the elastic temporality of the comic book—is distinct from, though often confused with, bullet time. The most significant distinction between the two articulations of slow-motion is that while bullet time serves both narrative *and* stylistic functions, panel moments serve no narrative function; they only exist as a function of remediating the comic book medium and, more specifically, the reading process. For instance, bullet time is used in *The Matrix* because characters like Neo, Trinity, and Morpheus have the ability to bend and slow the flow of diegetic time. In other words, time is being altered in both the world of the film and in the screen representation of that world; both the audience *and* the characters experience the narrative events depicted in bullet

time. Similarly, in *Spider-Man*, Peter Parker’s “spider-sense” is represented using bullet time, demonstrating his superior reflexes and response time compared to normal people. When his spider-sense is engaged, Peter experiences the world in slow-motion, allowing him to outmanoeuvre his aggressors. In *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, a playful sequence involving Quicksilver uses slow-motion to depict the mutant speedster’s perception of the world while also making his movements visible and legible to film audiences. As in *The Matrix*, the use of slow-motion is motivated by the character’s perception and experience of the world rather than—or in addition to—the aesthetic effect that it produces. In a sense, these scenes take place in real time *and* slow-motion, because the “real time” experienced by the characters *is* slower than ours. In panel moments, the characters depicted are not experiencing the world more slowly; just as it is for the comic book reader, it is only the viewer whose temporal experience is altered. When certain moments are presented more slowly than others, it is solely to heighten the aesthetic impact of the composition and to allow the viewer more time to contemplate the image: in other words, to privilege certain instants among the any-instant-whatevers that comprise the film. In short, while bullet time makes manifest the subjective experience of the characters, panel moments visualize the experience of the comics reader.<sup>93</sup>

While panel moments have appeared in various comic book films—only a few of which will be discussed here—the example *par excellence* comes from *300* and is known as the “Crazy Horse” shot, so called for the name of the camera rig used during its filming. The shot, which lasts for a full seventy-two seconds, is possibly the most memorable one in the film that is not also a compositional quotation from the original graphic novel. In the shot, which can almost be considered as a mini-battle scene on its own, Leonidas slashes his way through several enemies (**fig. 4.13**) before hurling his spear through the air; the camera follows the spear as it flies (**fig. 4.14**) and finally hits its target, impaling the soldier and sending him to the ground; he slashes through several more Persians, and the shot completes as he buries his sword in a fallen soldier (**fig. 4.15**). Throughout the shot, the speed of playback changes about twenty times in total,

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<sup>93</sup> There’s also something to be said for comics’ natural ability to render actions in their most hyperbolic and impressive state, distilling them down to their most aesthetically appealing moments. Spider-Man comics, for instance, are practically catalogues of the character’s most intricate, acrobatic poses, which don’t maintain their sense of grandiosity when presented as fleeting instants within larger movements. The increased presence of panel moments in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, which isolate and *elevate* precisely these kinds of poses, seems to be a direct response to this problem.



**Figs. 4.13-4.15.** Panel moments in *300*.

alternately ramping up into slow-motion to emphasize an arresting panel moment before ramping down to hasten the transition to the next moment, thus cinematically rendering the experience of

closure as defined by McCloud. The effect of this shot in particular was achieved by shooting with three cameras at once—each equipped with a lens of a unique focal length but all shooting from the same angle<sup>94</sup>—all recording at one-hundred-and-fifty frames per second,<sup>95</sup> much faster than the typical frame rate of twenty-four frames per second. In post-production, these separate shots were edited together to create the illusion of one seamless take, with the twenty-seven cuts masked by digitally-produced morph and zoom effects (Fordham, “A Beautiful Death” 78). The presence of these hidden edits reinforces the illusory nature of temporal flow in *300*, where what appears fluid is actually made up of separately filmed elements that are stitched together in post-production using digital editing technologies. As Stephen Prince puts it, “The action appears to be covered in a single camera move, and this appearance conceals the actual basis of the sequence that lies in montage. The wholeness of space here is a digital palimpsest, but one that advertises its constructed origins through the insistent artifice of the speed ramps” (*Digital Visual Effects*, Kindle loc. 1279). The shot is also an intermedial palimpsest that remediates how comics are read—as a series of separate images that are connected together only by the reader’s intervention—via a series of panel moments, which provide a seamless rendering of duration that also isolates privileged instants.

Prince writes that “The abrupt zooms and speed ramps give the shot a hyper-kinetic quality, a herky-jerky, spasmodic energy, a degree of artifice so pronounced that the viewer is forced to take notice” (Kindle loc. 1265). Indeed, such moments of extreme stylization demand that the viewer pay attention not just to the narrative but also to the film’s unique style of presentation. Unfortunately, the distinctiveness of its approach—and of the panel moment in general—has not been recognized. Constandinides writes about *The Matrix*, *300*, and *Wanted*—a film based on a graphic novel by Mark Millar and J.G. Jones—as though they all behave in the same way, referring to what I have called panel moments as “in-between moments” or as “blood-spraying time” (and, moreover, not making any distinction between them, bullet time, and traditional slow-motion cinematography, despite considerable aesthetic, narrative, and technological differences in each). He correctly notes that “the different temporal rhythms of motion and digital compositing replace *the gutter* between comic book panels” (87), which is

<sup>94</sup> The lenses were 85mm, 35mm and 18mm, giving radically different depths to each camera despite the identical shooting position.

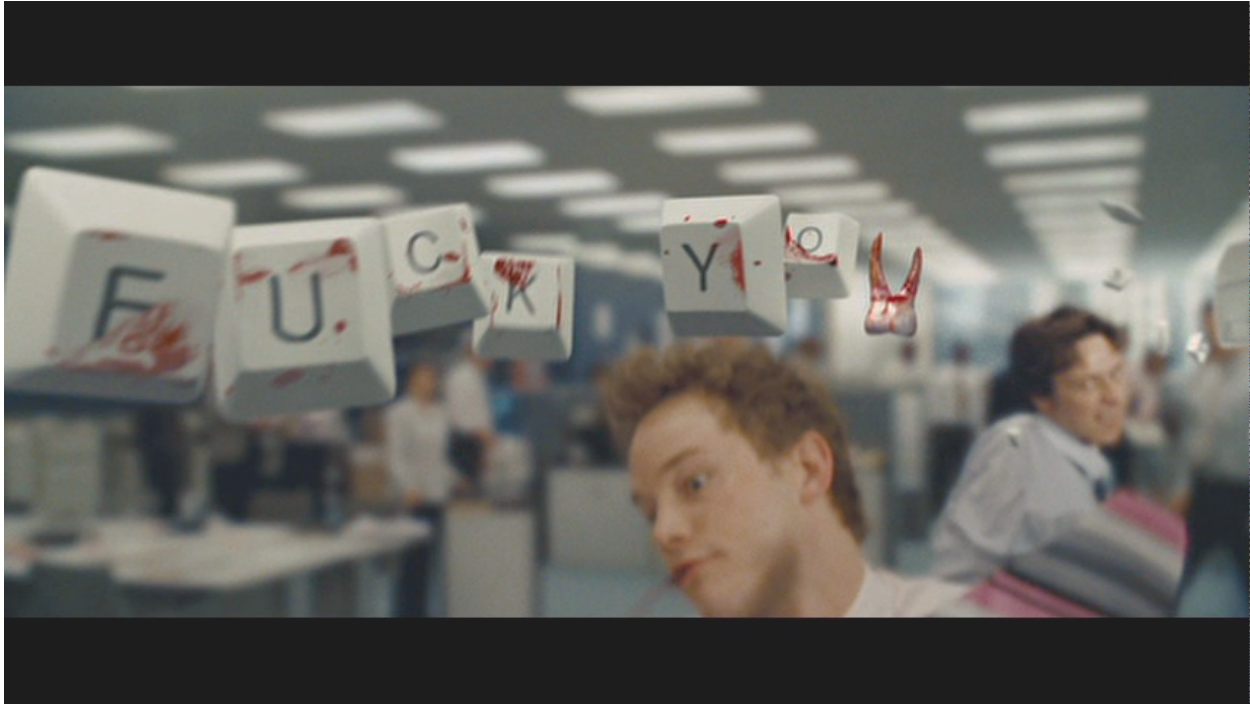
<sup>95</sup> If projected at the normal playback rate of twenty-four frames per second, each second of pro-filmic reality would take over six seconds to view.



**Fig. 4.16.** A point-of-view shot connects *Wanted*'s use of slow-motion to the character's subjectivity.

accurate for much of *300*, some of *Wanted*, and none of *The Matrix*. (I'd argue that the stasis of the central figure combined with the dynamic background created by the moving "camera" of bullet time is better read as a remediation of anime, which itself animates and remediates manga.) *Wanted* does feature several panel moments, but they are interspersed among a variety of other slow-motion-based stylistic interventions that collectively give the action scenes a "jagged, staccato rhythm," to use McCloud's own phrasing (67). One of the first instances of slow-motion occurs just a few minutes into the film as an assassin runs down a hallway, bursts through a window and flies between buildings, guns blazing and covered with shattered glass. Unlike *300*, the slow-motion here and elsewhere in the film is diegetically motivated: this assassin, along with many of the film's central characters, have the ability to respond to stimuli incredibly quickly (the pseudo-scientific reason given by the film is that their hearts beat upwards of four-hundred times per minute, producing excessive amounts of adrenaline). At this point in the narrative, this hasn't been explained to the viewer, but there is a shot that suggests that the slow-motion is linked to the assassin's subjectivity. In this shot (**fig. 4.16**), directly preceding the transition to slow-motion, we see as the assassin sees: the first-person perspective, shot-reverse shot editing pattern—the shot is bookended by close-ups of the assassin's eyes—and the throbbing of the frame in time with the heartbeats on the soundtrack all align the





**Fig. 4.17.** A panel moment-enabled visual gag in *Wanted*.

camera's perspective with that of the character. After this point, the slow-motion reflects the character's experience of time, as in *The Matrix*.<sup>96</sup> Within this shot sequence, however, there are several instances in which the camera ramps back to regular speed, which creates a dynamic, staccato rhythm to the scene: in other words, panel moments. The reader may think I have contradicted myself here, since panel moments by definition are not associated with a character's subjectivity; however, that remains the case here, since the *regular speed* cinematography is a purely aesthetic effect untethered to the assassin's slowed experience of time. Therefore the panel moments in this sequence are merely the inverse of *300*, in which the regular speed footage is associated with Leonidas' perspective while the slow-motion represents a purely stylistic intervention. *Wanted* also features more conventional panel moments, including a shot in which protagonist Wesley smashes a keyboard across his friend's face (**fig. 4.17**). He strikes the blow at full speed, loosing many of the keys; the missing keys then hang in midair, virtually static in a

<sup>96</sup> It's important to note that nothing in this sequence qualifies as bullet time, even though slow-motion and bullets are both involved. Bullet time should be reserved for those instances in which the effect is produced with still rather than movie cameras. As explained by Bob Rehak in his article "The Migration of Forms: Bullet Time as Microgenre," bullet time is produced in a particular way: each camera must be "tripped sequentially as action occur[s], generating a set of frames that [are] then digitally stitched together to make a 360-degree image. [...] Instead of multiple exposures from a single run of film through a unitary mechanism, bullet time blends many single shots into an apparently unbroken take" (34).





**Figs. 4.18-4.20.** A bullet's trajectory mapped out in panel moments in *Wanted*.

panel moment, allowing us to make out the phrase “FUCK YOU” (the second “u” is a tooth), before real time resumes and the keys fall quickly to the ground. This is precisely the kind of visual play that only seems possible in the static world of comics; panel moments enable these kinds of privileged instants to be appreciated onscreen longer than their diegetic duration—not indefinitely, or for as long as the reader cares to look before moving on, but nevertheless untethered from real time or the psychological time of the characters. The panel moment represents the psychological time of the comic book reader.

*Wanted* also features two scenes in which a bullet freezes in time after producing an exit wound (**fig. 4.18**); in both cases, time then reverses, showing us the bullet's complex trajectory—through, for instance, the hole in a donut (**fig. 4.19**)—culminating with its re-entry back into the gun from which it was fired (**fig 4.20**). The freeze-frame undoubtedly functions as a panel

moment, stopping time out of sheer pure aesthetic interest, as do some of the slower and more intricate shots (e.g., the donut). But this reversal of time's arrow represents an interest in time's malleability that is broader than the panel moment or slow-motion. We also see this in Superman's reversal of the Earth's rotation at the climax of *Superman*. Cinema may be "perceived as *the* exemplar of temporal irreversibility" (Doane 27), but Superman is capable of defying the laws of physics to which (pre-digital) cinema had to adhere, just as comic book readers are free to flip through pages as they choose, travelling to the past or future at will, and surveying a span of time simultaneously as it's arrayed across the page.

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In a comic book, all temporal moments—at least those privileged few that are represented in panels—are equally accessible to the reader at all times due to the nature of the medium, a quality that films are not capable of replicating to any significant degree. What is up for remediation, however, is the tension between the real time of lived experience and the total stasis of comics imagery. Most films fall somewhere in between these two extremes, with experimental films like the single-take *Russian Ark* (dir. Aleksandr Sokurov, 2002) and the photographic *La jetée* (dir. Chris Marker, 1962) perhaps coming closest to opposite ends of the spectrum. Given the genre's inherent interest in issues related to movement, comic book films employ a variety of stylistic means to appropriate, play with, and negotiate the dynamic stasis and elastic temporality associated with the comic book medium. The compositional quotation produces a memory image of a comic book panel whose stasis contrasts with the moving image remediation being viewed; the use of motion lines in live-action appropriates the visual language of comics, emptying it of its narrative purpose and replacing it with pure aesthetic value; and the panel moment, as well as other divergences from real time cinematography, replicate the temporal play inherent in comics as well as the staccato rhythm of the reading experience. Some films employ these techniques subtly, others obviously. Many filmmakers may not even be aware of the connections being forged between these two media in stylizing their films in these ways. (For instance, *Wanted*'s panel moments may very well be failed attempts at replicating *The Matrix*'s bullet time.) Indeed, the kinds of stylistic interventions that I've discussed in this chapter may be common enough in contemporary Hollywood cinema that many viewers let them pass by unnoticed; panel moments, for one, have been appropriated in other genres, wherein they lose their intermedial connection to

comics while maintaining the staccato rhythm associated with reading sequential art.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, films that remediate comic books can't help but negotiate between the stasis of comics and the mobility of cinema, and inevitably provide some commentary on the form of these two media.

In the next chapter, I'll discuss two films whose remediation of comics are so layered that they bring together all six of the categories defined in chapter two, including all of the techniques analyzed in this and the previous chapter. At the same time, these films explode the comics/film dialogism, replacing it with a polymedial palimpsest that is more inclusive of other media and more representative of the contemporary (new) media landscape.

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<sup>97</sup> For instance, instant replays on WWE's television programming now alternate between extreme slow-motion and regular speed video playback in order to heighten the perceived impact of various moves.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### The Comic Book Film as Polymedial Palimpsest: Two Case Studies

The concept of language and its potential reconcilability with the particular codes and audio-visual “grammar” of the cinema has long been a subject of debate in film studies: Bazin casually ended his “Ontology of the Photographic Image” essay with the rejoinder that “Then again, film is a language” (*What is Cinema?* 10), while Christian Metz put himself through greater pains to determine whether cinema was a language or a language system (1974). Throughout this dissertation, my approach has drawn inspiration from the work of literary theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Gérard Genette, whose ideas are supple enough that they have a fairly broad range of applicability across the humanities; but nevertheless, it should always be taken into account that they are writing primarily about verbal language and its use in the novel, while I am writing about the collision of two visual art forms of which verbal expression comprises only a part. It would be possible to read films using Bakhtin or Genette in a fairly straightforward way, analyzing the use of verbal language within the diegesis, the dialects and lexical choices of characters, and so on; this would ignore questions of cinematic form, however, while the analysis of language in the novel addresses both diegetic and formal issues simultaneously due to their shared vehicle of expression. Cinema usually contains language—it is, at the very least, *capable* of containing language, be it on the soundtrack or in intertitles—but when we speak about “the language of cinema” (or the language of comics, for that matter) we are referring to something else entirely: namely, the network of stylistic possibilities made available by the formal attributes of the medium (which includes verbal language as one of its components); the conventional means of expression that have emerged, evolved, and solidified over time; and the set of rules that organize the use of those conventions and allow us to make sense of them. It’s not merely the medium’s ontology—what it’s capable of or best suited to, its mode of “being”—but how it has been used in practice: in a metaphorical sense, its “vocabulary” and the rules of its “grammar.”

So, is cinema a language? Ultimately, the question is irrelevant to the present investigation. The more pertinent query is whether cinema *contains languages*, which in the Bakhtinian sense it certainly does. In the novel, Bakhtin isn’t concerned with languages in the

sense of large linguistic systems with unique lexicons and grammatical rules (i.e., what he calls “national languages,” like English or Russian); rather, Bakhtin uses the term “language” to refer to smaller modes of discourse that are specific to particular professions, or that give voice to particular social groups, or that otherwise embody some individual element of socio-cultural life. In other words, he’s interested in the socially determined use of a given language’s lexicon and grammatical rules: second-order linguistic phenomena that exist as discursive subsets of the overarching language. The deployment and commingling of these discourses in the novel results in various effects (e.g., satire or parody): as he writes, “the style of a novel is to be found in the combination of its styles; the language of a novel is the system of its ‘languages’” (Bakhtin 262). Understood in this way, the fact that cinematic style is not universal or uniform should indicate the co-presence of “languages” within the larger “cinematic language” (if such a thing exists), in the Bakhtinian sense. The fact that cinema is capable of remediating other media suggests that it is not monologic, but rather that it has the potential to draw upon a variety of modes of expression: in other words, a form of heteroglossia. If the form of the comic book represents one language, its cinematic remediation represents a dialogic interaction between the forms of expression native to the cinema and foreign ones associated with the comic.<sup>98</sup> the comic book film is thus, like the novel, “a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” (261). As Bakhtin writes, “All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions” (293). Cinematic forms are no different, and are often infused with their previous contexts (as we saw in chapter four in reference to compositional quotations) or other media more generally in precisely the way outlined by Bakhtin.

These “languages”—and from here on, consider the scare quotes around the word implied—can interact in two main ways, depending on whether the individual discourses retain their heterogeneity and difference or not; Bakhtin categorizes these two approaches as the “intentional semantic hybrid” and the “organic hybrid,” respectively. As Nico J. Berger explains, “Whereas in organic hybridity there is a merging and fusing into a new and independent product,

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<sup>98</sup> Following Bakhtin, the film medium would have as many languages as it has styles, genres, etc., as would the medium of comics. While each medium is capable of heteroglossia on its own, I am focusing on instances in which the languages interacting are primarily associated with other media.

language, or world view, intentional hybridity retains the different points of view or objects in a conflictual structure that remains energetic and open-ended” (70). The organic hybrid represents an integrated or invisible mixture of languages, while the intentional hybrid sees different languages “[coming] together and consciously [fighting] it out on the territory of the utterance” (Bakhtin 360), wherein each retains something of their aesthetic autonomy while simultaneously contributing to the formation of the dialogic text. Examples of each will be analyzed in turn.

### Holy Dialogism, Batman! or, *Na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na Na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na Bakhtin!*

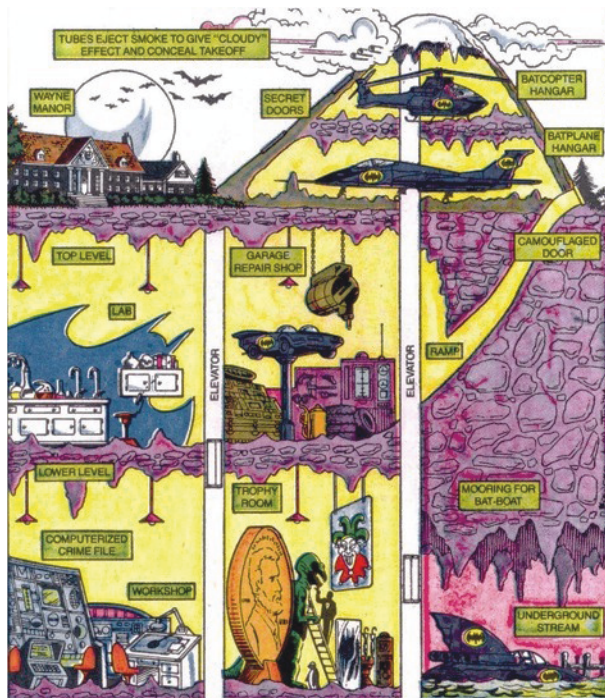


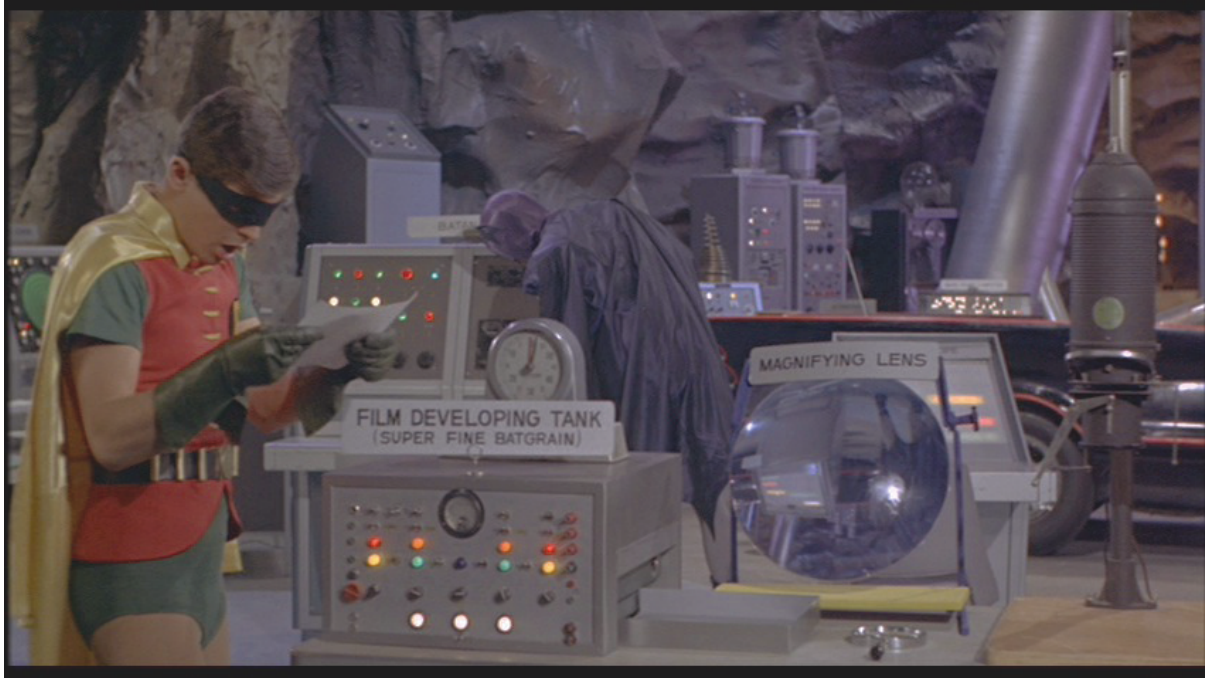
Fig. 5.1. A diagram of the Bat-Cave, labeled with comic book captions.

Before turning our attention to this chapter’s first case study—*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, an intricately layered palimpsest of a comic book film—I want to first discuss a simpler example that will illustrate this phenomenon clearly. 1966’s *Batman* was the third live-action incarnation of the Caped Crusader and his sidekick Robin to be produced for the big screen, but it was the first to incorporate the formal elements of the comic book medium into its stylistic system, as well as the most visible cinematic articulation of the superhero genre to date.<sup>99</sup> The movie’s bold primary colour scheme, its text-laden mise-en-scène and visual bursts of onomatopoeic sound effects, and its

actors’ one-note performances of stilted, alliterative dialogue all represent interpretations of comic book aesthetics, and some of them even remediate formal elements. For instance, the film’s bold palette—perhaps only outdone by *Dick Tracy* and *Sin City* in terms of live-action

<sup>99</sup> The earlier Batman films, *Batman* (dir. Lambert Hillyer) and *Batman and Robin* (dir. Spencer Bennet), were cheaply made fifteen-part serials produced in 1943 and 1949, respectively. Interestingly, one of the catalysts for the production of the television series (ABC, 1966-68) that spawned the theatrical feature under discussion here was the success of revival screenings of the 1943 serial under the title *An Evening with Batman and Robin*; at these marathon screenings viewers were encouraged to laugh at the ludicrousness of the narrative as well as the incompetence of the production. This ironic appropriation of Batman by college-aged and adult audiences is largely credited with the “camp” approach to the character taken by the television program (Yockey 5).





**Fig. 5.2.** The live-action Bat-Cave's gadgets are labeled in a manner that recalls comic book captions.

comic book films—echoes the limited colour selection available to comic book artists of the period: this is expressive intermediality. The obsessive labeling of gadgets in the Batcave (as well as the other sets) takes an extra-diegetic element of comics—caption boxes—and adapts them for the diegetic space: this is formal intermediality (**figs. 5.1** and **5.2**). The authoritative voice-over narration is another way in which caption boxes, which function both as vehicles for explanatory footnotes and expository information, are remediated for the film. The thin characterizations and outsized performances are a particular manifestation of diegetic intertextuality. Most notably and famously, however, are the film's trademark interventions of “BAP!”, “KLONK!”, and the like, which are superimposed over the live-action image. The written onomatopoeia to which the comic book necessarily turns as a means of visually representing sound are here presented as a supplement to the soundtrack, on which the impact of punches, kicks, throws, and splashes are both heard and further accentuated by non-diegetic musical stings: this is yet another example of formal intermediality (fig. 2.7).<sup>100</sup>

<sup>100</sup> In the television show (which is otherwise stylistically consistent with the show, using the same cast, costumes, and décor), these are often displayed as cutaways, occupying a kind of diegetic nowhere in which the stylized onomatopoeic text appears against a solid-colour background.



Verbal or written language, of course, is part of cinematic language: on-screen text appears in silent film intertitles, where it stands in for spoken dialogue and narration, and it's quite common as a conveyor of expository information in sound films as well (e.g., to indicate the year or location in which a scene or film is set). The inclusion of text in the film frame, therefore, doesn't constitute an addition to cinematic language, nor does it necessarily indicate any relationship to comics whatsoever. The style and function of these textual elements must be taken into account in order to determine if their discursive origins lie beyond the cinematic. The stylization of the onomatopoeic text in *Batman*—their vivid colours and hand-drawn, idiosyncratic design—does create a strong visual connection to the way similar moments are depicted in comics (albeit without movement, sound, or photography). In being remediated for the screen, however, the function of this device changes radically. As mentioned above, in comics onomatopoeia is used to approximate sound effects, which cannot be represented sonically using the representational tools available to conventional printed comics. *Batman*, like almost all films produced in 1966, has a synchronized soundtrack that renders the use of such devices unnecessary. Whereas in comics the kind of text at issue is used to indicate salient sonic information, thereby serving a crucial narrative function, their inclusion in a sound film is a purely aesthetic and ornamental gesture rather than a narrative strategy. Emptied of their original comics-specific function by the presence of the soundtrack, *Batman*'s onomatopoeias jar the viewer with their non-photographic nature and call attention to themselves for their novelty and, perhaps, their sheer lack of utility. By incorporating (and inevitably transforming) this representational tool, the film points the viewer's attention to the comics medium and forcefully demonstrates the difference between comics and films. The languages of comics and film become hybridized in such a manner that they remain heterogeneous rather than assimilated into a single gestalt: the comic book elements are not integrated organically into a photographic mode, but rather clash and collide with it whenever they appear. In short, *Batman* uses hybridization in such a way that "one voice [ironizes] and [unmasks] the other" (Young 21): the comic book aesthetics unmask the verisimilitude of live-action, exposing the fraudulence of the medium's purported realism,<sup>101</sup> while the live-action photography ironizes the comic book, exposing its supposed lack of aesthetic sophistication. In juxtaposing its visual and

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<sup>101</sup> The metaphor of "unmasking" is appropriately evocative in discussions about the superhero film, given the multiple layers of identity performance occurring onscreen.

representational strategies against those of live-action cinema, *Batman* parodies the comic book as a medium while also satirizing the comic book superhero genre.<sup>102</sup>

Though most often discussed as camp,<sup>103</sup> I argue that *Batman* is better understood as parody. Despite being among the earliest superhero films, the genre was already mature enough in comic books that its conventions were ripe for parody, even in another medium. And while the film does parody the superhero genre—from the ludicrousness of double identities to the increasing improbability of the heroes’ evasions of death—comics as a medium is also targeted. The medium’s very name in the English language—comics is a synonym for “funnies,” as though the medium was only capable of featuring this particular genre of content —itself functions to devalue it, or at least to undermine its aesthetic potential (Gardner, Kindle loc. 46). Indeed, until the final decades of the twentieth century American culture had largely accepted “the [premise] that there is nothing worth looking at in comics” (Kindle loc. 55), a misperception that *Batman* reifies by parodying not just the superhero genre but also the larger idea that anything in comics could be worth readerly investment. According to Genette, merely imitating a style “of low repute” can function as parody of the same (*Palimpsests* 20), but heteroglossia also has inherent parodic potential. According to Bakhtin, when intentional hybrids take on parodic intent, “the intentions of the representing discourse are at odds with the intentions of the represented discourse; they fight against them, they depict a real world of objects not by using the represented language as a productive point of view, but rather by using it as an exposé to destroy the represented language” (363-4). By contrasting it against the language of live-action, *Batman* depicts comics as a cheap, garish, and unsophisticated medium.

The case study to which we’ll turn our attention next contrasts sharply with the strategy on display in *Batman*. Where *Batman* refuses to integrate its different media languages in order to engender an ironic distance from the aesthetics of comics, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* is a melting pot of languages—an organic hybrid—and not merely of comics and film but of myriad others, including Japanese animation and manga, the television situation comedy, experimental film, Bollywood musicals, and eight-bit video games. All of these languages (some of which are

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<sup>102</sup> The film is well known for its doubled address: in screenwriter Lorenzo Semple’s words, it was designed to appeal to “kids as an absurdly jolly action piece and to grown-ups [as] deadpan satire” (Yockey 4).

<sup>103</sup> For camp readings of *Batman*, see Medhurst, “Batman, Deviance, and Camp”; Torres, “The Caped Crusader of Camp: Pop, Camp, and the *Batman* Television Series”; Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*; and Yockey, *Batman*.

cinematic already) are blended together—often several within any given shot or sequence—in a complex process of remediation that neutralizes the ontological differences between them, a process that brings us back one final time to Pascal Lefèvre’s argument regarding the ontological irreconcilability of comics and film. Because of the wide variety of media on display in *Scott Pilgrim*, the term “dialogic” no longer seems sufficient: I therefore propose the designation *polymedial palimpsest* for such texts, which better describes the fluidity with which they incorporate various languages as well as the aesthetic density of the final product. Similarly, the term “heteroglossia” no longer does justice to such texts, given the lack of demarcation or ontological distinction between languages; in cases such as this, the term *polyglossia* will be preferred. Using *Scott Pilgrim* and later the “Ultimate Cut” of *Watchmen* as case studies, this chapter will now explicate the ways in which the contemporary comic book film, largely enabled by the digitization of not just cinema but of culture in general, becomes a polymedial palimpsest, manifesting not merely a cinematic remediation of comics but indeed of the entire contemporary media ecology.

### **The Polymedial Palimpsest I: *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* as Organic Hybrid**

Bakhtin writes that “It is [the] very multiplicity of the era’s languages that must be represented in the novel” (411), a sentiment that I have extended to the comic book film and explicated through the lens of remediation throughout this dissertation. Edgar Wright’s *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, however, takes this to another level entirely, incorporating a much broader variety of media languages into its textual fabric but, unlike *Batman*, without irony or parodic intent. Rather, Wright’s film is an organic hybrid in which various languages co-exist and converge with fluidity, but ultimately combine to form a singular post-cinematic perspective. According to Steven Shaviro, the post-cinematic era is one in which “Digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience” (Kindle loc. 28). He defines the post-cinematic media ecology as one in which “all phenomena pass through a stage of being processed in the form of digital code”; consequently, we can no longer “meaningfully distinguish between ‘reality’ and its multiple simulations; they are all woven together in one and the same fabric” (Kindle loc. 103). This is precisely the experience of the characters in *Scott Pilgrim*, which is extended to the viewer via subjective third-person narration. The film has thus been understood as a

contemporary exercise in magical realism (Kadner 46), as has the comic,<sup>104</sup> but both are really just manifestations of the post-cinematic media ecology in which “video screens and speakers, moving images and synthesized sounds, are dispersed pretty much everywhere” (Shaviri, Kindle loc. 103) and therefore have a profound impact on how we see and interact with the world. In Bryan Lee O’Malley’s original six-part series of graphic novels, the comic book medium functions as the filter through which these other media are presented: music is communicated through the established sonic conventions of comics (as well as chord charts to play the songs yourself), just as the languages of manga,<sup>105</sup> anime, video games, and others are remediated by comics.<sup>106</sup> Comics is thereby the vehicle through which the media-saturated lives of Scott and his friends are communicated to readers in O’Malley’s work. The film breaks with this strategy, at least somewhat, by adding comics to the list of media being remediated. Indeed, the film arguably remediates comics—a medium that, unlike video games or music, the characters don’t seem to have any experience or intimate relationship with—to a greater extent than any other medium. The film’s remediation of comics is thus not diegetically motivated, but can rather be understood as a gesture to the narrative’s original incarnation, just as in other comic book films analyzed in previous chapters. In this section it will be demonstrated that *Scott Pilgrim* employs remediation not for purely ornamental and aesthetic effect, nor for “fidelity’s” sake, but rather as a means of reflecting the post-cinematic mediasphere in which the film’s characters exist.

<sup>104</sup> See Murphy (502) and Murray (130), the latter of which is quoted in the next paragraph.

<sup>105</sup> At a glance, the *Scott Pilgrim* series might be mistaken for manga, given the dimensions of each book, the graphic style (including large *kawaii* [cute] eyes), and the black-and-white printing. Nevertheless, the relationship between the *Scott Pilgrim* graphic novels and manga is a contentious one. While some categorize them as Original English Language (OEL) manga, O’Malley himself rejects this and prefers the designation “manga-influenced comic” (MIC) (Berninger 247). I prefer the latter categorization as well, since it recognizes the hybridity and transnationality of the series’ style.

<sup>106</sup> Undoubtedly, each of the many languages remediated by *Scott Pilgrim* warrants its own Genette-inspired schema, outlining the various means by which the medium may be represented cinematically, similar to that which I provided for comics in chapter two. Such an undertaking, however, is beyond the scope of the present work. Moreover, I suspect that the processes of remediating each individual medium would break down similarly to comics: diegetic intertextuality describes the appropriation of narrative elements; explicit intermediality refers to the presence of another medium in the film; compositional intertextuality covers direct quotations from specific texts; formal intermediality deals with the cinematic approximation of the other medium’s formal properties; and figural intermediality designates any attempts to capture the phenomenological experience of the medium being remediated cinematically. The only category that I’ve excluded on the grounds of being too specific to comics is expressive intermediality, which in the case of video games, at least, would largely be covered under formal intermediality: for instance, the presence of heavily-pixelated (deliberately not photorealistic) digital images reproduce the aesthetics of video games at the same time that they appropriate their form (digital code) (see fig. 5.4). Given the focus of this dissertation, it should not surprise the reader that despite the polyglossia on display in *Scott Pilgrim*, I will concentrate on the film’s remediation of comics; other media will be considered to the extent that they collide or interact with the comics medium.

The plot of *Scott Pilgrim*, in both its printed and cinematic manifestations, filters a generic romantic comedy premise (boy meets girl...) through the conventions of platform/fighting video games (...boy must overcome an increasingly difficult series of obstacles to get/rescue girl). As Padmini Ray Murray describes the comic series,

it meshes a naturalistic narrative and visual style with surreal episodes staged in a video game universe, which gives the comic an almost magic realist feel. *Scott Pilgrim* is a text that embodies transmediality, its very premise assuming at least a notional understanding of video games. In order to be with Ramona, Scott Pilgrim has to defeat her seven evil exes in elaborately staged battles that draw liberally on a vocabulary familiar to gamers—an economy where skills, resources and tenacity are embodied in material objects such as swords, gold coins and levels, and without this awareness, understanding of the comic is notionally incomplete. (130)



**Figs. 5.3-5.4.** Video game icons appear in the live-action diegesis of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*.

What Murray doesn't adequately address, however, is that there is no sharp division between the "video game universe" and the "naturalistic" universe; in both the comic and the film, the characters move fluidly between them to the point that they cannot really be separated. Even the most quotidian task is infused with video game aesthetics: for instance, when Scott goes to the bathroom, a power bar with the word "PEE" appears behind him, which drains as his bladder does (**fig. 5.3**). Video game conventions are alternately incorporated as digitized diegetic elements, such as the aforementioned "PEE BAR" or an extra life icon that appears as a reward after a successful fight (**fig. 5.4**), or as their real-world equivalents, such as the flurry of

Canadian coinage that replace the bodies of defeated enemies as they're defeated.<sup>107</sup> Video game conventions such as these are transplanted into the film's contemporary Toronto setting throughout, without comment, as though there was no ontological distinction between playing *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) on a Nintendo and playing bass at band practice. In his analysis of the film *Southland Tales* (dir. Richard Kelly, 2006), Shaviro identifies the omnipresence of media as an alienating and dislocating experience; he argues that "*Southland Tales* surveys and maps—and mirrors back to us in fictive form—the excessive, overgrown post-cinematic mediasphere. The film bathes us in an incessant flow of images and sounds; it foregrounds the multimedia feed that we take so much for granted, and ponders what it feels like to live our lives within it" (Kindle loc. 974). That film's "traditionally 'cinematic' sequences are intermixed with a sensory-overload barrage of lo-fi video footage, Internet and cable-TV news feeds, commercials, and simulated CGI environments" (Kindle loc. 980) that become as oppressive as the surveillance state that the film critiques. Like *Southland Tales*, *Scott Pilgrim* reproduces and is in a sense about the experience of living in the "post-cinematic mediasphere"—"sensory-overload" would be an apt description of the experience of watching this film as well—but where *Southland Tales* is apocalyptic, *Scott Pilgrim* is optimistic, playful, and even nostalgic about our interactions with media. For these characters, digital media provides a framework through which to view, understand, and participate in the world. For the viewer, the cinema screen becomes the means through which these various technologies are condensed and contained, their aesthetic markers put on display and to narrative use: the "sensory overload" Shaviro refers to may overwhelm the viewer but it never overwhelms (digital) cinema's representational capacities. Despite its polymedial aesthetics, intermedial origins, and largely digital production, *Scott Pilgrim* remains a film with a mode of address not dissimilar from more conventional films.

*Scott Pilgrim* is also ultimately a *bildungsroman*, and it's largely the framing of the narrative as a video game that enables Scott to grow as a human being and achieve a measure of self-actualization. Video games, premised as they are on the sequential completion of tasks organized into "levels," impose a goal-oriented structure onto Scott's life. At the beginning of the narrative, the twenty-three year-old Scott is drifting; still broken-hearted one year after his

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<sup>107</sup> "\$2.40?! That's not even enough for the bus home!"



**Fig. 5.5.** Scott earns an achievement in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*.

breakup with Envy Adams, his nascent relationship with a seventeen year-old high school student seems to be the only progress the jobless university graduate has recently made. After he meets Ramona Flowers, an American expatriate who has actively run away from her past by moving to Toronto, she becomes the goal to which he aspires, forcing him to take action beyond his comfort zone. As defined by Jesper Juul, the experience of playing video games is designed around such a set goal, which, even in the virtual space, is associated with tangible consequences, feelings, and actions. He divides goals into the following three components:

1. Valorization of the possible outcomes: Some outcomes are described as positive, some as negative.
2. Player effort: The player has to *do* something.
3. Attachment of the player to an aspect of the outcome: The player agrees to be happy if he or she wins the game, unhappy if he or she loses. (35)

Most obviously, the second component allows the film's narrative to proceed; the static, drifting version of Scott that exists prior to the film's events is not an active protagonist, but Scott-as-player is. The positive valorization of Ramona and their relationship encourages Scott to pursue his goal, despite the increasing difficulty of the challenges in his path. In the midst of this pursuit, Scott becomes invested in completing the "game" irrespective of the goal: his happiness



rests on completing the game because his dignity is at stake, not his relationship with Ramona. It's only after he tries, fails, and tries again—even though the chance to date Ramona is seemingly lost—that he is able to earn “the power of self-respect,” which is visualized in the film as an “achievement” or “trophy” (an optional side goal that players may choose to pursue while playing a video game) (**fig. 5.5**). The structure of the narrative is thus thoroughly indebted to the medium of video games; at the same time, however, it represents a diegetic intertextual link to O'Malley's comics, since the film borrows that structure from its source material. This layered appropriation is typical of its aesthetic strategy as well: as we'll see later, the film remediates comics at the same time, and using the same techniques, as it does video games.

According to Juul, video games are “half-real” insofar as the inhabited virtual world is imaginary while the rules according to which the player engages with that world are real (1). *Scott Pilgrim*'s world also seems half-real, straddling the line between video game fantasy and mumblecore-esque banality, but this appearance warrants complicating. We've already established that the film doesn't oscillate between these two modes, but rather combines them into a single language—indeed, as a polymedial palimpsest it combines these and many more. A useful concept offered in Shaviro's reading of the post-cinematic gives us a means to understand this phenomenon. He writes:

I take the concept of flat ontology from Manuel DeLanda, who uses it to characterize a view in which all entities at all scales have the same degree of reality and the same sorts of properties: “while an ontology based on relations between general types and particular instances is hierarchical, each level representing a different ontological category (organism, species, genera), an approach in terms of interactive parts and emergent wholes leads to a flat ontology, one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status.” (Kindle loc. 2503)

In the context of post-cinematic media, a flat ontology refers to the fact that “all media and all processes of remediation [now] have the same status and the same degree of actuality” (Kindle loc. 1495). Be it a sound, animation, photograph, drawing, or something else entirely, once it becomes a digital object, it's produced not of sound waves, lines on paper, light on emulsion, or whatever, but rather consists merely of ones and zeroes. This doesn't necessarily result in a change in how we *experience* these works—a vinyl record and an MP3 are both experienced as sound waves, and require an interface of some kind to hear the music they contain—but rather in



**Fig. 5.6.** The Universal logo is rendered in low-resolution eight-bit video game graphics.

how these works exist in the world: not as concrete objects, limited by their physical dimensions and materials, but as immaterial digital information. You can't record a movie on a vinyl record; you can't photograph a song; but movies, songs, photographs, and other media can be contained and expressed through digital means. Binary code is thus the great ontological equalizer. This, I argue, is the logical conclusion of Bakhtin's organic hybrid. Shaviro writes, "In the world of the film, no less than in this present world in which we encounter the film, nothing is direct or 'unmediated,' and nothing exists outside of the mediasphere" (Kindle loc. 1495). The characters in the film don't distinguish between video games, manga, Japanese animation, and their "real" lives; the film doesn't make such distinctions in representing them; and the digital mode of production and transmission doesn't make such distinctions in creating and exhibiting them. Nowadays, even the real half of Juul's "half-real" is necessarily mediated. Let's now look at the film more closely.

Jeff Thoss argues that both the film and comic book versions of *Scott Pilgrim* "deny their actual mediality to engage in a competition of simulating yet another medium—the video game" (qtd. in Murray 136). The first thirty seconds of the film version alone demonstrate a much more complicated state of affairs than this, in which film style is deployed to create a hybrid language consisting of comics and video games. As we saw in previous chapters, comic book films often



**Figs. 5.7-5.9.** The opening images of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (the movie) and *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* (the comic).

begin with credits sequences that announce the dialogic nature of the representations to follow, indicating that the film is to be understood as a live-action comic book (figs. 2.1-2.4). *Scott Pilgrim* begins with a modified version of the Universal logo that suggests that the film to follow is not a comic book, but rather a video game or, at the very least, a heavily digitized and mediated representation of the world (**fig. 5.6**). (The fact that the film is produced by Universal,

whose logo is the globe itself, articulates this point nicely.) The degree of pixelization and the eight-bit chiptune<sup>108</sup> timbre of the studio's refashioned fanfare evoke a very particular era in gaming history, marked by low-resolution "sprites" as avatars, two-dimensional imagery, primitive synthesized soundtracks, etc. The film segues from this eight-bit aesthetic to full live-action, albeit one heavily invested in other media, and comics in particular. The opening narration—which is visible on screen and also heard on the soundtrack—first announces the film's comic book affiliation through the use of on-screen text in the same font used in the comics (**fig. 5.7**). The camera then tilts down to reveal a snowy Toronto street; a musical flourish from *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986) game series plays on the soundtrack as the camera settles on its first compositional quotation. This first shot mirrors the first page of *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life*, with the dialogue balloon displaced to the film's audio track (**figs. 5.8 and 5.9**). Less than thirty seconds into the film, then, it seems that the comic book and video game languages will be deployed to significant degrees throughout: more specifically, however, the video game medium may be associated with movement (such as the camera movement in this first shot) and the narrative logic governing the diegetic world while the comic book medium will be associated with narrative exposition, compositional elements, and will be primarily non-diegetic in nature. In keeping with the concept of the organic hybrid, however, the divisions between these various languages are not strongly enforced: the film's sporadic use of voice-over features both a narrator that reads on-screen comics-style captions aloud and a video game announcer that reports victories, defeats, goals achieved, and countdowns. Both medium-specific tasks are performed by a single voice, though the video game-related utterances are sonically degraded, as if produced by a vintage arcade machine. Thus even the narrator's voice resists univocality and instead embodies the film's particular fusion of media.

Far from denouncing the cinematic, as Thoss claims, *Scott Pilgrim* is heavily invested in the materiality of film. The opening credits sequence, which follows the first scene, explicitly references avant-garde cinema in its use of painted and scratched film. The imagery is strongly reminiscent of drawn-on-film or scratch films like Len Lye's *A Colour Box* (1935) or Norman McLaren's *Boogie-Doodle* (1941), featuring bold colour clashes, symbolic representations of

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<sup>108</sup> "Chiptune" refers to the style of synthesized electronic music found in older (1990s and before) video games, arcade machines, and computers. Eight-bit refers to the computing power of the microprocessor found in systems such as the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES).

characters (e.g., a pair of sai for Knives Chau, a guitar for Stephen Stills), and abstract lines and movement, all syncopated to the grungy musical soundtrack. The sequence serves many functions in the film: to give viewers the opportunity to acclimatize themselves to the film's particular rhythms and visual energy;<sup>109</sup> to subtly establish traits or images associated with each character; and to provide a visual representation of Knives' experience of listening to Sex Bob-omb, Scott's band.<sup>110</sup> I'd argue that the sequence also functions as an example of expressive intermediality, insofar as it forgoes the use of the camera to produce images and instead introduces comics' drawn aesthetic into the proceedings, substituting paper with celluloid.<sup>111</sup> The post-cinematic draws upon the avant-garde in that both push at the perceived limitations and boundaries of media. As Lev Manovich describes it,

When the avant-garde filmmakers collaged multiple images within a single frame, or painted and scratched film, or revolted against the indexical identity of cinema in other ways, they were working against "normal" filmmaking procedures and the intended uses of film technology. (Film stock was not designed to be painted on.) Thus they operated on the periphery of commercial cinema not only aesthetically but also technically. (306)

In this light, the opening credits of *Scott Pilgrim* read very clearly as a mission statement, as a declaration that the interests of the avant-garde—operating on the periphery of the mainstream, going against "intended" or "normal" uses of technology—no longer hold in the digital era of filmmaking. Experiments in polymediality that were once considered avant-garde have become *de rigueur* today. To quote Manovich again: "The avant-garde move to combine animation, printed texts, and live-action footage is repeated in the convergence of animation, title generation, paint, compositing, and editing systems into all-in-one packages... All in all, what used to be exceptions for traditional cinema have become the normal, intended techniques of digital filmmaking, embedded in technology design itself" (307). It is largely through dialogic genres like the comic book film and polymedial palimpsests like *Scott Pilgrim* that these changes

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<sup>109</sup> In an interview, Wright noted that Quentin Tarantino suggested that viewers needed "a title sequence at the start to let people settle in and hint more about what we were about to see" after screening an early cut of the film with a different opening credits sequence (Ulloa).

<sup>110</sup> The sequence is bookended by shots of Knives looking on in amazement. Wright has suggested that "the animation is a manifestation of how cool the music is in Knives' head" (Ulloa).

<sup>111</sup> The sequence was actually produced by scratching on sheets of acetate, which were kicked around the floor to add scratches, dirt, and hairs before being scanned into a computer and divided into frames (Ulloa).



**Figs. 5.10-5.11.** Dialogue and sound effects manifest as dynamic textual elements in *Scott Pilgrim*.

have taken place.<sup>112</sup> The opening credits' evocation of avant-garde cinema and its emphasis on the material of film also emphasize *Scott Pilgrim*'s status as a film as well as a representative of the post-cinematic media ecology.

As the film continues, the use of comics aesthetics becomes more conventional, functioning mostly in the ways that I've described in previous chapters—which is to say, rather than serve their intended purpose as they would in a comic, these stylistic interventions often duplicate information that is amply provided through traditionally cinematic means. For instance, many sound effects that appear on the audio track are also doubled on the image track, appearing as they would in a comic book. *Scott Pilgrim* is notable, however, for its embrace of the various means through which comics visually represent sound. Earlier in this chapter, we saw examples of formal intermediality via visual onomatopoeia in *Batman*; while this constituted only a part of the film's overall approach to remediation, it was the sole instance of comics' sonic strategies being cinematically rendered. *Scott Pilgrim* features multiple instances of onomatopoeia, including visualizations of Stephen's musical vocalizations (**fig. 5.10**) a string of "RRRRRRRRRs" representing an end-of-school-day bell, "DDDDDDDDDDs" representing a steady stream of plucked notes on the electric bass, the "DING-DONG" of a doorbell, and repeated "THONKS" as Scott bangs his head against an electrical pole (**fig. 5.11**). In all of these cases, the visualized sounds are not static parts of the moving image, but rather seem to issue forth from their diegetic source; their animation within the frame represents the main difference

<sup>112</sup> To speak to Manovich's specific points, we've already seen how the comic book film divides the frame into multiple images (see Chapter Three) and how the genre resists traditional photographic indexicality (see the section on expressive intermediality in Chapter Two and the compositional quotation in Chapter Four). More so than many other genres, the comic book film tends to be at the vanguard for these kinds of mainstream appropriations from the avant-garde.



between the comics and film versions of this convention. And though they don't exist within the diegesis—the sounds exist as sounds, but not as both sounds *and* visible representations—they nevertheless occupy three-dimensional space and are often partially obscured by mise-en-scène elements. In fig. 5.10, for example, the microphone appears in the foreground while the word “YEAH!” exists between the foreground and the out-of-focus background. In comics, by contrast, representations of sound usually (though not necessarily) appear on top of or above the diegetic world, as a separate layer, in order to remain legible and distinct from the rest of the image (fig. 5.12).<sup>113</sup>



Fig. 5.12. Sex Bob-omb jams in *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life*.

The film also remediates the non-onomatopoeic ways in which comics represent aural phenomena. Aside from dialogue and onomatopoeia, sound most commonly manifests in the form of jagged lines or shapes that resonate from or surround the source of a sound, which is also usually a point of violent impact. In comics, these shapes may be used in combination with onomatopoeia (e.g., a jagged balloon that surrounds an onomatopoeic word, as in fig. 2.7) or on their own. As examples of the latter, lightning bolt-shaped images appear when Kim Pine strikes her kick drum (fig. 5.13) or when Scott plays his bass in the opening scene. In the comic, these effects stand in for sound but in the film they become a supplement to it, emphasizing the cacophonous grunge of

<sup>113</sup> In one exception to the non-diegetic rule, when Knives professes her love for Scott the word “LOVE” appears in cloud-like pink letters, floating from her mouth toward Scott; at first, it seems that this will follow the same laws as other sonic visualizations, but when the Ramona-smitten Scott waves his hand, the letters evaporate into a pink mist. This is a rare moment of self-reflexivity with regard to comics; while the film is fairly self-reflexive about its relationship to video games throughout—characters are seen playing and talking about games as much as we see them living one—the film’s stylistic relationship with comics is less overt within the diegesis. With a wave of his hand, Scott implicitly recognizes that he’s in a comic book as much as he’s in a video game.



Sex Bob-omb. In the comic, these shapes are the only visual clues that help the reader imagine Sex Bob-omb's sound; the overall impression given by a page like fig. 5.12 is that the band is fast, loose, and loud. The film version, by virtue of its soundtrack, is unquestionably more specific. Combined with the close-ups (many of the compositions mirror specific panels) and the quick, rhythmic cutting, these visual supplements give the film version all the dynamism of the comic book while rendering explicit what the comics leave implicit. The sonic shapes don't convey unique narrative information—they merely provide a visual corollary to the soundtrack—but they contribute to the density of the image. In being remediated by the cinema, moreover, the meaning of techniques such as these changes from a figural representation of sound—a storytelling tool—to an iconic representation of the comics medium that serves an indexical function. In the same way that the compositional quotation brings a particular panel to the viewer's consciousness through visual semblance, formal intermediality brings the *medium* of comics to mind; rather than communicating narrative information, such techniques emphasize the hybridity and intermediality of the comic book film as a genre. In this case, the remediation of comics form through film style completely undermines and transforms its original, medium-specific purpose.

Another common comics convention that we see throughout *Scott Pilgrim* is the use of



Fig. 5.13. Sonic information appears visually in *Scott Pilgrim*.



**Figs. 5.14-5.15.** Comic book captions remediated in *Hulk* and *Kick-Ass 2*.

on-screen text as captions. As suggested in the analysis of the opening shots, extra-diegetic on-screen text is primarily used as an expository tool as a means of providing the viewer with information: a visual equivalent to a voice-over (which is an apt description for how captions are usually deployed in mainstream comics). In many cases, the use of on-screen text is completely synchronized with its use in comics: both provide efficient means of conveying expository information in a purely visual way. The vast majority of films that employ on-screen text do so sparingly, often to establish the historical and/or geographical setting. A film like *Hulk* uses text in precisely this way, but alludes to comics simultaneously by using a comics-esque typeface

(fig. 5.14); *Kick-Ass 2* (dir. Jeff Wadlow, 2013) does the same thing, but increases the visual similarity to captions by encasing the text in a rectangular box (fig. 5.15). Like comics themselves, however, *Scott Pilgrim* is again notable for using extra-diegetic text in a wider variety of ways than the previous examples. This is apparent from the opening shot (fig. 5.7), but then as characters are introduced, small black boxes with narrative information (name, age, and an additional trait) appear in the frame (fig. 5.16). This strategy is taken directly from the comics, as is the use of chapter titles, which appear sporadically throughout the film. They don't necessarily mark key turning points in the narrative: one of the captions reads "SO YEAH," superimposing the characters' idiomatic and disaffected speech onto a scene transition, as though the film itself was ambivalent about the narrative's direction. Often they are references to the comics, and thereby function as diegetic intertextuality as well as formal intermediality; for instance, the caption "THE INFINITE SADNESS" marks a low point for Scott in the narrative while also citing *Scott Pilgrim and the Infinite Sadness*,<sup>114</sup> the third in the graphic novel series.



Figs. 5.16-5.17. On-screen text and comics art appear in *Scott Pilgrim*.

As should be clear by now, the film is extremely flexible and generous in its deployment of comics' various formal strategies. On-screen text is not used in isolation from other remediated elements, but rather is combined with them. For instance, in fig. 5.17 on-screen text is combined with comics art in a crossover between the explicit and formal categories of intermediality. The right side of the frame darkens (one of many instances in which the on-set lighting is manipulated to emphasize parts of the image), and diegetic time seemingly freezes for a moment of expository narration; as the voice-over informs us of the backstory behind Scott's

<sup>114</sup> The title of the comic book is itself a reference to the Smashing Pumpkins' album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*. Throughout the comic and the film, Scott wears different Smashing Pumpkins t-shirts, including one with their shared initials "SP" inside a crudely drawn heart.





**Figs. 5.18-5.22.** Comic book temporality is reproduced by representing time as a series of discrete moments in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*.

haircut-related paranoia, a crude comic book image of the title character appears in the darkened screen area, diagramming the date of his last professional haircut. Remediating the instant replay of televised sports, the aforementioned narrator draws our attention to salient parts of the image

with arrows and lines of emphasis that appear as if drawn in real-time. In this case, the narrator and text convey more or less the same information. The film's use of on-screen text is perhaps at its most radical, however, when it contributes information not provided through other cinematic means. The best example of this occurs in the scene immediately following Scott's disastrous first conversation with Ramona, which is comprised of a short series of five shots each of which features on-screen text (**figs. 5.18-5.22**). Specifically, each shot features between one and three words, and the entire series collectively forms the complete sentence "AND THEN / HE STALKED HER / UNTIL / SHE LEFT / THE PARTY" (the slashes indicate how the text is divided between the shots). Given in this piecemeal manner, the editing imposes a distinctly staccato rhythm on the viewer's reading of the text, much like that which Scott McCloud associates with comics itself (67). Interestingly, the comic book version of this scene features the complete sentence at the top of the page, and thereafter the images are presented without additional textual narration.<sup>115</sup> Wright's use of text and its placement within the shots forces the eye to move around the film frame in the same way that the eye moves around a comics page: not necessarily from left to right, but rather following a different and unpredictable path on each individual page based on the particular arrangement of images and text and the whims of the reader.

Arguably, scenes edited in this manner also attempt to remediate what we might call a comic book chronotope, by which I refer to a relationship between time and space that is particular to the comic book medium. The chronotope is another Bakhtinian concept, which was initially used to describe the interconnectedness of time and space in the novel. As Bakhtin puts it, "temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always colored by emotions and values" (243), and it is how these spatio-temporal coordinates are connected to certain emotional states and narrative events that chronotopes generally describe. A novel's chronotopes shape its narrative in particular ways but are also a precondition for narration itself, which cannot exist outside of time and space—therein lies abstract thought, not narrative. For this reason, perhaps, narrative has tended to dominate the discourse surrounding the concept; in film studies, it has largely been employed to explain the specificity of certain generic tropes,

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<sup>115</sup> Each of the shots in this sequence also represents a compositional quotation. See chapter three of *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life*, "This One Girl..."

associating each with a particular chronotope.<sup>116</sup> This application of the chronotope as a concept—while useful and very much in line with Bakhtin’s initial usage in “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics”—favours its significance with regard to narrative over its representational import. He would not have us forget that it is through the chronotope that

Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. An event can be communicated, it becomes information, one can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence. But an event does not become a figure [*obraz*]. It is precisely the chronotope that gives the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events. And this is so thanks precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers—the time of human life, of historical time—that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas. (250)

On these grounds, then, we should be able to refer to chronotopes on micro *and* macro levels, the former of which would provide insight into the construction of specific texts and genres while the latter sets forth general rules according to which individual media—be it the novel, film, or comic books—represent time and space in a unified way. Thus the continuity editing associated with Classical Hollywood cinema may be considered a macro chronotope that governs how time and space interact in general terms during a particular era of cinema while “lounge time” may refer more specifically to how a particular genre thematizes and temporalizes certain diegetic locations. As Martin Lefebvre points out, the chronotope—like many of the Bakhtinian concepts used throughout this dissertation—is a “slippery” concept, apt to be variously interpreted and used differently in an array of contexts (“A Sense of Time and Place” 88).

The comic book chronotope, then, refers to the specific way in which time and space are uniquely articulated in the comic book as a discursive genre.<sup>117</sup> It occurs on the level of form,

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<sup>116</sup> For instance, Vivian Sobchack argues that film noir is best understood through a chronotope she refers to as “lounge time,” which describes the association between some of the genre’s most commonly depicted public spaces (e.g., the cocktail lounge, the hotel room) and the narrative events that overwhelmingly occur there, which conspire to undermine the familial, domestic spaces to which they are opposed (157-58). As she summarizes, “Lounge time concretely spatializes and temporalizes into narrative... the moment when the idyllic and ‘timeless’ identity of the patriarchal American ‘home’ was held hostage to a future beyond its imagination” (167).

<sup>117</sup> Chronotopic studies of comic books have previously been undertaken by Annalisa Di Liddo in her book *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*, in which she argues that the “hybrid, verbal/visual nature of

and exists irrespective of narrative content; it is, however, a precondition for the existence of narrative content in this medium. Expanding my discussion from the previous chapter, the comic book chronotope refers specifically to the expression of duration as a series of discrete moments separated by temporally indeterminate ellipses in the representation.<sup>118</sup> This should resonate with the previous chapter's discussion of the distinct temporalities of comics and film. Indeed, a cinematic comic book chronotope is another articulation of figural intermediality: i.e., the remediation of the reading experience specific to comics. In films like *Wanted*, we saw closure visualized through the intermittent use of slow-motion, which remediated the imaginative aspect of the comics reading experience in which the reader intervenes and internally produces the "missing" moments between panels. The scene just described in *Scott Pilgrim*, however, is doing something very different insofar as it retains the existence of "gutters" between panels; instead of smoothing over the gaps between panels (or panel moments), this short sequence presents shot-to-shot relations that are marked by self-conscious ellipses like those between each comics panel.

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comics, and the fact that narratives appear as sequential actions on the space of the page, makes the space-time connection [in comics] even more palpable than it appears in the prose novel" (63); much of her discussion is based on the validity of McCloud's assertion that in comics, time and space are "one and the same" (McCloud 100). This, however, is a misreading of both comics as a medium and Bakhtin's concept, the latter of which is concerned not with the commensurability of time and space but with their interconnectedness. In her dissertation "Comics as Assemblage: How Spatio-Temporality in Comics is Constructed," Rikke Platz Cortsen corrects Di Liddo's error, and her elaboration is worth quoting at length: "even in sequences in the medium where spatial progression *is* equal to progression in time, that does not make the two concepts the same. The spatial structuring of panels on the page is not the same as the diegetic space that is traveled in the narrative. When Di Liddo underlines that 'Scott McCloud's later theories resound with the Russian scholar's words even more clearly' (2009, 63), she is implying that the two theorists agree because in comics time and space is the same as in the chronotope. But time and space is *not* the same to Bakhtin. The close relation between time and space in the chronotope is intimately linked with human agents. Space is what is measured out when people pass through it in time, and time is what passes when an agent transverses a space" (36-37). The fact that temporality is communicated through space in comics does not mean that time *is equal to* space. While I agree with Cortsen, my articulation of a comic book chronotope is nevertheless distinct from hers insofar as it represents an overarching articulation of time-space common to the medium as a whole. As a result, I recognize that it is somewhat generalizing and does not apply to all comics at all times.

<sup>118</sup> The chronotopes discussed by Bakhtin typically relate to generic literary locations or motifs (e.g., the crossroads, the castle, the pastoral, etc.) or genre (adventure-time, Greek Romance-time, etc.) and the narrative events associated with them. As Cortsen puts it, "while the narrative events shape the chronotope, in turn, the chronotope organizes the events at a representational level, allowing the reader to make sense of the action. Without a spatio-temporal structure, an event cannot be pinned down, represented, or communicated" (60). As a discursive genre, the novel's abstract presentation of space-time results in a great variety of chronotopes at different periods and in different genres. The comic book, I argue, is dissimilar to the novel in this regard. While comics can and do represent space-time in various ways within individual genres or narratives—Di Liddo refers to "the science fiction chronotope" (64-75), "the urban chronotope" (75-85), "the chronotope of the imagination" (85-101), and "the chronotope of sex" (148-155) in various works by Alan Moore, while Cortsen recognizes chronotopes of the road, flying, and time-travel in Moore's comic series *Top 10* (62-66), among others—they must *necessarily* represent time and space through a series of discrete panels on the level of form. The comic book chronotope refers to this overarching and most basic spatio-temporal strategy of the medium.



In other words, what is absent in comics—classical cinema’s (illusory) sense of temporal fluidity and wholeness—remains absent in the filmic remediation of the comic book chronotope. Not only does the viewer *literally* read these frames, following the text around the screen space and assembling the discrete utterances into a coherent phrase, s/he must also combine the content of the text and the accompanying images in order to fully understand the narrative expressed by the scene: the combination of these two activities is also the combination of the processes of comics



**Figs. 5.23-5.24.** An indeterminate period of time is elided in the edit between these two shots in *Scott Pilgrim*.

reading and movie watching. Unlike many of the remediation strategies examined in this dissertation, this scene incorporates comic book form in a way that resembles comics while also avoiding narrative redundancy.

At other points in the film, the editing elides over indeterminate chunks of diegetic time, again evoking a comic book chronotope but for a different purpose. Take, for instance, the transition out of an earlier scene in which Scott first sees Ramona at the Toronto Reference Library. After Knives asks the conspicuously-stupefied Scott if he knows her, he continues to stare, dumbfounded by the appearance of the girl previously seen only in his dreams. The camera holds on a close-up of his face for what seems like a moment too long, and then his Sex Bob-omb bandleader Stephen intrudes into the frame, commanding Scott’s attention (**fig. 5.23**); we suddenly cut to a medium-long shot of the band in middle of practice (**fig. 5.24**). The editing falsely implies that the two moments are immediately subsequent in diegetic time by matching the shots together in a seamless way; the shots *seem to* flow together and thereby present a consistent span of time, but they do not. The result is meant to be jarring, to represent Scott’s distracted perspective as he drifts through his day after first seeing Ramona, but it also reproduces the chronotope associated with the comic book medium. The film elides the time between these two instants, just as comics elide time in the gaps between panels; it incorporates

this gappiness into its editing, making comics' inherent lack of temporal fluidity meaningful in the film's narrative context. Whereas panel moments visualize the process associated with the theory of reading comics (closure), the cinematic comic book chronotope evokes comics as they appear on the page, as a series of somewhat disconnected narrative events whose connective tissue is lost to ellipses.<sup>119</sup>

*Scott Pilgrim* also plays with the shape of the shots themselves in a way that recalls my earlier discussion of *The Dark Knight*'s use of shifting aspect ratios in its IMAX presentation.<sup>120</sup> In that film, I argued that the use of shifting aspect ratios subtly evoked the mercurial panel shapes seen in many comics (at least those without “waffle-iron” style pages, in which all panels share the same dimensions: e.g., fig. 3.2). In *Scott Pilgrim*'s case, this same strategy is deployed to more palimpsestuous ends; while the shifting aspect ratios in *Scott Pilgrim* certainly remediate comics in the same way as in *The Dark Knight*, they also remediate video games simultaneously.<sup>121</sup> In many games that feature full-motion video “cut scenes”—fully animated sequences in which gameplay is temporarily suspended and the narrative is advanced—the transition from a participatory to a spectatorial mode of engagement with the game is marked by an aesthetic shift from a “full screen” display to a “letterboxed” view. According to Harper Cossar, this is a visual strategy intended to distinguish gameplay from video scenes while also capturing some of the cultural capital associated with cinematic works on behalf of games.<sup>122</sup> I quote:

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<sup>119</sup> Temporal ellipses, of course, are not at all uncommon in cinematic editing; indeed, they are present in nearly every film made, even ostensibly real-time films such as *Cléo de 5 à 7* (dir. Agnès Varda, 1962). With the comic book chronotope, I refer specifically to conspicuous, self-conscious ellipses that employ these kinds of temporal gaps in order to shape the film's narration in a particular way, producing comic book-like rhythmic effects.

<sup>120</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>121</sup> This aesthetic strategy has also been appropriated by Japanese anime, through which it has been taken up and remediated in films (e.g., *Kill Bill Vol. 1* [dir. Quentin Tarantino, 2003]).

<sup>122</sup> Though I think that this line of argument has a great deal of merit, Cossar gets the lineage of letterboxing wrong, referring to it as a “filmmaking strategy” rather than a distribution format. Letterboxing was introduced for home video formats (like RCA VideoDisc, Laserdisc, VHS, and DVD) in order to maintain the original theatrical aspect ratio of films on 4x3 television sets. When video games and the other digital video-based media discussed by Cossar appropriated the look of letterboxed video, it was a means of appropriating the cultural capital associated with letterboxed home video—the preferred format of highbrow cinephiles and the only way to see the images as originally composed for the cinema screen (i.e., in widescreen) at home—not the cultural capital associated with cinema itself. Though panoramic images existed prior to widescreen cinema, the formalization of widescreen aspect ratios is a cinematic innovation, the remediation of which would represent the appropriation of a filmmaking strategy; letterboxing, strictly speaking, doesn't refer to theatrical aspect ratios such as scope, but to a more specific manifestation of widescreen images in non-cinematic (e.g., home video) contexts, the remediation of which

Sports games utilize the letterboxed view when something extraordinary—a shot or play—is worthy of spectatorship. The 4:3 monitor view collapses to a letterbox view. When this occurs, a remarkable transformation takes place that is virtually untapped with regard to media studies; the participant playing the game is cued by an aesthetic shift in aspect ratio and simply *becomes a spectator*. (6)

This is precisely how *Scott Pilgrim* styles its dream sequences; when asleep, Scott becomes a passive spectator, often gaining knowledge that he will use in future “gameplay”—that is, his life. Thus when the film re-appropriates letterboxing from video games, it carries with it the narrative associations it gained through its use in that medium. The letterbox view of Scott’s dreams, however, is not fixed; the frame is mobile, imparting a subtle oneiric quality to the images, moving in closer and gradually subsuming the negative space at the top and bottom of the screen. When the letterbox is entirely eliminated, Scott wakes up: the cut scene is over and “gameplay” resumes. Letterboxing is similarly used immediately prior to each major fight scene—cut scenes are commonly used in video games to set up battles or challenges—in which they again evoke both comics (by manipulating the shape of the frame, treating it as a malleable panel) and video games (appropriating the letterbox’s narrative connotation in that medium) using the same technique.

Related to the use of shifting aspect ratios and letterboxing is split-screen, which is another strategy discussed in chapter three. Much of the split-screen in *Scott Pilgrim* is conventional, and not sufficiently distinct from its use in films like *Hulk* to warrant extended consideration; as in *Hulk*, the technique is often used to present simultaneous shot/reverse shots in a single frame.<sup>123</sup> However, it is worth noting how other instances of split-screen evoke multiple media simultaneously, namely comics, anime, and video games. Unsurprisingly, split-screen is arguably the aesthetic strategy most closely linked to the contemporary sense of hypermediation, since it breaks the illusion that the window (be it a cinematic frame, a television screen, a tablet, a computer, etc.) is an unmediated presentation of the world; the co-presence of

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represents the appropriation of a distribution strategy associated with cinema. Cossar conflates these two distinct, though related, phenomena.

<sup>123</sup> See chapter three for an analysis of *Hulk* in which I first introduce these concepts.

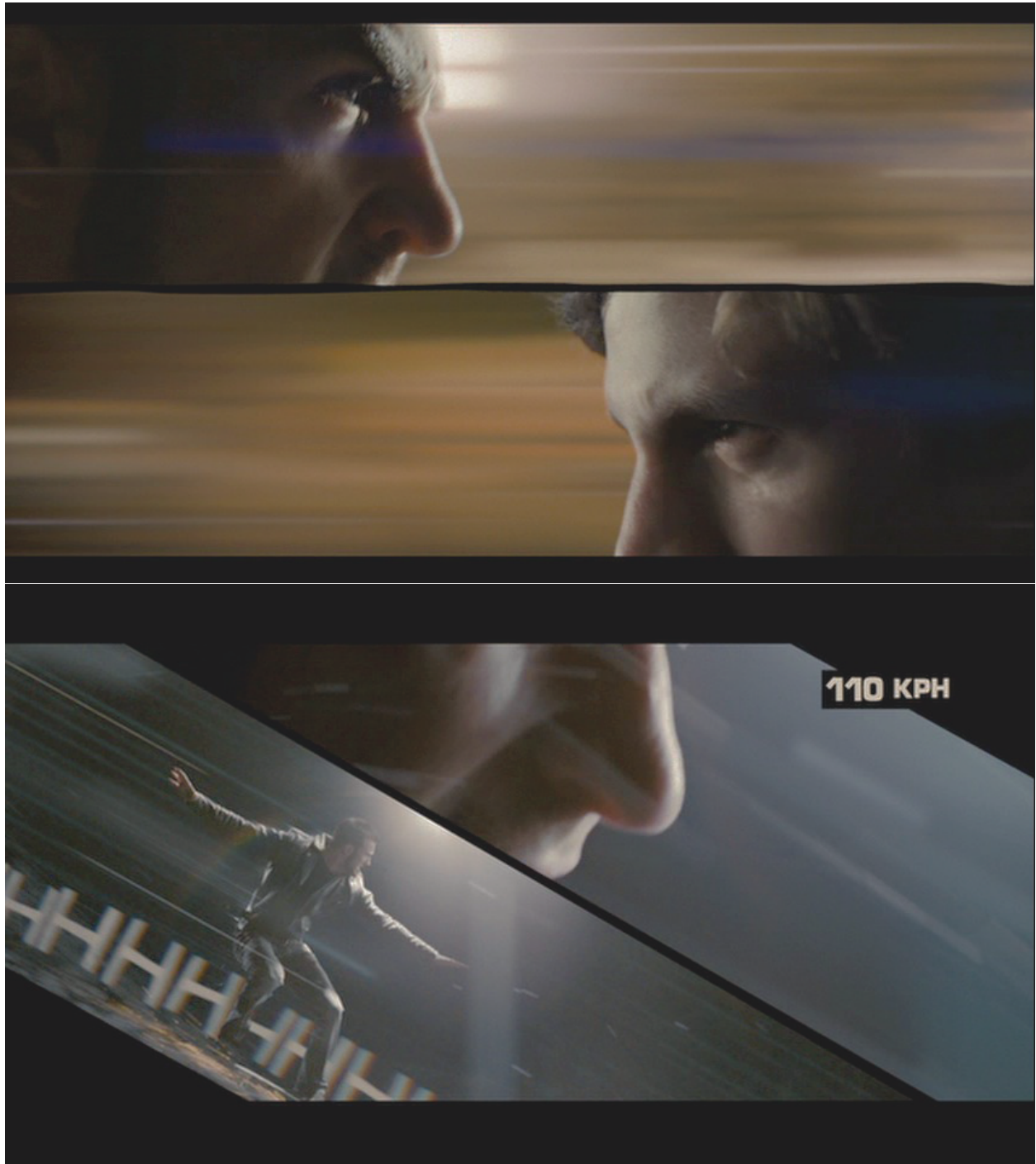


**Fig. 5.25.** Scott and Knives engage two-player mode in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*.

multiple windows within the larger framework necessarily fragments the single-perspective view associated with natural (human) vision. Computer operating systems, the Internet, and contemporary cable news networks are all highly visible, everyday examples of the kind of hypermediation parodied in *Southland Tales* and pastiched in *Scott Pilgrim*. These, however, are not the media that contribute to Scott's worldview.<sup>124</sup> Video games most often employ split-screen as a means of offering multiple players a simultaneous point-of-view; in multiplayer mode, the screen is divided into two to four player-specific frames. It is precisely this kind of split-screen being evoked in the film's final fight, in which Scott and Knives team up against Gideon, the seventh and final Evil Ex (**fig. 5.25**).

Anime's use of split-screen—which also tends to congregate around fight scenes—is arguably already an aesthetic choice ported over from digital games (Ahn 30). However, it's regularly employed in *Scott Pilgrim* to produce a visual style distinctly associated with anime (which is itself remediating manga, i.e., Japanese comics: sometimes the remediation snake eats

<sup>124</sup> Murray argues that “The comic’s nostalgic preoccupation with old technologies such as eight-bit gaming and arcade games betrays an anxiety regarding format irrelevance and obsolescence, as well as about big business and media conglomeration” (139). The film maintains this ambivalence toward contemporary technologies, particularly through Scott’s sense of obliviousness to technology’s forward march. For instance, Scott needs to ask his roommate the web address for Amazon.ca. The preference for “old” media (e.g., Young Neil plays an original Nintendo GameBoy rather than a next-generation Sony PSP) is also a key component of the film’s address to “geek” culture.



**Figs. 5.26-5.27.** Split-screen and letterboxing produce polymedial images that simultaneously evoke comic books, video games, and anime in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*.

its own tail). The limited animation style associated with anime, which “drastically decreases the number of drawings used for character movements, relying on other effects to impart a sense of movement” (Lamarre 19), is often typified by a static character (in the requisite action pose) against a colourful, streaked background. The result contains no foreground movement

whatsoever, but nevertheless implies it. It is precisely these kinds of images, often combined with split-screen imagery, that best represent the hybridity inherent in polymedial palimpsests like *Scott Pilgrim*. The fight scene between Scott and Evil Ex #2, Lucas Lee, presents several such moments. In **fig. 5.26**, the frame is divided horizontally into two long rectangular sub-shots; the two characters are shown in profile, and do not move to any significant degree within the frame, while the background streaks with horizontal lines of colourful light: this is a live-action version of the limited animation of anime. As was the case with the remediation of onomatopoeia, the original purpose of the device is made redundant in its new context—replaced by live-action cinematography—and retains only its aesthetic associations with its originary medium. A second example from later in the same sequence provides an even denser combination of media. The diagonal split-screen in **fig. 5.27** remediates comics in two ways (the split-screen evokes the co-presence of panels; the onomatopoeic “HHHs” as the skateboard grinds the rail; not to mention diegetic intertextuality, since the characters and situations originated in the comic series), video games in three ways (the split-screen; the speedometer in the upper-right corner; and the letterboxed frame, indicating a cut scene since Scott is merely a spectator, not an active participant), and anime in two ways (the split-screen; the lack of figure movement combined with an active, streaking background evokes limited animation). It is through such simultaneity that we see most clearly how an organic hybrid like *Scott Pilgrim* combines various media languages into dense, association-rich moments. This seems like it would be a particularly complex example from the film, but equally multifaceted cases are common throughout.

Ultimately, it's beyond the scope of this chapter to do justice to *Scott Pilgrim*'s textual and intermedial richness. In addition to the crucial role played by video games in the structuring of the film's narrative and its aesthetics, the thorough remediation of comics throughout, and the occasional references to anime, the film also boasts a Bollywood-inspired musical number; a domestic scene featuring Wallace and Scott featuring studio audience reactions, musical cues, and the sitcom rhythms of *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998); hand-drawn animated sequences;<sup>125</sup> the

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<sup>125</sup> These sequences—flashbacks to Ramona's previous relationships with Evil Exes numbers one and three—feature character designs directly ported over from the comics. This does constitute explicit intermediality, insofar as these scenes feature literal comic book art, including panels that are read sequentially. However, these sequences are also *animated*, which makes them more similar to another non-cinematic remediation of comics that is known as the “motion comic.” The inclusion of these hand-drawn animated segments does contribute to the film's dense





**Fig. 5.28.** Knives' face becomes an emoticon in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*.

superimposition of an emoticon onto a character's face (**fig. 5.28**); elaborate kung-fu fight choreography; and more besides. All of these media or languages either represent means through which these characters express themselves in the world—or through which mediated experience give them a means of understanding or giving shape to the ostensibly unmediated world around them. The film thoroughly embodies a post-cinematic position in which all relevant media are voraciously consumed and amalgamated, stripped of their ontological uniqueness and much of their original function: what remains is pure form. Cinema, comics, video games, anime, and other media don't merely become equivalent, but *one* under the flat ontological regime of the digital media ecology. The next case study, however, takes the opposite tack—an intentional rather than organic hybrid—in which the different media languages largely retain their heterogeneity.

### **The Polymedial Palimpsest II: *Watchmen* and its Paratexts as Intentional Hybrid**

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polymediality, and do not compromise its status as an organic hybrid; indeed, because these scenes are framed within the story as subjective, narrated flashbacks, their non-photographic status further confirms my thesis that the wide array of media incorporated into *Scott Pilgrim*'s textuality mirrors the hypermediated subjectivities of its characters and their experiences of the world.



Like *Scott Pilgrim*, Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* is an adaptation of a particular series of comics that remediates the broader media ecology of which comics is one part. While *Pilgrim*'s media hybridity has been discussed in transmedia terms,<sup>126</sup> the various texts that comprise that franchise are largely closed off from each other, at least in terms of the stories they tell; for instance, Ubisoft's *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World: The Game* (2010) doesn't advance the overall narrative of the franchise, though it does reproduce images and sounds from the comics and film while giving players the opportunity to extend their relationship with the property in general. This is not the ideal of transmedia storytelling as advanced by Henry Jenkins and exemplified by *The Matrix* franchise, in which a metanarrative is spread across a variety of texts and media, all of which feature standalone stories that provide a unique contribution to the whole: the franchise *in toto* tells a single coherent story across multiple texts and platforms (95-96). As a film narrative, *Scott Pilgrim* is self-contained, telling a complete story unto itself, albeit one that originated in another medium. Its polyglossic mode of address may assume prior knowledge of other media or genres, but it doesn't direct its viewers to other texts in the franchise (e.g., the comics) in order to assemble a larger narrative: rather, the other texts in the franchise tell the same narrative in different ways.<sup>127</sup> While also a product of an increasingly digital media environment, *Watchmen* represents a very different articulation of polymediality than *Scott Pilgrim* in that the narrative does extend itself across different platforms; as a result, it is difficult to determine where "the text" begins and ends. Its heterogeneous transmedia style is best represented in a multimedia home video release has been designated *Watchmen: The Ultimate Cut* (hereafter *TUC*), which contains an extended 215-minute cut of the film,<sup>128</sup> the theatrical cut of the film, an array of bonus features, the complete motion comic adaptation, and a hardcover reprinting of the original graphic novel. *TUC* is the *Watchmen* franchise in a box: an intentional hybrid that remediates comics as well as other media, placing all of these languages "in a conflictual structure that remains energetic and open-ended" (Berger 70) by virtue of the flexibility of home video formats and the possibilities of transmedia storytelling.

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<sup>126</sup> See Murphy, "Virtual Canadian Realities"; also Kyle Eveleth, "Crucial Convergence: *Scott Pilgrim* as Transmedial Test Case," *Textual Overtures* 1.1 (2013): 1-14.

<sup>127</sup> The film, however, was written before the graphic novel series was complete; as a result, the conclusions of the two versions are markedly different.

<sup>128</sup> Previously released cuts of *Watchmen* clock in at 162 minutes for the theatrical cut and 186 minutes for the director's cut.

The bevy of supplemental material released alongside *Watchmen* is not merely a consequence of contemporary Hollywood marketing; indeed, it is also presaged by a storytelling strategy contained in the original graphic novel. The twelve issues that comprised Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' revisionist superhero series were released monthly between September 1986 and October 1987,<sup>129</sup> though the comics have received broader distribution and acclaim in their collected form. *Watchmen* is notable in that both the monthly issues and the collected edition feature supplemental materials presented as addenda to the comics. More specifically, these addenda—which take the place of the back pages usually devoted to reader mail—pause the comics' complex non-linear narration to elaborate on various characters' backstories and the history of the diegetic world, deepening the reader's engagement with and knowledge of the narrative. They do so not via “character profiles” or other such contrivances, but rather through *prose*, and predominantly literary genres specifically: e.g., chapters from Hollis Mason's autobiography *Under the Hood* and an essay from *The Journal of The American Ornithological Society* are “reprinted” in full. The inclusion of these imaginary intertexts, which are seen in or alluded to within the diegetic world of the comics, itself represents an intermedial gesture that takes advantage of a common vehicle (print) to incorporate other languages (again in the Bakhtinian sense) into what is otherwise a conventional (at least in its presentation) superhero comic. These metafictional pieces are part of the diegetic world, but their formal difference (they aren't comics like the fiction proper) and placement at the end of each book places them on the periphery of the text; in other words, they are presented as *paratextual* material.

As defined by Gérard Genette, paratexts are “those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*), that mediate the book to the reader,” including “titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes, epilogues, and afterwords,” among other things (*Paratexts* xviii). In their ambiguous relation to the text proper, paratexts act as interpretive “thresholds,”<sup>130</sup> which refers to their ability to frame and demarcate the borders of the text, and to facilitate or mark the reader's entry into it; but they also represent an “undefined zone,” being neither part of the text proper nor totally disconnected from it (2). This adequately describes the positioning of *Watchmen*'s aforementioned pseudo-

<sup>129</sup> No issue was released in June 1987.

<sup>130</sup> The English title of Genette's book is *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*; the French title is *Seuils*, which simply means “thresholds.”

paratexts, which are certainly meant to influence the reading of the main text but whose status seems to be supplemental rather than central to the text itself.<sup>131</sup> As a book, *Watchmen* contains actual paratexts as well: its cover(s), its title, and so on. The hardcover printing of the graphic novel contained in *TUC* also features two afterwords as well as reprints of Gibbons' artwork at various stages. These would be non-diegetic peritexts that we would not expect to be adapted in a film version; after all, they aren't part of the narrative even if they may contribute to the meaning of the work.<sup>132</sup> In the analysis to follow, I will primarily be considering diegetic paratexts, which contribute to the construction—not merely the interpretation—of their fictional world. By virtue of the narrative's diffusion throughout these paratexts, they assume a more vital role in their franchise than, say, the *Scott Pilgrim* video game does. I argue that the cinematic *Watchmen* franchise as a whole, as represented by the *TUC* set, presents an alternative articulation of the polymedial palimpsest in which the various arms of the media ecology are not subsumed into the "main text" (i.e., the film) but are rather kept separate and distributed across a variety of paratexts—in other words, a strategy more in line with Bakhtin's intentional hybrid and Jenkins' conception of transmedia storytelling.

Any cut of Snyder's *Watchmen* is already a palimpsestuous work, irrespective of its various paratexts, due to its adaptation and remediation of comics. To a greater extent than most comic book films, and practically unprecedented in the superhero genre, *Watchmen* hews very closely to the characters and narrative of the graphic novel: in terms of diegetic intertextuality, an adaptation theorist would surely determine—perhaps after screening the film while following along in the (graphic) novel, as George Bluestone suggests—that it is fairly faithful to the original work. And indeed, Bob Rehak has described the film version as "a very ambitious experiment in hyper faithful cinematic adaptation" ("Adapting *Watchmen*" 154) while Drew Morton has categorized it as part of a "high fidelity" cycle of comic book adaptations (99).<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> This status is conferred by a combination of factors: the fact that these sections are not presented as comics but as prose, as well as their placement at the end of each issue (or, in the collected version, between chapters) give them a sense of otherness and distance from the main narrative. They also represent a diegetic pause in which the story comes to a halt.

<sup>132</sup> Their closest equivalent in *TUC* would be the audio commentaries and "video journals" that describe the making of the film.

<sup>133</sup> *Watchmen*'s critical reception was characterized by the claim that it was "too faithful" to its source material, illustrating the damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't logic of fidelity discourse. See Owen, "*Watchmen* is Too Faithful"; Lemire, "Review: *Watchmen*"; Sancton, "Did Zack Snyder Love *Watchmen* Too Much?"; and Roeper, "*Watchmen*" for representative examples. Arguably, the film's self-effacing stance is best revealed by the titles of

Rehak's claim is particularly peculiar, since the article in which this statement appears is largely devoted to explicating the narrative divergences made in the film adaptation as a result, he argues, of September 11, 2001. How might a film be considered not merely faithful but indeed *hyper faithful* given the considerable differences he notes in the climaxes of the two versions, wherein one version features a psychic squid teleporting into and detonating at the centre of New York City and the other does not? Such claims seem to be based entirely on the film's use of the original comics "as script, storyboard, and design bible" (Rehak, "Adapting *Watchmen*" 154) and can allow for differences in meaning or narrative so long as superficial resemblance is, for the most part, maintained; indeed, cosmetic similarities between the film's mise-en-scène and the comics' as well as an incessant use of compositional quotations apparently more than compensate for the narrative alterations and condensation in the film version.<sup>134</sup> The film's primary strategy for remediating the comics medium—the aforementioned strategies are intertextual rather than intermedial—is the use of panel moments.<sup>135</sup> As in other comic book films, the staccato rhythm thus produced emphasizes particular compositions, nearly arresting these moments amidst the temporal flow and raising them to the privileged status of the comic book panel. These function in precisely the way earlier detailed in chapter four, and don't warrant revisiting here.

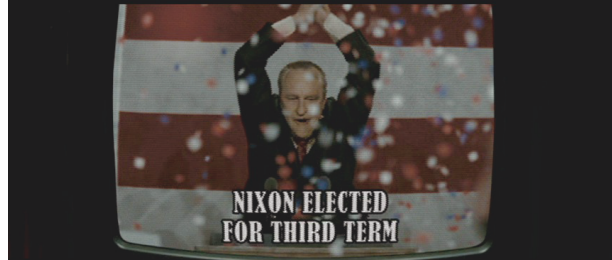
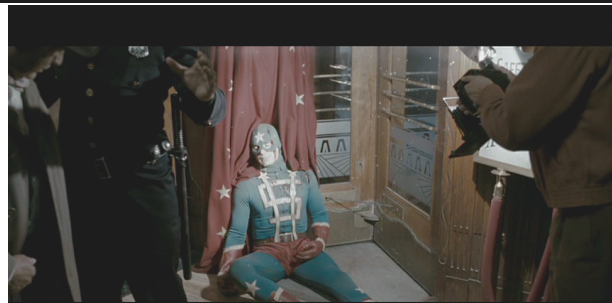
*Watchmen*'s opening credits, however, contain its most unique contribution to comic book film style. As David Bordwell notes, "Credit sequences are very important narrational gestures. These extrafictional passages usually present information in highly self-conscious and omniscient fashion" (*Narration* 66). Like *Scott Pilgrim*, wherein the opening credits served multiple purposes, this six-minute sequence in *Watchmen* both sets the stage for the narrative, fleshing out the details of the alternate history in which the film is set—as Bob Dylan sings on the soundtrack, the times they are a-changin', literally—while also establishing the film's style.

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the different released cuts, with the Director's Cut's definitive status—typically such versions are considered as the "real work of art" and "true version of the film" (Gray, Kindle loc. 1687)—having been thoroughly supplanted by the Ultimate Cut. The Director's Cut has thereby implicitly been rendered the *penultimate* cut, indicating the franchise's overall preference for the original vision of the graphic novel over the cinematic intervention made by Snyder.

<sup>134</sup> It's worth reiterating here that while fidelity may be the goal, implicit or not, of adaptations, the same cannot—or at least should not—be said of remediation, which recognizes and embraces the differences between media. Panel moments and compositional quotations don't attempt to reproduce the comic book medium, but to hybridize it with the cinema.

<sup>135</sup> See chapter two for a discussion of panel moments in the opening sequence of *Watchmen*.



**Figs. 5.29-5.35.** The pre-history of *Watchmen* is presented as a series of nearly static historical moments.

The former point is worth elaborating on. The revisionist history of *Watchmen* inserts superheroes into key historical moments—the assassination of JFK (The Comedian did it), the moon landing (Dr. Manhattan was there)—while also marking the trajectory of superhero culture itself: early in the sequence, superheroes are seen fighting alongside police (**figs. 5.29 and 5.30**) while later one is seen dead with his cape stuck in a revolving door (**fig. 5.31**) and another is shown being committed against his will (**fig. 5.32**). Such events seemingly set history down a darker path, exemplified by military police gunning down peaceful Vietnam protesters and Nixon’s third-term reelection as president (**fig. 5.33**). Superheroes ultimately become just another part of the pop cultural landscape, depicted as the subject for an Andy Warhol screen-printing (**fig. 5.34**) and as a guest of honour at Studio 54 (**fig. 5.35**). Composed primarily of slow-motion shots, each of which represents a separate scene in microcosm, this sequence takes the panel moment to the extreme by excising the regular-speed bookends; as a result, the sequence reads more as an alternative expression of the comic book chronotope discussed in the previous section, since it doesn’t visualize closure so much as a series of disconnected (panel) moments.

The eagle-eyed reader may have noticed that the credits in **fig. 5.35** attribute authorship of the graphic novel to illustrator Dave Gibbons only; no mention is made of its scribe, Alan Moore, who is notorious for the confrontational, even malevolent stance he’s assumed with regard to cinema in general and film adaptations of his comics in particular. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he clarifies his issue with such works:

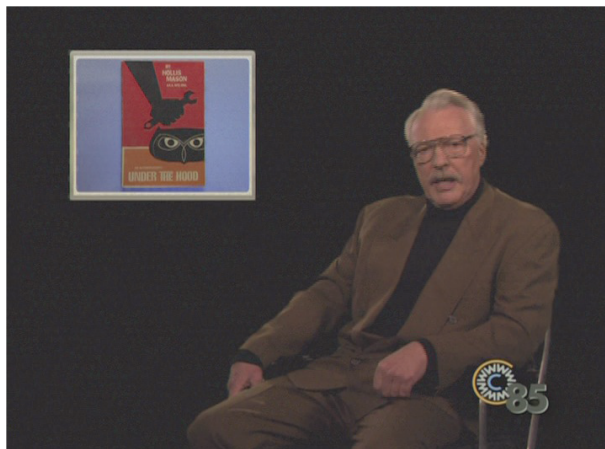
“There is something about the quality of comics that makes things possible that you couldn’t do in any other medium,” he says, with just a hint of the exasperated schoolteacher. “Things that we did in *Watchmen* on paper could be frankly horrible or sensationalist or unpleasant if you were to interpret them literally through the medium of cinema. When it’s just lines on paper, the reader is in control of the experience – it’s a tableau vivant. And that gives it the necessary distance. It’s not the same when you’re being dragged through it at 24 frames per second.” (Rose)

As a writer of comics, Moore doesn’t necessarily understand the nuances of cinema: he seems to think that all films are necessarily literal in meaning, incapable of providing a sense of aesthetic distance from their subject matter, and that their viewers are entirely passive. The first ten



minutes of *Watchmen* alone is enough to prove him wrong on these fronts, given the film's liberal use of compositional quotations (which encourage active, intertextually-minded viewing, as detailed in chapter four) and use of film style (which evokes comics in a figural, rather than literal, way). Perhaps, however, he means to refer to the *Watchmen*'s paratexts: a film may be able to remediate a comic book, but surely it will not also be able to incorporate autobiography, essays, journalism, interviews, psychological profiles, and police case reports, all of which the graphic novel includes between chapters. It is here that we'll turn our attention away from the film proper and toward its paratexts, wherein the film's polymediality truly lies.

In anticipation of its theatrical release, two shorts were released to DVD and Blu-ray as a separate commercial product, thereby transforming these elements of the graphic novel into a transmedia storytelling and marketing strategy (fig. 5.36). Adapting *Under the Hood* into a short faux-television documentary, featuring



**Fig. 5.37.** *Under the Hood* remediated as a television newsmagazine.



**Fig. 5.36.** *Tales from the Black Freighter* becomes a *Watchmen* paratext.

interviews with Hollis Mason (Nite Owl I) among other retired superheroes, was the filmmakers' novel way to incorporate the content of these prose sections of the graphic novel while radically transforming their form; *Tales from the Black Freighter*, an animated short, adapted the pirate comic-within-the-comic that runs throughout *Watchmen* and provides an allegorical commentary on the events of the graphic novel. The realization of



these two peripheral elements of *Watchmen* simultaneously performed a variety of functions: announcing the filmmakers' dedication to the minutiae of the original text (contributing to the fidelity discourse discussed earlier); creating hype for the forthcoming release of the film; introducing and deepening fans' engagement with the diegetic world; and, most importantly for my argument here, remediating the paratextual strategy first seen in the graphic novel, wherein supplemental elements like *Under the Hood* were connected to but separate from the story itself (between chapters/on a separate DVD), and also presented in an idiom that marked it as distinct from the main text (autobiographical prose/1970s television newsmagazine, similar to *60 Minutes* [CBS, 1968–]) (**fig. 5.37**). Through this format, *Under the Hood* is able to elaborate on the backstories glimpsed in the opening credits, rewarding viewers with extra information and thus providing a unique contribution to the transmedia narrative.

*Tales from the Black Freighter* has been considered as a central part of Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen*, arguably providing the moral centre of the text via an allegorical version of the narrative events.<sup>136</sup> Richard Reynolds summarizes the relationship between the text and its imaginary intertext thusly:

*Watchmen* is at bottom about the intentions and fictions employed by everybody either to achieve power and control or simply to get through their daily lives. The youth reading the *Black Freighter* comic fails to grasp the significance of the story before he is obliterated in Adrian Veidt's attack on New York—an event which, for the alert reader of *Watchmen*, is echoed by the story of the marooned mariner. There are no privileged cases: superheroes, presidents, psychiatrists, newsvendors, journalists, admen; all are presented as consumers of their own self-serving fictions. (114)<sup>137</sup>

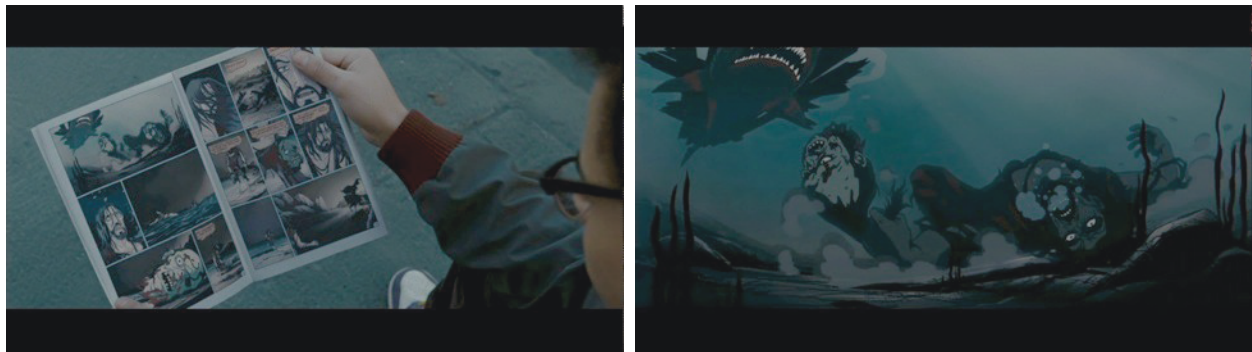
But taken separately from the narrative of *Watchmen*, *Black Freighter* is itself somewhat marooned. Much of its meaning emerges from the specific ways in which the narration of the pirate comic intersects with the main plot, at times echoing Rorschach's trajectory in the story

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<sup>136</sup> At a recent comics studies conference, I overheard two comics scholars discussing how “everything you need to know about *Watchmen* is in *The Black Freighter*.”

<sup>137</sup> *Black Freighter* also comprises a key part of *Watchmen*'s revisionist history that is not otherwise covered in the film: seemingly as a direct result of superheroes appearing on the streets of New York in the wake of Superman's debut in *Action Comics*, the genre fails to make a comeback in post-war comics culture. Instead, EC Comics—best known today for their gruesome early-1950s horror stories—continues to dominate the marketplace with pirate-themed comics in particular.

and at others commenting on Adrian's use of mass death to achieve lasting world peace. Viewed as separate (even if connected) texts, these thematic parallels are barely implicit. In the *TUC* version of the film, however, *Tales from the Black Freighter* is incorporated into the feature itself, providing a running commentary on the central narrative. In this way, the evocative connections between text and paratext are made much more explicit; indeed, the paratextual *becomes* textual, just as it was in the comics. For instance, an animated scene detailing the mariner's isolation and his increasingly tenuous grip on sanity is inserted between Rorschach's arrest and subsequent psychological examination, suggesting that the vigilante is also becoming (or has become) mentally unmoored, even if his intentions are good; the mariner's raft, buoyed



**Figs. 5.38-5.39.** Live-action transitions to animation in *Watchmen: The Ultimate Cut*.

by the dead bodies of his former crew, also echoes Rorschach's placement in a prison in which he's surrounded by the very criminals that he himself brought to justice.

For the purposes of this dissertation, however, the way in which these animated sequences are incorporated into the film is more relevant than their thematic effect on the text.<sup>138</sup> Like the entirety of *Superman* or the individual episodes of *Creepshow*,<sup>139</sup> the *Black Freighter* segments of *Watchmen* are presented as a moving representation of a comic book: we see young Bernard reading a floppy issue of *Tales from the Black Freighter* on the street; the camera cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot, showing a double-page spread (**fig. 5.38**) before (virtually) tracking into one particular panel (**fig. 5.39**) which, once it takes up the entire frame, comes to life in full-motion animation. Though not all of the sequences are introduced in this way—some, like the aforementioned Rorschach scene, are not diegetically introduced—enough of them are that the

<sup>138</sup> As regards the narrative meaning of *The Black Freighter*, Reynolds' reading is, in my view, absolutely adequate: see 110-114 in particular.

<sup>139</sup> Both examples previously discussed in chapter three.

viewer understands this sub-narrative's place in the overall story. This technique is very similar to that seen in the prologue to *Superman*, and indeed produces the same effect, marking the scenes thereafter as a figurative remediation of not just *a* comic, but *this* comic in particular as animated film. *Superman* places this device outside of the diegesis, thereby framing the entire film as a live-action comic; the more subtle strategies of remediation employed in *Watchmen*'s live-action scenes, however, also mark them as a cinematic version of comics, thereby remediating the "comic-within-a-comic" framework of the original graphic novel.

*The Black Freighter*, *Under the Hood*, and *TUC* are all only accessible on home video, which speaks to the evolving role of theatrical release in a film's life. Richard Grusin has described DVD releases of films as a form of remediation that "marks a fundamental change in the aesthetic status of the cinematic artefact" because

the DVD release of a feature film is no longer seen as an afterthought, a second-order distribution phenomenon aimed at circulating the original film to a wider audience. Today the production, design and distribution of DVD versions of feature films are part of the original contractual (and thus artistic) intention of these films. (214)

According to Jared Gardner, Snyder had always intended to utilize the home video market to fully realize his adaptation of *Watchmen*, paratexts included (Kindle loc. 3818). In the new paradigm embodied by such release strategies, we must increasingly recognize that "a film does not end after its closing credits" (Grusin 214) but rather continues through "multiply networked, distributed forms of cinematic production and exhibition" (210). Grusin dubs this, retooling Tom Gunning, the digital cinema of interactions, though the concept is not dissimilar from transmedia storytelling insofar as the viewer ultimately chooses his/her own path through the narrative by selecting which texts to consume and in what order. (Grusin also invokes *The Matrix* franchise as an example.) The kind of control that DVD gives viewers is not unlike that of the comic book reader, who at any given moment assumes a perspective that encompasses past, present, and future on a single page. The original graphic novel allegorizes the act of comic book reading through the superpowers of Dr. Manhattan, whose perception of all time as simultaneous mirrors the perception of the comic book reader. As Gardner interprets the character:

Dr. Manhattan is capable of taking in past, present, and future in a glance, of moving back and forward between them effortlessly, even of making choices in

the gaps between slivers of time that might impact if not the conclusion at least its ultimate meaning. Dr. Manhattan, that is, sees time like a comic reader... If there was ever a comic book that could not be adapted to film, it was surely this one. (Kindle loc. 3792)



**Fig. 5.41.** DVDs allow viewers to view multiple instants in a glance: not unlike the powers of Dr. Manhattan and the comic book reader.

Indeed, a theatrical release would have difficulty remediating this aspect of the medium (as we saw in previous discussions of split-screen imagery), but this kind of temporal control is old hat to DVD viewers, specifically in scene selection menus that simultaneously present them with an array of scenes and moments in time—each represented, it should be noted, through a single privileged instant (**fig. 5.40**). Viewers are thereby “invited to excavate the layers through multiple viewings using its new powers (like Dr. Manhattan) to stop time, to study a film frame by frame, byte by byte—powers consequent to the DVD” (Kindle loc. 3818). Both as an adaptation of Moore and Gibbons’ comics series and a remediation of the comics medium, *Watchmen* only becomes richer as a text—indeed, as a series of texts—in its home video afterlife. Contrary to Gardner’s conclusion about the impossibility of adaptation, I arrive at an inverse conclusion about the potential of remediation: indeed, if ever there was a comic book film that was meant for DVD, it was surely *Watchmen*.

Thus we see how the remediation of a complicated comic book like *Watchmen* can be detected at every stage of the film's distribution, from before its theatrical exhibition to its home video afterlife. Considering the franchise as an intentional hybrid, the various texts—the film itself and its paratexts in their various configurations—each maintains distance and autonomy through aesthetic differentiation while also, following the logic of transmedia storytelling, combining to form a coherent whole. As Grusin suggests, it's increasingly important to pay attention to the ways in which films are remediated to home video formats, since it determines the means through which most people will see a film after its brief theatrical release window. These packages are texts in themselves that don't only remediate theatrical films but may also contribute to and extend the aesthetic choices made in the film itself. In the case of *Watchmen: TUC*, the package is arguably as worthy of discussion as the film itself, transforming the film into a much more complicated polymedial palimpsest.

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*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* and *Watchmen* function as compelling limit cases for the remediation of comics, pushing the discussions begun in previous chapters into new territory that are opened up largely as a result of the aesthetic flexibility afforded by digital cinema's flat ontology, which includes the ability to traverse multiple platforms for distribution. The next and final chapter, however, presents a limit case for the inverse: a series of comic book films—namely Christopher Nolan's "Dark Knight" trilogy (*Batman Begins*; *The Dark Knight*; *The Dark Knight Rises*)—that severely limits its remediation of comics in order to foreground its filmic (read: not digital) materiality. Indeed, Nolan's interpretation of the Batman mythos disavows the character's origins in comics, reshaping him as a hero of the cinema. Thus the series not only materially embodies but also uses its narrative to allegorically advocate for cinematic specificity, thus articulating a counter-example to the framework established in the previous chapters.

## CHAPTER SIX

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### An Allegory of the Cinematic Superhero

Throughout this dissertation, I have referred to the comic book film as a genre defined by its intermedial relationship to comics and distinct from the superhero genre with which it is often associated. Though comics are undoubtedly the medium most commonly associated with superheroes,<sup>140</sup> the superhero and film have an almost equally long and storied history. Indeed, the first superhero film, *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* (dirs. John English and William Whitney, 1941) debuted in cinemas only three years after the first appearance of the original costumed superhero in comic books (Superman in *Action Comics* #1, June 1938).<sup>141</sup> Though a thorough history of the superhero genre in film is beyond the scope of this chapter, it's nevertheless important to trace a few general tendencies that have emerged over the decades to set up my argument here. When the superhero genre first migrated to the cinema, it was not possible to create perceptually realistic superheroes, particularly with regards to their costumes and their superpowers. Superhuman musculature is relatively simple to draw, but difficult to find on B-list Hollywood actors of the 1940s. Likewise, fabrics that hug the skin enough to reveal said musculature tend to restrict movement when worn by human bodies; in practice, puffy sweatsuits were the most commonly used alternative. While superhero's capes never fail to flap majestically in comics (e.g., fig. 4.8), in early film serials they tend to either hang impotently or wave about erratically, often interfering with fight choreography. From the outset, superhero masks created striking visual effects in comics, completely concealing the wearer's identity and

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<sup>140</sup> While the superhero as a character type increasingly appears in other media—such as live-action television (*Heroes* [NBC, 2006-2010]), video games (*Infamous* [Sucker Punch Productions, 2009]), and table-top card games (*Sentinels of the Multiverse* [Greater Than Games, 2011])—it seems to be haunted by the comic book wherever it goes. Indeed, each of these three examples is influenced by the aesthetics of comic books to a significant degree, whether through the presence of comic book imagery and typefaces in *Heroes*, the static and paneled cut scenes of *Infamous*, or the “yellow box” captions on each card of *Sentinels of the Multiverse*. Indeed, the “haunting” of cinema by comics is, generally speaking, the subject of this dissertation, which demonstrates that this phenomenon extends beyond the superhero genre.

<sup>141</sup> Some locate the origin of the superhero earlier, with the first appearance of Lee Falk's purple costumed crime-fighter The Phantom in comic strips in 1936 (Stedman 215). The Phantom's lack of superpowers, however, puts him more in the tradition of the costumed adventurer/pulp fiction hero alongside characters like Doc Savage, Tarzan, The Spider, and The Shadow. I contend that the superhero as a category did not exist until Superman; after Superman's debut, however, most new costumed adventurers (especially those appearing in comics) would be considered superheroes (even those, like The Phantom, that lacked superpowers, e.g., Batman).

often replacing his pupils with pure white illumination. The ill-fitting masks in early serials—particularly the limp-eared Batman cowls in both *Batman* (1943) and *Batman and Robin* (1949)—provided little disguise and were about as intimidating as a homemade Halloween costume. Heroes like Captain Marvel and Superman needed to fly, but CGI was some decades off yet; in the former’s film, the actor playing Marvel is suspended on wires with his arms extended in the classic pose—a typical solution, but aesthetically static—while in the latter’s serials, actor Kirk Alyn dissolves into an animated Superman, a cruder version of which featured earlier in the Fleischer Studios shorts; this option proves immeasurably more dynamic—Superman can weave through the air with total freedom, unlike Captain Marvel—but it sacrifices the allure and impact of live action photography. In all of these cases, the seriousness of the superhero’s quest for justice is inadvertently undermined by low production values and the seeming impossibility of convincing special effects. Rather than fight a battle the cinematic superhero couldn’t win—the battle for believability—studios acknowledged the genre’s limitations and leaned into them, marketing superhero films as unsophisticated children’s fare. The genre later became a joke, and audiences were in on it.<sup>142</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the marketing of the paradigm-shifting *Superman* was centred on the tagline “You’ll believe a man can fly.” *Superman* asked audiences to suspend their disbelief, as they originally had for Captain Marvel, but this time filmmakers were prepared to meet viewers halfway by giving them something that was easier to believe in.

Since *Superman*, the genre has continued to benefit from gains made in the visual effects industry. Indeed, it is widely thought that the refinement of computer-generated visual effects in the 1990s and 2000s enabled the meteoric rise of the superhero genre to the top of the box office and the popular cine-cultural zeitgeist. For example, M. Keith Booker writes that with

the recent advent of computer-generated imagery (CGI), more and more of the kinds of action that were once the purview of the comics are becoming available to filmmakers... As a result, the early years of the twenty-first century have seen a veritable explosion in the production of movies based on comics, movies that are perfect for the heavy use of CGI. (ix-x)

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<sup>142</sup> See my discussion of *Batman* in chapter four.



Of the superhero films released in the past twenty years, almost all of them ask the viewer to believe in the diegetic universe on display, rather than mock it for its sheer outlandishness. Though Superman may smile knowingly at the camera in the closing moments of the 1978 film, *the film itself* doesn't wink at the viewer; rather, the film demands to be taken seriously as a narrative. It is not the case that superhero movies are inherently juvenile, inartistic, unintelligent, or uncinematic, though they may be. The question is not if, but rather *how* superhero films are cinematic, and this is the question that I want to explore in this chapter. The answer, appropriately enough, is that the genre has had something of a double identity, echoing the lifestyle of the mild-mannered reporter who sheds his glasses and dons a cape to become the world's greatest superhero. On the one hand, the superhero film may embrace the kinds of remediation that have been under discussion throughout this dissertation, not only adapting comic book characters to the screen (diegetic intertextuality) but also acknowledging the character's history in comics through the film's stylistic system using more complex forms of intermediality. The previous chapters are replete with examples of such films, including *Superman*, *Hulk*, *Daredevil*, and *Watchmen*. On the other hand, however, the superhero film may attempt to disavow its connection to comic books by opting for a kind of monolithic cinematic specificity, adapting the characters to fit the medium rather than the other way around. This chapter is devoted to this alternative mode of practice, which attempts to avoid remediating comics as much as possible and whose paradigmatic example is Christopher Nolan's trilogy of Batman films (*Batman Begins*; *The Dark Knight*; and *The Dark Knight Rises*). Indeed, this series is so indifferent to comics that it reimagines its title character and his journey as an extended allegory for the medium of cinema, and in particular its losing battle against digital technology (which, it should be noted, largely enables the kinds of remediation under discussion in this dissertation). In doing so, Nolan also disempowers the superhero, instead emphasizing his human weakness, frailty, and—paradoxically—exceptionalism. While the contemporary cinematic superhero is usually associated (and created) with digital imaging, Nolan instead aligns Batman's rogues gallery of villains with various elements and logics associated with the digital, in order to demonstrate that they (and the technology they represent) can be defeated by the organic, the analog, the human. Consequently, this trilogy also undermines a key ambition of the superhero genre as it has been practiced over eight decades of comic books: to allow the reader (or viewer)

to transcend the limitations of the merely human, to imagine a world in which natural laws are not immutable, but rather were made to be broken by a few special individuals.

### **Allegories and the “Dark Knight” Trilogy**

In *The Virtual Life of Film*, D.N. Rodowick acknowledges an anxiety in pre-millennial cinema that sometimes manifests in film narratives “as an allegorical conflict wherein cinema struggles to reassert or redefine its identity in the face of a new representational technology that threatens to overwhelm it” (4). The representational technology in question is not a particular invention, per se, but rather an industry-wide shift that would see emulsion-based photography, mechanical projection, and other analog cinematic technologies replaced by digital successors. The fallout of this change (and, indeed, the change itself) remains ongoing, both within the film industry and consequently in the discipline of film studies. According to many, the digital simultaneously threatens to weaken cinema’s indexical claim to reality,<sup>143</sup> to doom celluloid to obsolescence, to decentralize the theatrical moviegoing experience, and to endanger the very possibility of film archiving and preservation. For others, it promises to deliver heretofore unimaginable cinematic spectacle, to make distribution cheaper and easier, to enable stricter quality control over theatrical projection, to provide new release models for non-blockbuster and independent films, and to give viewers instantaneous access to a larger catalogue of films than has ever been commercially available before. The allegorical struggles between man and advanced digital technology depicted in films like *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (dir. James Cameron, 1991), *Strange Days* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), *eXistenZ* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1999), and *The Matrix* are hardly so specific, but there is nevertheless the pervasive sense throughout this canon that digital advancements are not harbingers of a utopian technological future but rather something at least somewhat sinister.<sup>144</sup>

Despite its strong association with the post-9/11 zeitgeist, I believe that Nolan’s “Dark Knight” trilogy is related to this pre-millennial set of films and in particular to the anxieties they represent. Though the already considerable body of literature devoted to this superhero trilogy

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<sup>143</sup> The concern over the loss of indexicality is largely based on a misunderstanding of what indexicality is, and is better expressed as the loss of a direct connection to reality. See chapter four for a discussion of the index.

<sup>144</sup> This concern about the role of digital technology in filmmaking practice has been characterized elsewhere as “cyberphobia” (Bolter 15) or “technophobia” (Bennett 168).

largely focuses on their value as a contemporary political allegory,<sup>145</sup> I would like to read them as a commentary on cinematic technology and its relationship to the superhero genre instead. In doing so, it is not my intention to discount or undermine the often very good readings of Batman as an allegory for various aspects of contemporary global politics, but rather to provide an alternative reading that will function as a counterpoint to the kinds of comic book films that have been discussed in the previous chapters. Specifically, I intend to demonstrate that Nolan's trilogy functions as an extended allegory for the value of celluloid and its precarious position in contemporary digital visual culture, with Batman representing celluloid and his opponents representing the digital. The films function as a covert celebration of celluloid's unique power in a world "corrupted" by the digital. And just as Batman (an "ordinary man" with no supernatural powers) is the odd man out among his fellow superheroes, so too does this trilogy stand out within the cinematic superhero genre.<sup>146</sup> While its generic contemporaries tend to embrace the digital (both on a narrative/allegorical level and in terms of their production), Nolan's films attempt to undermine the genre's affiliation with and valorization of the non-organic.

As previously mentioned, there is already a great deal of writing on Nolan's "Dark Knight" trilogy, most of which is not directly relevant to the present argument but is nevertheless worth touching on briefly for purposes of contextualization. In order to better situate the various

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<sup>145</sup> In her article "The Hero We Read: *The Dark Knight*, Popular Allegoresis, and Blockbuster Ideology," Andrea Comiskey attempts to account for the proliferation of allegorical readings following the release of the second film in Nolan's trilogy. Indeed, the association between these films and the War on Terror has been so popular that it warrants just such an article to sort through the minutiae between its various articulations. Comiskey focuses primarily on newspaper critics and bloggers, but this reading has also taken various forms in academia. Anthologies exploring the impact of 9/11 on popular culture often include a chapter devoted to Batman, e.g., Justine Toh's examination of *Batman Begins*' military fetish and post-9/11 ideology in *Reframing 9/11* or Andrew Schopp's essay about the culture of fear in *Begins* and other post-9/11 films in *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture*. Anthony J. Kolenic has written similarly on how *The Dark Knight* echoes the cultural fears of a "post-post-9/11" world, defined by "the continuation of psycho-political security fears" and a seemingly unending series of "embassy attacks, school shootings, the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a myriad of other violent acts" (1023). Additionally, Marc DiPaolo's chapter on Batman in *War, Politics and Superheroes* contextualizes Nolan's characterization of Batman against a broader consideration of the transmedia franchise, concluding that the sexist and juvenile male wish fulfillment that the character tends to represent "can be easily exploited as propaganda that supports the excesses of American imperialism and global capitalism" (68). Slavoj Žižek has also contributed to this corpus, both in a piece on the politics of the trilogy, particularly with regards to the final film's deliberate resonances with the Occupy Wall Street movement, and in a segment of the documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2012).

<sup>146</sup> Nolan's role as the "godfather" of DC Comics' future cinematic endeavours, however, suggests that his vision may extend beyond his three Batman films (Bettinger). Indeed, Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013) represents a massive departure for the director in terms of its engagement with the comic book medium compared to *300* and *Watchmen*, which may be attributable to Nolan's influence.

approaches taken in these studies, however, a concise plot summary of the series is required. The first entry in the trilogy, *Batman Begins*, represents the “origin story” of the superhero, giving rhyme and reason to Bruce Wayne’s assumption of the Batman identity. After a series of formative adolescent traumas—first, he falls into a cave full of bats; second, his parents are murdered, for which he feels vaguely responsible—Bruce leaves Gotham on an indefinite quest, seeking “the means to fight injustice.” While imprisoned in Asia, he is approached by Henri Ducard, who becomes his mentor and instructs him to join Ra’s Al Ghul’s League of Shadows, a terrorist group devoted to restoring balance to the world by eradicating irredeemably corrupt civilizations. Bruce accepts Ducard’s lessons and training, but ultimately disagrees with the means by which the League would effect change in the world. After burning down the League’s mountaintop headquarters, he returns to Gotham where he decides to put his training to use in a novel way: by adopting a theatrical persona, inspired by his own fear of bats, that will function as a symbol with a double articulation. First, the Batman will be “indestructible,” “everlasting,” and “more than just a man”; he will be the “dramatic example” that will inspire the people of Gotham to reclaim their city from the criminals that control it. Second, the Batman will shield Bruce from his own terror, effectively transferring his own fears to the criminals he would do battle with: as he puts it, “It’s time my enemies share my dread.”

While doing battle with Gotham’s underworld, Bruce ultimately discovers the League’s plot to destroy Gotham, which culminates with the reappearance of his former mentor, now revealed to be the League’s mastermind, Ra’s Al Ghul. With the help of his childhood friend Rachel Dawes and police Lieutenant James Gordon, Batman is able to dispatch Ra’s as well as his demented disciple Dr. Jonathan Crane, aka The Scarecrow. In the film’s closing scene, Gordon reveals an emerging threat that goes by the name of “Joker.” Batman promises to look into it before leaping off the rooftop and into the night.

If *Begins* shares thematic concerns with an Introduction to Psychology textbook, its follow-up *The Dark Knight* is enrolled in Ethics 101. Batman, now established as a force for good, has instilled a sense of fear in Gotham’s criminals. Despite his earlier premise that Gotham needed “more than just a man” to inspire its population, Bruce is now eyeing District Attorney Harvey Dent, who promises to be the “hero with a face” that Gotham truly needs, replacing Batman as the catalyst for reform. An unintended consequence of Batman’s emergence has also come to fruition in the form of the Joker, who seemingly exists only as the ultimate challenge to

Batman's morality. In a series of Rube Goldberg-esque plots, the Joker challenges Batman to make difficult ethical decisions, the consequences of which variously result in Rachel's death, Harvey's disfigurement and consequent descent into homicidal madness, and Batman's own status as a fugitive from the law.

*The Dark Knight Rises* begins eight years after the conclusion of *The Dark Knight*. A bereaved and traumatized Wayne has confined himself to his estate for the interim, and popular rumour paints him as a Howard Hughes-esque madman. After a "cat burglar" named Selina Kyle steals a precious family heirloom from a locked safe on his premises, Bruce comes out of hiding, reassuming an interest in his father's company, Wayne Enterprises, and the identity of the Batman. Through a series of convoluted plots that define the series' approach to criminality, the villain Bane manages to dispatch Bruce to a distant prison with an incapacitating back injury while he holds all of Gotham hostage for months under the threat of nuclear annihilation. Miranda Tate, recently selected by Bruce himself to run his company, is revealed to be the daughter of Ra's Al Ghul, and has enlisted Bane to complete her late father's mission. Ultimately, Batman reappears with just enough time to fly the bomb away from Gotham, where it detonates safely; Bruce, however, is decidedly within the blast radius. As the city mourns their martyred hero, it is revealed that he miraculously escaped the bomb blast and is now living in Italy with Selina, where they will presumably live happily ever after. In the closing shot, the mantle of the Batman seems to be passed on to the next generation, embodied by Detective John "Robin" Blake.

Despite its relatively recent vintage, this trilogy is very likely the superhero franchise that has inspired the greatest amount of scholarship. It should be noted that Batman as a character is also the superhero that has seemed to provoke the most intellectual inquiry as well, with William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson's edited collection *The Many Lives of the Batman* and Will Brooker's monograph *Batman Unmasked* representing the most influential texts. With regard to Nolan's films specifically, however, a few distinct discourses emerge. Most obvious is the attempt to read *The Dark Knight* as an allegory for George W. Bush's post-9/11 "War on Terror." Most popularly articulated by conservative columnist Andrew Klavan in a *Wall Street Journal* article published while the film was still in theatres, this reading has been taken up and expanded upon in many venues. Klavan's original argument attempted to valorize Bush by associating him with Batman, drawing similarities between the Patriot Act's invasions of civil

liberties (e.g., wire-tapping) with the cell phone-powered panopticon that Batman uses to locate the Joker. Todd McGowan has countered that Klavan's reading doesn't do justice to the thematic import of this plot device, which sees Batman both accepting that invading the public's privacy in this way constitutes an unambiguously immoral act and consequently makes him a criminal not only in the eyes of the law, but in his own view as well. As a result, Batman immediately disables the device once its use is served and the Joker's location is determined. Bush, on the other hand, would never accept his status as a war criminal, nor did he dismantle his surveillance apparatus after its ostensible purpose was satisfied (McGowan 131).<sup>147</sup>

For all of the diversity of writing on this trilogy, the critical discourse is remarkably unified. One weakness of this body of work, however, is that the vast majority of it was published prior to the release of *The Dark Knight Rises*. Thus, with the exception of Slavoj Žižek's article for *New Statesman*, no academic to my knowledge has taken up the trilogy in its entirety. Furthermore, the focus on the films' politics and philosophy leaves out against-the-grain readings that might give the texts' cinematic specificity greater attention, which is especially odd given how outspoken Nolan is regarding his distaste for digital cinema.

Indeed, among directors today Nolan may be the most concerned, or at least the most vocal, about the potentially negative consequences of the digital revolution. While his Hollywood contemporaries increasingly abandon physical film in favour of an entirely digital workflow, Nolan has instead doubled down on celluloid, foregoing digital intermediates (Ressner) and choosing to shoot large portions of *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* using large and cumbersome 65mm IMAX cameras.<sup>148</sup> According to his visual effects supervisor Nick Davis, "shooting IMAX was Chris' kick-back against the entire world going digital [...] In his book, we're losing a lot of the mystique and the glamour of film. [...] I think Chris just

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<sup>147</sup> The other major tendency in criticism of *The Dark Knight* in particular is to read the film for its philosophical content, either thinking through the film as if it was a philosophical text or using the film to explain philosophical problems to a lay audience. The latter approach is taken primarily in books such as *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul*. Elements of *The Dark Knight* have been interpreted as exemplars of deontology, consequentialism and utilitarianism, nihilism, and Foucaultian power relations, not to mention Brooker's Derridean reading of Nolan's role within the Batman transmedia franchise in *Hunting the Dark Knight* or McGowan's Hegelian interpretation of the director's entire oeuvre up to and including *Inception* (2010). Though it falls outside of this trend, Lian Amaris' analysis of *The Dark Knight*'s innovative viral marketing campaign is also worthy of mention here. The tension between the primarily digital viral marketing for the film (largely based around the Joker rather than Batman, significantly) and the allegorical message of the trilogy are worth interrogating, but it's beyond the scope of the present investigation, which is focused on a close textual reading.

<sup>148</sup> On the use of IMAX in *The Dark Knight* in particular, see chapter three.

wanted to have a chance to show the public what we might be losing” (Duncan, “Batman Grounded,” 64). The closing credits of *Rises* even boast, in emphatic capital letters, that “THIS MOTION PICTURE WAS SHOT AND FINISHED ON FILM.” In interviews, Nolan is unequivocal regarding his dismissal of cinema’s digital future; of the many directors and cinematographers interviewed about film and the digital revolution in the documentary *Side by Side* (dir. Christopher Kenneally, 2012), he is the only figure that refuses to acknowledge *any* positive potential inherent in digital technology<sup>149</sup>—despite the fact that all of his films since *Batman Begins* could fairly be classified as CGI-driven spectacles. For instance, *The Dark Knight* contains six-hundred and forty-two visual effects shots (Duncan, “Batman Grounded,” 64), *Inception* has four-hundred and ninety-one (Fordham, “In Dreams,” 69), and *The Dark Knight Rises* contains four-hundred and fifty (Duncan, “A Farewell to Arms,” 1). Nolan’s analog idealism sounds great in interviews and may lend him credibility with cinephiles, but in practice the situation is far more complex.

His “Dark Knight” trilogy embodies this complexity not only in its production but also in its narrative. Throughout these films, the values associated with the cinema in its ideal analog or pre-digital form—truth, physicality, indexicality, and a privileged relationship to reality—are aligned with the Batman character. Echoing Nolan’s own use of CGI throughout the films, Batman does utilize digital technology but always as a means of better revealing the world around him, while his enemies use technology to alter or destroy not only our perceptions of the world, but often the world itself. The narrative sees Batman overcoming obstacle after obstacle, often against all odds, not because of some superhuman ability but rather because of his overwhelming humanity. The final moments of the trilogy, as we will see, narrativize the inherent contradiction in a human exceptionalism that is based largely on frailty and weakness. In laying this allegory bare, I don’t mean to assert that Nolan intentionally constructed this series of films with a mind to allegorize celluloid’s struggle against the digital; nevertheless, the trilogy

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<sup>149</sup> Nolan compares digital film to store-bought cookies that attempt to emulate being home-made: “What I find is, the manipulations that the digital media like to do—they are seductive, but ultimately, they’re a little bit hollow. The analogy I would always use is, I remember this summer when Chips Ahoy, or whatever, they came out with these chocolate chip cookies that were like they just came out of the oven, and they were soft. It was like, ‘Oh, this is amazing. Amazing. It’s a soft cookie.’ And then after a couple of months, you’re like, ‘Oh, no, this is some horrible chemical crap that’s giving this bad illusion that fools you at first.’”



reflects Nolan's position vis-à-vis film and digital technology with some precision. I will begin by looking more closely at Bruce/Batman, the analog protagonist of the trilogy.

### **Of Superheroes and Celluloid: Batman as Analog Hero**

The appeal of Batman as a character varies vastly from person to person, but a common theme amongst fans is that he is *just* an ordinary man.<sup>150</sup> He isn't an alien from another world (e.g., Superman, Martian Manhunter), a "chosen one" with a fantastic destiny (e.g., Captain Marvel, Green Lantern), a victim of a scientific experiment gone awry (e.g., Hulk, Spider-Man), or an otherwise superpowered being; rather, he is merely a human being that, by his own agency, trains his body and mind to their acme, and uses his earned abilities to fight for the common good of society and justice. Though he may wear protective armour of some kind, be it the rubber of earlier cycle of films or the kevlar of Nolan's, he can be wounded, hurt, or (in theory) even killed. It reasonably follows that because Batman is "just an ordinary man," he is more plausible than other superhero characters who rely on fantastical powers that defy natural laws or on technologies that are sufficiently advanced that they may as well be magic. Batman *can't* fly through space or otherwise defy natural laws; rather, he glides between skyscrapers and is constrained by the laws of nature as any other human. He *doesn't* fight alien or superpowered beings, as he so often does in the comics; thus, Nolan has Batman brawl mostly with street thugs, and he's often badly hurt in these scuffles. In theory, he only performs activities that could be captured in camera, on set, with live actors. For Nolan, this is the appeal of the character, and precisely what had been missing from previous versions:

I felt there was this odd cinematic gap—no one had taken Batman on as a *realistic* character. Batman is, after all, a mortal guy. Even the Gotham of the comics, of all the comic locations, while certainly heightened and exaggerated, still reflects people's very real worries about their own society. What hadn't been done, for better or worse, was the notion of an extraordinary man in an ordinary world. [...] What spoke to me was, really, the fundamental quality of this elemental, archetypal character. It was the idea of a powerful individual who's

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<sup>150</sup> Despite the fact that Batman exists in many contradictory iterations by innumerable writers and artists, his lack of superpowers is his most consistent character trait. On Batman's polysemy, see Brooker, *Batman Unmasked* and *Hunting the Dark Knight*.

powerful purely through his own self-discipline, rather than through some external force. (qtd. in Vaz 21-22)

Nolan's ostensible approach to representing Batman and his world is thus based on capturing photographic reality with a minimum of digital interventions. In privileging such a cinematic vision of the Batman, Nolan seems to be in line with Dudley Andrew's perspective on "what cinema is": that "in whatever manifestation or period, real cinema has a relation to the real" (Andrew xxv). My point is not whether Nolan's films adhere strictly to "reality" as such, since cinema cannot capture reality without modifying it (if only via processes of selection and exclusion), nor is it to lend credence to Nolan's intentions; rather I want to propose a connection between his professed desire for "realism" and his insistence on celluloid photography. The axiom provided by *Cahiers du Cinema* and taken up by Andrew—"that the cinema has a fundamental rapport with reality and that the real is not what is represented" (5)—is sufficient to make my point here: Nolan's obsession with maintaining a sense of reality doesn't translate to a series of films grounded in "the real," but rather to a series of films that have some concern with the real.

In addition to dispassionately and mechanically capturing the image of that which is placed before it, celluloid is also a physical object that bears the imprint of its experiences, the scars of its use over time. Primarily, it features the imprint of light, which produces an image through a chemical process. Once developed, it continues to take new imprints, in the form of dust, scratches, colour fading, the disappearance of frames, reel changeover cues, etc., all of which introduce visible "imperfections" both in the projected image and on the "body" of the film itself. Archivists attempt to slow the inevitable decay of celluloid (and, earlier, nitrate) prints, but their task is admittedly Sisyphean. As film preservationist Paulo Cherchi Usai writes, "Moving image preservation [is] the science of its gradual loss and the art of coping with the consequences, very much like a physician who has accepted the inevitability of death even while he continues to fight for the patient's life" (105). The analogy between the finitude of film and human life is clear: neither can outlive their organic bodies, which are subject to injury and decay over time, and eventually death and decomposition. Many superheroes have powers that allow them to either heal their bodies (e.g., Wolverine, Deadpool) or that render them impervious to most physical injuries (e.g., Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel). Batman's humanity separates him from these characters, putting him on the same level as celluloid film: his body can

be injured, bruised, cut, burned. “As a man, I’m flesh and blood, [...] I can be destroyed,” he acknowledges in *Batman Begins*. Nolan makes sure to demonstrate the toll that crime-fighting takes on Bruce’s body in all three films, but most noticeably in *Rises*, in which a permanent limp (he walks with a cane throughout the first act) underscores the physical cost of his vigilante career and a debilitating spinal injury puts him out of commission for several months. This is surely not the body of a superman, but rather of an everyman.

A key phrase uttered during Bruce’s training as a ninja emphasizes the character’s affiliation with the cinema. During this montage sequence, Ra’s gives one lesson in particular that his student takes to heart: “Theatricality and deception are powerful agents.” The former manifests in Bruce’s adoption of the Batman disguise and persona (his affected voice indicates a conscious performativity whenever in the cowl, even in situations when maintaining anonymity isn’t a concern). When Ra’s initially sees him in costume, he suggests that Bruce took his advice regarding theatricality too literally. Underscoring the importance of theatricality to the cinema, however, is part of Nolan’s aesthetics—hence his preference for the large-screen experience of IMAX projection—so it’s understandable why Batman would emphasize this point. Likewise, deception is something that is associated with the cinema in myriad ways, from the illusion of movement produced by the rapid succession of discrete still images to the “phantasmaticization of the subject” represented onscreen (Baudry 364). Batman’s deceptions—like Nolan’s—are not insidious, however; indeed, as McGowan puts it, “The superhero’s false identity is the source of both power and truth, which is why it holds such appeal for Nolan as a filmmaker. The superhero’s guise is clearly a deceit, but it points toward a truth of the subject that would otherwise remain obscured” (7). Rachel recognizes this at the end of *Begins*, when she tells Bruce his “real face is the one criminals now fear”; in other words, the fiction of Batman has become more real than the reality of Bruce Wayne. This gets back to McGowan’s central thesis, which is that truth is accessible in Nolan’s films only after “succumb[ing] to the fiction that seems to obscure it” (5). The cinema is inherently illusory in many respects, but it can nevertheless lead us toward truth, just as Bruce’s false persona ultimately leads to his own self-actualization. Nolan’s “films begin with the fundamental deception of cinema itself—the image passing itself off as reality—and then they push this deception even further. By accepting these deceptions, spectators do not just submit to the cinematic experience that Nolan wants them to have; they work to transform their ethical being” (14). McGowan’s concern with Nolan’s

Hegelian ethics are beyond my purview in this chapter, but I would suggest more generally that in accepting the deceptions offered by the cinema, viewers do open themselves up to the potentially transformative experience of truth. Nolan's films, as indicated by Bruce's trajectory in *Begins*, merely allegorize this more explicitly than most.

As previously discussed, Batman may be a superhero, but he is merely an extraordinary human being with a costume, an array of weaponry, and superior intellect in lieu of superpowers proper. To this end, in the comics he is commonly referred to as the "world's greatest detective," and Ra's Al Ghul—the primary villain of *Batman Begins*, though here I refer to his manifestation in the early 1970s comics by Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams—often refers to Batman by the designation "detective." While his intelligence is scaled back considerably in Nolan's interpretation—for example, he misses several indications that Miranda Tate is involved with the League of Shadows that the comic book Batman would have noticed, including a tell-tale scar on her back and her callback to Ra's Al Ghul's interest in "restoring balance to the world"—he is nevertheless able to find enough clues to put him a step ahead of the (corrupt and mostly incompetent) Gotham Police Department. It is not surprising, given Batman's affiliation with analog cinema, that his methods of detection would rely primarily on direct indexical traces left in the world, much like those left by light on a photographic emulsion. One of the commonest examples of direct indexicality is the fingerprint, whose indexicality emerges out of its existential and *causal* connection to its referent; as Peirce scholar Martin Lefebvre notes, "photography, fingerprints, the dilation of mercury under the effect of heat, and a weathercock turning in the wind. In all of these examples, the object acts as the efficient cause of the sign" ("The Art of Pointing" 231). The fingerprint is also the commonest clue sought out by Batman; in *The Dark Knight*, he virtually reconstructs a shattered bullet in order to pull a fingerprint from it, and in *The Dark Knight Rises*, he uses false fingerprints left by Selina Kyle to assess her skills as a professional thief. Indexicality is often invoked as the guarantor of the cinematic reality effect that Nolan attempts to capitalize on in this trilogy. Perhaps most famously, Bazin determined that the indexical relationship between a photograph and its object involved a transfer not only of likeness but also of *essence*: "The image may be out of focus, distorted, devoid of colour and without documentary value; nevertheless, it has been created out of the ontology of the model. It is the model" (*What is Cinema?* 8). By emphasizing the inherent truth

value of indexical traces, Nolan creates a high standard against which he will judge the digital. As we will see later, the Scarecrow represents the counterpoint to this allegorical argument.

Though film charges the narrative with meaning, the medium is never explicitly mentioned in the trilogy;<sup>151</sup> indeed, Nolan seems to have gone out of his way to avoid referencing it. For example, in the scene preceding the murder of Thomas and Martha Wayne, they are at an opera, which triggers a traumatic memory for young Bruce; he begs his father to let him leave, and they all depart through a back door into an alley, where the elder Waynes are shot and killed. In most comic book versions of this oft-told narrative, including its original iteration in *Batman* #1 (April 1940), the Wayne family is leaving a movie theatre rather than the opera before the murder.<sup>152</sup> I suspect that given the trilogy's interest in lauding celluloid, Nolan didn't want Bruce's terror (and the tragedy that follows) to create any negative associations with the medium of cinema. Despite its conspicuous absence elsewhere, there is one shot in *The Dark Knight Rises* in which an old movie palace is visible, and it plays a subtle though significant role. On his first night out after eight years as a recluse, Bruce drives past this movie palace; the brightly illuminated marquee reads "GRAND REOPENING." Bruce is driving to his first public appearance in nearly a decade, and Batman will return in full costume mere minutes later. How appropriate it is that Nolan would choose to foreshadow Batman's re-emergence using the marquee of a movie palace, exactly the kind of place that would screen celluloid prints rather than digital films. This subtle textual clue merely reinforces what I have demonstrated to be a consistent association between the Batman character and the medium of celluloid film throughout this trilogy.

The reader may be wondering by this point how Batman's use of digital technology fits into this reading. For instance, when Batman pulls a fingerprint from a shattered bullet, it is decipherable only after being scanned into a computer and reconstructed digitally. Rather than undermine the character's allegorical association with celluloid, I believe that it lends nuance and complexity to it by mirroring the way that Nolan uses digital tools in his filmmaking. Nolan

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<sup>151</sup> The closest any of the films comes to explicitly referencing its medium is the Joker's intertextual allusion to *Jerry Maguire* (dir. Cameron Crowe, 1996), when he quotes the film's signature line—"You complete me"—in *The Dark Knight*'s interrogation scene.

<sup>152</sup> The particular film is identified in Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's *Batman: Year One* (DC Comics, 1987) as *The Mask of Zorro*. In the graphic novel *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (DC Comics, 1989) by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, the theatre's marquee first reads *Bambi*, foreshadowing Bruce's imminent parental loss, and later *Zorro*, representing his reaction to that loss.

claims to use CGI to “enhance” the reality effect of his shots, rather than to create something that would have been impossible to stage before the camera. In a 2012 interview with the Director’s Guild of America, Nolan responded to the question “When do you like to use CGI?” thusly:

I believe in an absolute difference between animation and photography. However sophisticated your computer-generated imagery is, if it’s been created from no physical elements and you haven’t shot anything, it’s going to feel like animation. There are usually two different goals in a visual effects movie. One is to fool the audience into seeing something seamless, and that’s how I try to use it. The other is to impress the audience with the amount of money spent on the spectacle of the visual effect, and that, I have no interest in. We try to enhance our stunt work and floor effects with extraordinary CGI tools like wire and rig removals. If you put a lot of time and effort into matching your original film elements, the kind of enhancements you can put into the frames can really trick the eye, offering results far beyond what was possible 20 years ago. The problem for me is if you don’t first shoot something with the camera on which to base the shot, the visual effect is going to stick out if the film you’re making has a realistic style or patina. I prefer films that feel more like real life, so any CGI has to be very carefully handled to fit into that. (Ressner)

Nolan admits that CGI is a useful and perhaps even invaluable tool for contemporary filmmakers, especially those creating movies with practical effects and stunt work, but he is not interested in creating digital images out of whole cloth; rather, he prefers to base any digital effects in his films on photographic images, on direct indexical traces of the “real world.”

Because the superhero film seems to prescribe the performance of physically impossible feats, this genre is commonly marred by less-than-wholly-convincing CGI bodies. Scott Bukatman notes the following, comparing the expressive movements of the musical to the superhero film: “We watch a body go from prosaic and inexpressive, bound by gravity’s laws, to marvelous and profoundly expressive of the exuberance of new love. In *Spider-Man 2*, by contrast, we have encountered ‘bodies’ in ‘space’—phenomena generated, composited, or rendered by computer” (*Poetics of Slumberland*, Kindle loc. 4555). Nolan’s superhero trilogy sometimes resorts to an all-CG Batman—according to *Cinefex*, in twenty shots in *Batman Begins* alone (Fordham, “Starting Over,” 96)—but these shots are not perceptively jarring as they are in

other superhero films. By way of comparison, *Batman* again invokes Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man*, whose CG superhero is phenomenologically distinct from the actor embodying the character:

By contrast, after Tobey Maguire's Peter Parker pulls Spider-Man's mask over his face and swings into action, the figure onscreen literally ceases to be Tobey Maguire. This has the unfortunate effect of severing the connection between the inexpressive body and the liberated, expressive one. The films give us not a passage between states of being but rather a rupture that denies the connection between them. Thus the superhero film is an exuberant, performative, embodied genre that, in many ways, inherits the giddy, sensual power of the musical but without the, um, actual bodies. (*Poetics of Slumberland*, Kindle loc. 4565)

The feats performed by Nolan's CG Batman—falling, gliding—were first performed and filmed, allowing visual effects artists to create the digital character from filmed referents (Duncan, "Batman Grounded," 117). When the digital version of Batman was used, it was because the verisimilitude of the shot was better served by the double than the live-action version, not because the action couldn't be physically performed by a live actor. Likewise, Batman doesn't use digital tools to modify reality but only to better reveal it. He also tends to disavow these tools after they have served their purpose. For example, in *Batman Begins* he uses a digital tool to better see in the dark when surveying the Scarecrow's drug storehouse; after sufficiently viewing the scene from a fire escape, he discards the device by throwing it to a nearby child as a memento of his encounter with the Batman. Similarly, the already mentioned panopticon-esque sonar device is used to better navigate the world, to increase Batman's perceptual abilities within it but not to alter the world in any way. Again, Batman programmed the computer system to self-destruct after its use was served. Moreover, he sometimes uses tools that specifically target and deactivate digital devices in his vicinity. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman employs a cell phone-activated sonar gadget that shuts down all computers within its radius; in *The Dark Knight Rises*, he (unsuccessfully) uses an electromagnetic pulse rifle to shut down a laptop that is being used by Bane to affect an illegitimate stock trade. In all of these cases, digital tools function only as means to an end, and their use always includes their own destruction.

Thus I hope to have demonstrated the strong connection between Batman and celluloid film in Nolan's trilogy. His human frailty and corporeality, reliance on the truth value of



indexical traces of reality, and use of digital technology to reveal rather than distort or augment the represented world all associate the character with the powers of analog film, at least as practiced by Nolan. Though the Joker's desire to get Batman to "break his one rule" in *The Dark Knight* refers in the narrative to the hero's unwillingness to take life in his ongoing war against crime, we might also associate it more generally with his insistence on the possibility of truth and order rather than the deception-fuelled anarchy preferred by the Joker. In either case, by that film's end Batman has broken his one rule: by knowingly taking a life (Harvey Dent's) and then proposing that the best course of action is to lie about it, to bend reality to better serve his goal of reforming Gotham (thereby necessitating a sequel to redeem him). This is precisely the kind of action that we would expect from the villains of the trilogy, who are ideologically opposed to everything Batman represents and believes in. In this allegorical reading, they become associated with various aspects of digital technology and they use such technologies not to better reveal the world, as Batman does, but rather to falsify perceptions of it or to destroy it altogether.

### **Digital Villainy from *Begins* to *Rises***

Beginning with the first film in the trilogy, the two villains of *Batman Begins*—Ra's Al Ghul and the Scarecrow—are in cahoots to destroy Gotham by polluting the water supply with a toxic drug that causes powerful hallucinations when inhaled. In order to vaporize the city's contaminated water supply, they use a machine stolen from Wayne Enterprises.<sup>153</sup> In this film, digital imagery is strongly associated with fear, which is both the catalyst for Bruce's vigilante identity<sup>154</sup> and the means by which the villains' enact their master plan. The Scarecrow's fear toxin may be an organic compound synthesized from a rare flower, but its effects are anything but organic. In order to represent fear, Nolan uses POV shots that are modified with "digitally-animated high frequency vibrations" that impart a destabilizing effect to the viewer and representing the fear of the infected character whose perspective we share (Fordham, "Starting Over," 110). Digital

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<sup>153</sup> The repurposing of Wayne Enterprises tech for evil-doing is a recurring plot point throughout the trilogy that reinforces the series' technological ambivalence. In these films, technology is not inherently good or evil, but can be used in service of either end: any tool is only as ethical as its operator. In *Rises*, for example, the narrative centres around a fission reactor that is capable of providing clean, sustainable energy for the entire city, but when a scientist discovers that it could be repurposed into a nuclear bomb, Bruce decommissions it at the cost of bankrupting his company. Naturally, the device is stolen by Bane and turned irrevocably into a weapon of mass destruction.

<sup>154</sup> In these films, bats represent fear. All bats in the trilogy, appropriately, are digitally animated. See Fordham, "Starting Over," 108.

animation is used here in an additive way, to impose a falsified vision of reality on the viewer that doesn't reflect the pro-filmic world but rather an internal and unreliable mode of vision: each character "sees" their own fears manifest before them, from a bat crawling out of a character's mouth to maggots issuing forth from every orifice of Scarecrow's mask. These shots deliberately eschew the "realism" of the trilogy in favour of a subjective and hallucinatory view. As a result, the Scarecrow comes to represent a loosening of the indexical link between reality and the images shown in the film, taking direct indexical traces and modifying them in a way that compromises their documentary value. This is not to be understood as a *loss* of indexicality, since indices are a necessary feature of all embodied signs (Lefebvre, "Art of Pointing," 238), but rather as a shift from direct to indirect indexicality. Lefebvre notes that "once it becomes impossible to distinguish a photograph from a CGI, the epistemic value we give photography may very well change" (243), but Nolan makes sure that effects in these shots are obvious and foregrounded; they are not meant to "pass" as a purely photographic view of reality, but rather as an obviously corrupted version of it. As Scarecrow articulates in *The Dark Knight*, "I told you my compound would take you places. I never said they'd be places you wanted to go." In these shots, Nolan expresses a deep discomfort with where digital imaging might take the cinematic subject.

Despite the pessimistic perspective of film archivists and their very real concerns regarding the shelf life of computerized data, digital technologies nevertheless tend to be associated with a kind of immortality. This is, somewhat paradoxically, because of their abstract nature and lack of physical embodiment; with nothing material to decay over time or be destroyed with repeated use, the digital media object should continue to exist indefinitely, without the slightest hint of deterioration or alteration, in its intangible state. Indeed, so pervasive is this thinking that Lev Manovich dubs it a "myth of the digital" (52). He describes this commonly held belief as follows: "In contrast to analog media where each successive copy loses quality, digitally encoded media can be copied endlessly without degradation" (54). Archivists argue, however, that digital films are actually more quickly rendered obsolete and inaccessible than physical formats like celluloid, which don't require a specific set of hardware and software to access them, but only a working mechanical projector and a surface on which to project the image. On the one hand, a celluloid film will last until the physical object itself disintegrates, which can be delayed significantly if cared for properly; a digital film, on the other hand, may be

doomed to inaccessibility merely by virtue of a glitch in a hard drive, or even something as benign as a routine software update. For Manovich, the issue is that in practice, digital objects tend to be compressed during replication in order to decrease their file size, which entails a concomitant loss of information (54-55). It's appropriate, then, that Ra's Al Ghul—a character who, in comics lore, extends his life indefinitely by rejuvenating himself in a “Lazarus Pit,” and thereby escapes the related hazards of aging, physical decay, and death—would be outlived by Batman. After Bruce leaves him for dead in the first act, he returns in the third to enact his vengeance and follow through on the League of Shadows' plan to destroy Gotham. He explains his seeming resurrection thusly (referring to himself in the third person): “Is Ra's Al Ghul *immortal*? Are his methods *supernatural*?” Given Ra's' ultimate fate—he will later die in a monorail crash—the line of dialogue appears to be nothing more than fan service via diegetic intertextuality, a nod to comics readers who recognize immortality as one of the villain's defining character traits. Within this allegorical reading, though, it assumes greater significance. Given Nolan's interest in maintaining plausibility and stripping the diegesis of any supernatural elements present in the comics, it would have made more sense to exclude any mention of the original version of the character's supernatural traits. However, their inclusion allows Nolan to associate the supposed immortality of digital with Ra's,<sup>155</sup> which then gives him the opportunity to both undermine that belief and demonstrate celluloid/Batman's superiority. The villain's climactic death suggests that Nolan would prefer that digital vanish from filmmaking, if only so the threat it represents to celluloid would disappear. That said, like Batman, he won't be the one to pull the trigger on it: “The message I wanted to put out there was that no one is taking anyone's digital cameras away,” he claims. “But if we want film to continue as an option, and someone is working on a big studio movie with the resources and the power to insist [on] film, they should say so. I felt as if I didn't say anything, and then we started to lose that option, it would be a shame” (Ressner). When Batman lets Ra's die—uttering “I won't kill you, but I don't have to save you”—it is this very logic in action. Through this allegory, Nolan narrativizes the weaknesses of digital imagery—its decreased truth value, its exaggerated claims of immortality—and demonstrates the superiority of celluloid, that which would be supplanted by a demonstrably inferior replacement unless individuals (like Bruce, like Nolan) stand up against it.

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<sup>155</sup> Ra's al Ghul's pseudonym, Henri Ducard, also bears the digital-evoking initials “HD.”

While *Batman Begins* associates digital technology and imagery with fear and exaggerated claims of immortality, *The Dark Knight* zeroes in on digital's ontological difference compared to photographic film. There are superficial connections between *The Dark Knight*'s villains and digital technology—the Joker is twice seen using a low-grade digital camera, while Two-Face is an anthropomorphization of binary logic<sup>156</sup>—but it's the ideology and value systems of these characters that truly reflects the trilogy's perspective on digital film. The Joker in particular warrants a thorough examination. Heath Ledger's Joker is quite unlike any iteration of the character seen to that point; his sloppy make-up, greasy hair and Glasgow grin produced a striking image, not at all similar to Cesar Romero's foppish Joker of 1966 or Jack Nicholson's jive-talkin' Joker of 1989.<sup>157</sup> In terms of his character, Nolan enacts a fairly radical change by not just obscuring but removing any trace of his origins. He is a character without history or identity; given several opportunities to speak to his backstory and motivations, he never fails to contradict what we thought we knew about him. He arrives in the film already fully formed; he often offers biographical information that is later shown to have been fabricated; and when he is captured by the police in the middle of the film, Gordon remarks on his lack of identifying markers: "No DNA, no fingerprints. Clothing is custom, no labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name, no other alias." According to McGowan, "this complete absence of identifying information is not an indication that the Joker has successfully hidden who he really is but that he has no identity to hide. There is no real person beneath the illusion" (136). Like a digital object, the Joker's existence doesn't necessarily point to something real that produced it; he is, rather, a simulacrum of a human being.

The Joker is a complex character, and what most critics and viewers seem not to appreciate about him is that he is a walking contradiction. In interviews, Nolan has compared his version of the clown prince of crime to "the shark from *Jaws*," calling him a "force of chaos" that rampages through the film without a backstory or motivation (Brown); in the film itself, the Joker self-identifies as an "agent of chaos" most closely resembling "a dog chasing cars" ("I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it!"). These descriptions, however, only serve to obfuscate what's really going on in the film. In his dialogue, the Joker advances a value system

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<sup>156</sup> Harvey "Two-Face" Dent is also another "HD" villain.

<sup>157</sup> On the racial overtones of Jack Nicholson's performance and the film in general, see Andrew Ross, "Ballots, bullets, or Batmen: can cultural studies do the right thing?"

that denies the existence of universal truths and absolute morality; he mocks the “schemers” who have “plans,” like Batman and Commissioner Gordon, because “the only sensible way to live in this world is without rules.” Sudipto Sanyal interprets the character along these lines:

The Joker refuses to fit into the scheme of things, constantly challenging the stability of Gotham’s power structures and perpetually threatening to superimpose an entirely different structure of power—one that exists arbitrarily, in other words, chaos—onto the one that exists at the moment. In this respect, the Joker appears to be the ultimate agent of chaos, situated on the margins of a profoundly disturbed panoptic order. (70)

What this fails to take into account, however, is that he is only capable of making such grand ideological pronouncements through the perfect execution of intricately planned, Rube Goldberg-esque machinations, which often involve a mind-boggling number of variables that must all go “according to plan”—*his* plan—in order to achieve the desired result; the successful implementation of these elaborate plots serves to demonstrate that the world is, contrary to what he says, utterly controllable and bound by a set of knowable rules. (Perhaps the only reliable piece of dialogue uttered by the Joker is his claim that he’s “ahead of the curve.”) He claims not to be a “schemer,” but he is in fact the biggest and greatest schemer of them all; when assessed in the context of the whole film, his anarchistic sentiments are revealed to be both self-defeating and -contradictory.

A deconstruction of one of his plots should provide sufficient demonstration. In this case, the Joker’s ultimate goal is to force Batman to make an impossible moral decision: to choose between the lives of Rachel and Harvey, effectively causing the death of the one he chooses not to save. In order to achieve this seemingly simple result, his plan features the following steps (parentheses indicate necessary story information that is not shown in the plot of the film):

1. The Joker poisons Commissioner Loeb and later infiltrates the Honor Guard at his funeral ceremony. He shoots Gordon (who uses the opportunity to extemporaneously fake his death).
2. The Joker outfits an accomplice at the scene in an Honor Guard uniform with a nametag reading “Rachel Dawes,” indicating his next victim. Harvey sees it and tells Batman. To lure the Joker out, Harvey falsely confesses to being the Batman at a press conference and is immediately taken into custody.

3. (The Joker has Rachel kidnapped while she is en route to Bruce's penthouse and ties her up in a room full of explosives. He instructs his henchmen to do the same to Harvey. He plants an explosive device in one of his stooges and orders him to get himself arrested.)
4. The Joker blocks the police's intended route to county jail with a burning fire truck, forcing them to take Lower Fifth instead. He steals a transport truck and sets off to follow the police motorcade. Batman appears and gives chase. After Batman flips the Joker's eighteen-wheeler, the hero falls off his vehicle, unconscious. When the Joker approaches Batman, Gordon reappears and apprehends him from behind.
5. The Joker is taken to county jail, where Batman interrogates him. He tells Batman about the choice he must make, that he can only save Harvey *or* Rachel. After Batman runs off, the Joker holds another officer's life as leverage to get a phone call, which he uses to detonate the explosive planted in his nearby stooge, facilitating his escape.

The pacing of these sequences is so propulsive that it's difficult to notice how intricate the Joker's plan is on first viewing. When analyzing his plot step-by-step, however, it's clear how far in advance he would have had to plan certain steps. For instance, he must know that Harvey isn't Batman when he confesses, because the Joker would have to arrange for Dent's abduction to take place on his behalf after his arrest. He would have no way of contacting his stooges to change plans from prison, so it would all have to have been pre-arranged before he is taken into custody. He would have to have known that Batman would be the one to interrogate him; otherwise he would have no opportunity to challenge him with the sadistic choice. Several key actions in his plan are necessarily pre-planned but *also* react or take into account unpredictable actions taken by Gordon, Rachel, Harvey, and Batman. Breaking the plot down in this way suggests that the Joker either possesses a god-like omniscience or that the events were pre-ordained by fate (or a screenwriter with a lot of index cards...). In either case, some greater structuring order is being imposed upon the diegesis that seems to belie the very possibility of anarchy.

How does this characterization of the Joker contribute to Nolan's undermining of the digital? Similarly to my analysis of Ra's Al Ghul, Nolan seems to ascribe characteristics associated with digital technologies to the Joker for the sole purpose of undermining them. In this case, the Joker's association with anarchy ties him to another myth of the digital that Nolan seeks to efface. In *The Virtual Life of Film*, Rodowick claims that "Because the digital arts are without substance and therefore not easily identified as objects, no medium-specific ontology

can fix them in place. The digital arts render all expressions as identical since they are all ultimately reducible to the same computational notation” (10). As discussed in the previous chapter, digital objects are unbound by the kind of laws that affix photography to a particular ontology; in drawing a parallel with the Joker, we might alternatively refer to this as a state of ontological anarchy. However, what appears superficially to be a lack of order—a consequence of the loss of photography’s direct indexicality in favour of indirect indexicality, which doesn’t carry with it the same inherent assurance of truth—is only enabled by a carefully written and executed set of code. While digital images, digital sounds, and digital text may all be ontologically equivalent, that doesn’t equate to ontological anarchy *de facto*. Indeed, as Andrew puts it, “The digital is thought to perfect whatever operations its analog or manual predecessors were designed to perform; the digital enhances, expands, and alters those operations, achieving ultimate control” (xxvi). Nothing happens in a digital object by accident; rather, it is always a product of scrupulous coding. In other words, the digital is where contingency comes to *die*, not to reign. Batman’s ultimate victory over the Joker demonstrates once again the superiority of celluloid over digital, of the real and the contingent over the disembodied and the coded.

Though Harvey Dent’s descent into homicidal rage “after his disfigurement is so precipitous that it strains credulity” (McGowan 143), it’s nevertheless worth a brief comment before moving onto the final film in the series. Two-Face functions in the third act of *The Dark Knight* merely as an extension of the Joker, primarily as the extreme embodiment of his binary digital logic, both in his bifurcated physical appearance and reliance on coin flips to make moral choices. Indeed, the cinematic representation of Two-Face is a hybrid of photographic and computer-generated imagery, literally split down the middle (**fig. 6.1**). It’s no coincidence that his moral decay is represented visually with the use of obvious CGI, just as the corruption of perception was represented with digital effects in *Batman Begins*. Indeed, Two-Face’s mere image perfectly encapsulates the association made throughout the trilogy between good with analog photography and evil with digital.

The final film in the series, *The Dark Knight Rises*, features only one primary villain. Bane, like Ra’s and the Joker, is given ostensible character traits that are popularly associated with the digital—in this case, the democratization of technology—though there are also more





**Fig. 6.1.** Two-Face's good/evil split is aligned with photographic/digital imagery, respectively.

superficial connections to be made. For instance, given the rate of technological advancement in digital fields, it's no surprise that *Rises'* allegorical stand-in for digital would be much stronger than Batman's previous enemies. Nevertheless, the hero's eventual triumph over him suggests that celluloid remains superior. Also, Bane's mask modulates his voice with a digital effect, infusing every line of dialogue with a vaguely robotic brogue.<sup>158</sup> This is merely a side effect of the mask's primary function, however, which is to feed its wearer with a stream of painkillers. Consequently, Bane's body doesn't have to tolerate the consequences of its injuries, as Bruce's does; like a celluloid film that has been transferred to digital, it lives with the scars it has already acquired but doesn't suffer or endure any additional consequences of use thereafter.

The main allegorical import of the Bane character, however, lies in his politically charged rhetoric. Like the Joker, Bane promotes a particular ideological view of the world that his own actions undermine, again demonstrating that the promises of the digital are empty, misleading, and will ultimately go unfulfilled. As a means of carrying out Ra's Al Ghul's plot to destroy Gotham, Bane holds the city hostage with the threat of nuclear annihilation, blackmails the

<sup>158</sup> A recurring feature of reviews of *The Dark Knight Rises* saw critics trying to capture the essence of Bane's voice with an amusing simile. See Matt Singer, "Who Does Bane from 'The Dark Knight Rises' Sound Like?" for a partial list.

national government into enforcing his lockdown, frees every imprisoned criminal, and declares martial law. He reframes his acts of terror—including a hostile takeover of the Gotham Stock Exchange and the mid-game destruction of the Gotham Rogues’ football field—as acts of class revolution: “We take Gotham from the corrupt, the rich, the oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths of opportunity, and we give it back to you, the people. Gotham is yours. None shall interfere. Do as you please.” On the surface, Nolan seems to be aligning the class struggle represented contemporaneously by the Occupy Wall Street movement—which the film consciously evokes by filming in New York City during the protests—with terrorist activity.<sup>159</sup> As with the political overtones of the previous films, I’d like to put that interpretation aside for the moment. In my view, Bane’s promise to put the control over public and private institutions back in the hands of “the people”—i.e., the oppressed 99% rather than the corrupt 1%—is an allegorical proxy for digital’s promise to democratize technology. It purports to effect this in two ways: firstly, by making the tools of cultural production more widely available to anybody that wants to use them, and secondly, by flattening out the cultural terrain, giving all voices the opportunity to be heard. As Manovich puts it, “we may connect the American ideology of democracy with its paranoid fear of hierarchy and centralized control with the flat structure of the Web, where every page exists on the same level of importance as any other and where any two sources connected through hyperlinking have equal weight” (258). Neither of these promises, however, has really been fulfilled. While access to, for example, the tools needed to make a film have certainly become more readily available, the vast majority of digital tools—including cell phones, cameras, computers, etc.—are made by a few wealthy tech corporations, who are more interested in profits than democracy. Global technological and economic inequalities (e.g., access to electricity and consumer goods and the ability to pay for them) effectively limit the spread of digital democracy to the wealthiest nations. Even if you’re fortunate enough to be able to afford something like an Apple iPad, you’re not free to fill it with content and programs from various sources: it’s designed to only accept proprietary content bought and paid for from Apple sources like iTunes. Likewise, if you’re able to make a film and distribute it online—say, by uploading it to YouTube—you’ve already given your intellectual property away to Google in exchange for the mere possibility that your work will be seen. The

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<sup>159</sup> See Žižek’s “The Politics of Batman” for a more on the film’s relationship on the Occupy movement.

reality of the new digital democracy is that the masses pay corporations for the tools that they will use to provide free labour and produce free content from which those corporations stand to profit further.

Similarly, Bane's "democratic" Gotham City more closely resembles a dictatorship, with kangaroo courts ordering sentences of "death" or "exile"—an illusory distinction, since death sentences are carried out via exile—and armed guards preventing escape. Bane loots Wayne Enterprises of its holdings, including Batman's spare "tumblers" (i.e., Batmobiles) but rather than give them to "the people" he uses them to enforce his rule by intimidation. The nuclear weapon, repurposed from a device designed to provide sustainable energy to the city, is described by Bane as "the instrument of your liberation," though it's difficult to imagine how, given the imminent threat of destruction that it implies. Bane's claims are even more transparently false than the Joker's, making Nolan's commentary on the emptiness of digital's promises clear. According to *Rises*, the digital is not the instrument of cinema's liberation, but rather of its destruction—and it must be stamped out before it can do permanent damage.

One of the key assertions of the classical era of film theory was made by Bazin, when he divided filmmakers into two camps: those "who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality" (*What is Cinema?* 88). This kind of tension is at the heart of the trilogy, and is particularly evident in a statement from the closing moments of *The Dark Knight*. After killing Two-Face and volunteering to take the fall for his third act killing spree, Batman offers the following in his characteristic growl: "Sometimes the truth isn't good enough. Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded." In his monograph on the director, McGowan argues that all of Nolan's films are defined in part by the "ontological primacy of the lie" (1). In other words, for Nolan truth is only accessible through lies, which renders the latter constructive rather than destructive. Unfortunately, McGowan's book was released prior to the release of *The Dark Knight Rises*, and thus does not take the trilogy's finale into its account. Interestingly, though, *Rises* functions simultaneously as both a rebuttal and a confirmation of his thesis. The penultimate film in the series ends on a note that sees the hero assume the role of the villain in the eyes of the public, a fiction that the third entry is devoted to correcting. Indeed, in *The Dark Knight Rises* the lies that ended the previous film are shown to have had a corrupting influence on those that perpetuated them; these lies, "ethical" though they may have been, must not be allowed to stand. Though Nolan is interested in the lie, this third

film ultimately acknowledges that the truth's primacy will always reassert itself. As Alfred puts it to Bruce, "Maybe it's time we all stop trying to outsmart the truth, and let it have its day?" And yet the closing moments of the film advance yet another lie, whose implications will be discussed presently.

### **The Immortality of Celluloid and *The Dark Knight Rises*' Paradoxical Ending**

The resolution of this three-film narrative sees Batman at the centre of a nuclear detonation with a blast radius of six miles. In the moments immediately preceding the explosion, Nolan shows us Batman in the cockpit, looking calm as he flies not only towards his own unavoidable death but also, more importantly, the salvation of the city that he's devoted his life to saving (**fig. 6.2**); from one close-up he cuts to another, this time of the bomb's (digital) countdown timer with just five seconds remaining (**fig. 6.3**). The bomb explodes, its mushroom cloud safely beyond the six-mile radius (**fig. 6.4**). After scenes of Bruce's funeral, the settling of his estate, and the unveiling of a statue in tribute to the city's masked martyr, the viewer is surprised to see him enjoying a drink at an outdoor cafe in Italy with Selina (**fig. 6.5**). Though the scene recalls a flashback motivated by Alfred earlier in the film, there is no indication that it is to be read as another flashback or as the butler's reverie. Indeed, the motion that Bruce survived the explosion is supported by a previous scene where Lucius Fox, the CEO of Wayne Enterprises and designer of Batman's tech, learns that the faulty auto-pilot on Batman's helicopter (known as the Bat) had been repaired by Bruce prior to his final flight. Thus Nolan gives us two mutually exclusive versions of events: an outright contradiction rather than the ambiguity with which the director notoriously ended his previous film, *Inception*. Either Batman was in the cockpit with five seconds to detonation and died in the explosion, *or* he escaped well before that and subsequently migrated to Italy: both cannot be true, and yet both are shown to us. The logic of the allegory I have traced, which pits celluloid against digital and has celluloid triumph in every instance, seems to require this contraction. Celluloid is inherently and necessarily destructible, subject to the slings and arrows of its particular fortune, and it is partly in its materiality and consequent frailty that its value resides. But at the same time, the director cannot bear to witness its ultimate and inevitable demise. Celluloid can be beaten, bruised, burned, crippled, and even destroyed; but despite its destruction, it must also persevere. For Nolan, this trilogy is a demonstration of celluloid's continued necessity, not its death knell; thus he sacrifices narrative coherence in the

name of allegory. The Batman is dead: long live the Batman. Celluloid is dead; long live celluloid.



**Figs. 6.2-6.5.** Batman sacrifices his life to save Gotham City from nuclear devastation and is later shown alive and well in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Nolan's insistence on analog "realism" in the "Dark Knight" trilogy distinguishes these films from the vast majority of cinematic superhero fare. Though Nolan's approach (and the films' unprecedented box office success) has undoubtedly been influential on other superhero adaptations and remediations, the superpowers of most costumed crime-fighters can't be visualized without more extensive (and obviously digital) visual effects. The banality of Batman is the exception rather than the rule, and the rule leans decidedly toward the fantastic. Indeed, Bukatman defines the genre as it manifests in comics thusly:

Superhero comics have an oneiric quality that further aligns them with [Winsor] McCay's great work. What is a superpower, after all, but a fantasy, the kind of fantasy that we might find expressed in our dreams—dreams of flight, of strength, of invisibility, of suddenly transporting to another place, another time, dreams of animals, dreams of scale- and shape-shifting. That superhero comics explain these fantastic abilities through references to gamma rays, alien interventions, or cosmic power does not obviate their true origins in dreams and play. Umberto Eco finds "a kind of oneiric climate" in the way each Superman

story existed utterly apart from all the others; nothing that happened in one had any effect on another. Scratch the surface even a little bit, and superhero comics can be seen to exemplify Bachelard's irreality function, the creative imagination that liberates us from the strictures and logics of the real. (*Poetics of Slumberland*, Kindle loc. 4193)

The tendency for superhero narratives to be constructed as welcome and knowing retreats from the real is precisely what Nolan is fighting against in his films—a strange and possibly even counterintuitive *modus operandi*, given that it seems to be one of the genre's defining attributes and key pleasures. Admittedly, Eco's observation refers to a generic moment long past—so much so that superhero narratives are now defined more by their impossibly intense and intensive seriality than their independence from their own historicity<sup>160</sup>—but the emphases on traumatic origins, fantasy, and bodily transcendence remain. In the concluding section of this chapter, I would like to contrast Nolan's films to those made by Marvel Studios in order to articulate an alternative approach to the cinematic superhero that celebrates and benefits from the hybridity offered by digital cinema. Indeed, in most ways, the “Dark Knight” trilogy can be seen as the inverse of Marvel Studios' approach to the superhero film: where Nolan takes great pains to emphasize the humanity of his characters, Marvel relishes in their superhuman abilities; where Nolan uses CG sparingly, Marvel devotes large segments of their films to primarily computer-generated spectacle; where Nolan keeps his franchises discrete,<sup>161</sup> Marvel combines them into a single meta-franchise; and where Nolan represents the superhero using an analog format and even has him stand in allegorically for the same, Marvel Studios uses digital formats and creates an opposing allegory in which the superhero's hybridity is echoed by the means of cinematic representation. To better demonstrate these differences, let us now look briefly at the superhero films produced by Marvel Studios.

### **Marvel Studios and the Necessary Hybridity of the Cinematic Superhero**

Stan Lee, the figurehead of Marvel Comics, co-creator of many of its most well known characters, and writer of much of its golden age output, was always more interested in the movie business than in comics. In a private discussion with Alain Resnais, with whom he collaborated

<sup>160</sup> See Eco, “The Myth of Superman.”

<sup>161</sup> *Man of Steel*, which Nolan executive produced and whose story he co-wrote, exists in a separate diegetic world.

on a never-filmed screenplay, he confided that he couldn't "understand people who read comics! I wouldn't read them if I had the time and wasn't in the business" (qtd. in Howe, Kindle loc. 1819). He spent much of the 1970s and 1980s trying to sell the movie rights of the characters he created to Hollywood, with little success. Even with a DC superhero like Superman headlining blockbuster pictures, Marvel couldn't seem to break through. Indeed, in the wake of *Superman*,

Marvel began taking out a series of full-page ads in *Variety*, attempting to pimp their characters to the highest bidder . . . or any bidder, really. One featured a head shot of Daredevil: "Daredevil is but one of over 100 exciting Marvel Characters ready right now to star in your next motion picture or television production," it read. "All Marvel Characters have their own identity—their own personal story—and the potential for outrageous stardom." Nothing happened. (Kindle loc. 3745)

Ultimately, they were able to sell various characters to B-grade productions houses like New World and Cannon Films; advertising materials for films featuring Captain America and Spider-Man appeared but the movies never materialized. While Superman and Batman were flourishing on the big screen, Marvel's stable of superheroes seemed doomed to straight-to-video status at best. In 1989, the year of "Batmania," Cannon's *The Punisher* (dir. Mark Goldblatt) was released to considerably less fanfare. The following year saw *Captain America* (dir. Albert Pyun) skip theatrical release entirely. In 1994, a Roger Corman production of *The Fantastic Four* (dir. Oley Sassone) was completed but deemed unworthy of release of any kind. Throughout the 1990s, lesser-known characters like *The Crow*, *Judge Dredd*, and *Tank Girl* managed to be adapted into at least modestly-budgeted features, while a potential headliner like Spider-Man languished in various stages of development.<sup>162</sup>

By 2008, Marvel Studios had completely turned things around. While their most well known characters remained optioned to other studios (Spider-Man to Sony, the X-Men and Fantastic Four to Fox), they had retained or regained enough character licenses to execute something on a grand scale: a Marvel cinematic universe that resembled the narrative model of the comics. Each hero would headline their own series of films, but they would share a common diegesis, allowing events in one film to impact the next; and the individual franchises could

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<sup>162</sup> See David Hughes, *The Greatest Sci-Fi Movies Never Made* (London: Titan Books, 2008) for a detailed history of Spider-Man's development, including James Cameron's attachment to the project in the 1990s.



occasionally converge in crossover event pictures. In 2008, the first two features were released; at the end of *Iron Man* (dir. Jon Favreau), secret agent Nick Fury tells Tony Stark that he has “become part of a bigger universe. You just don’t know it yet.” Stark makes a similar appearance at the end of *The Incredible Hulk*, recruiting the Hulk for what Fury called “the Avengers initiative.” A post-credits stinger (Marvel’s preferred way of segueing into their next film) in *Iron Man 2* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2010) introduces Thor’s hammer on Earth, leading into the events of *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011). References to a super-soldier program in *The Incredible Hulk* and *Iron Man 2* set the stage for *Captain America: The First Avenger* (dir. Joe Johnston, 2011), which was the final piece of the puzzle. The cinematic Avengers had been assembled.

Marvel’s unprecedented success with this convergence strategy<sup>163</sup> leaves the embarrassment of riches garnered for Warner Bros. from the “Dark Knight” trilogy look somewhat less impressive. With a limited stable of characters and many of their top-tier superheroes off the table, Marvel Studios was not only able to create four separate blockbuster franchises, but also to combine them in one of the top-grossing films of all-time. Warner Bros., by contrast, has complete ownership over all of DC Comics’ characters—because they own DC itself—but can’t seem to capitalize on them beyond Batman.<sup>164</sup> During the press tour for *Iron Man 3* (dir. Shane Black, 2013), the first post-*Avengers* Marvel outing, executive producer and Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige was asked how Warner might have better success with their cinematic superheroes. He offered the following: “It’s what I say all the time and have said over the years, which is, have confidence in the characters, believe in the source material, don’t be afraid to stay true to all of the elements of the characters no matter how seemingly silly or crazy they are” (Goldberg). Without again getting into issues surrounding fidelity as a criterion of value,<sup>165</sup> I want to consider the ramifications of Feige’s advice. In order to render the “silly or crazy” elements of characters like Superman or Green Lantern on screen, filmmakers can’t shy away from digitally-produced visual effects; rather, they must embrace them as key contributors to the look and execution of their film, in capturing “the creative imagination that liberates us from the strictures and logics of the real,” as Bukatman put it (*Poetics of Slumberland*, Kindle

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<sup>163</sup> Derek Johnson has written an excellent account of how the studio’s strategy has been received within the film industry. See “Cinematic Destiny: Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial Convergence.”

<sup>164</sup> Prior to his involvement with Marvel, *Avengers* director Joss Whedon famously developed a Wonder Woman project for Warner Bros., but it didn’t advance past the outline stage. See Tasha Robinson, “Joss Whedon.”

<sup>165</sup> See chapter one for a thorough discussion of this and other issues around the concept of adaptation.



**Fig. 6.6.** Captain Marvel takes flight in *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*.

loc. 4193).<sup>166</sup> Nolan’s “Dark Knight” trilogy represents the very antithesis of this notion: Nolan strips Batman and his world of every trace of the fantastic or implausible in order to ground it in the very “logics of the real” that the superhero genre is so apt to disrupt.

In order to fully appreciate how different Marvel’s approach is, we need to go back to the earliest days of the superhero film genre. In the 1941 serial *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*, the flying effects were produced by suspending actor Tom Tyler from wires and either gliding him through the air on a fixed trajectory or by suspending him in place and filming him against a

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<sup>166</sup> I don’t mean to imply that superhero films are impossible without using digital imagery; indeed, there were plenty of pre-digital superhero films produced. Given the states of the industry and of technology today, however, it’s very unlikely that filmmakers would choose to render, for example, the constructs produced by Green Lantern’s power ring any way other than digitally. Likewise, a flying effect can be produced without CGI (using rear-screen projection, for example) but digital animation combined with live-action photography creates a more believable and seamless image.



**Figs. 6.7-6.8.** Superman gets animated in order to take flight in *Superman* (1948).

moving background (**fig. 6.6**). Though the effect was impressive for its day,<sup>167</sup> it fails to communicate the freedom of movement experienced by the superhero. Indeed, flight is hampered by the physicality of the actor in *Superman*, released almost four decades hence: thanks to more sophisticated wire rigs, Superman can fly in different directions, but he still can only take off and land slowly and gently. Until the intervention of perceptually realistic digital animation that could create seamless CG stand-ins to take over in such superhuman moments, the only superhero film that had attempted to visualize superpowers as something truly superhuman was the *Superman* serial of 1948, whose title character notoriously transformed, via dissolve or creative staging, from a live actor into an animated figure (**figs. 6.7** and **6.8**). Only this animated Superman was capable of flying through the air at high velocity and in varying directions, like a quickly deflating untied balloon; of taking off like a bullet and landing with the impact of speed. *Superman's* failure lies in the obviousness of its substitution of man with superman—Kirk Alyn and his crudely animated counterpart are plainly not one and the same—but its success, largely unacknowledged, lies in its recognition of the superhero's necessary hybridity. Nolan's Batman denies the hybridity of the superhero, resulting in myriad moments where the attentive viewer will sense that something has been excluded, perhaps deliberately. For instance, it is plain in the films that Batman wears make-up to blacken the skin around his eyes not covered by his cowl; and yet when he exits the Bat in *The Dark Knight Rises*, in full costume but for his mask, his face

<sup>167</sup> According to Raymond William Stedman's *The Serials: Suspense and Drama By Installment*, "a good combination of clever camera angles, concealed wires, and artful faking by [stuntman David] Sharpe and Tyler made it appear that Captain Marvel really could fly through the air. It was the most successful illusion of such aerobatics ever put upon the screen, in serial or feature" (127).

is clean.<sup>168</sup> A second example, this one from *The Dark Knight Rises*: with Gotham under military lockdown (nobody is allowed on or off of the island) and Bruce left on another continent without money or a passport, he miraculously reappears in the city after months of imprisonment. The viewer's only possible recourse to explain how he accomplished these feats is simply that "He's *Batman*!" But what do we mean when we say that? We surely don't mean that he's just a mortal man, bound by the same physical limitations as any other human being; rather, we mean that he's a *superhero*, and therefore that he's capable of extraordinary things, of performing feats that defy the laws of logic physics alike. Nolan pushes any such feats to the margins of his trilogy, leaving them in between shots so as not to disrupt his carefully crafted "realism," but they are nevertheless present in their absence. These unseen, unacknowledged, but nevertheless necessary plot elements threaten not only to undermine but to overwhelm Nolan's "grounding" of the superhero throughout his trilogy.

Marvel's films, by contrast, put these extraordinary feats front and centre, and significantly, they gain credibility by not having any representational gaps in between the live actor and his CG double. Just as we might only believe that a chameleon can change colours depending on its surroundings when we see it occur before our eyes in real time, so too do we need to see the transition in action in order to accept the hybridity of the superhero. Iron Man, like Batman, is not superhuman but rather just an ordinary man buoyed by his intellect and some technological gadgets: "just a man in a can" as he describes himself in *Iron Man 3*. From the very beginning of Marvel's cinematic universe, the studio emphasized a character whose hybridity was demonstrable: without cutting away, Robert Downey Jr. could step onto a platform, have the Iron Man armour attach itself to him, and fly away; indeed, the spectacle of his hybridity creates some of the most effective and engaging scenes in the films. What we witness in these scenes of seamless transformation is the realization of the promise made in 1948, implicit in Alyn's replacement by his animated double. The superhero is a hybrid figure—man *and* superman—that benefits most from a hybridized mode of representation. Denying us these moments doesn't serve to render such characters more human; on the contrary, their absence only implies that the full cinematic realization of the superhero is an impossibility.

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<sup>168</sup> Nolan avoids a more obvious continuity error by having Bruce remove his cowl before exiting the helicopter. In *Batman Returns* (dir. Tim Burton, 1992), the alternative can be seen. In a shot-reverse shot preceding Batman revealing his identity to Catwoman, the make-up is present and, after a shot of Catwoman, it is conspicuously absent, leaving a circle of pink skin between his eyes and the mask.

There are various strategies for achieving media hybridity, but digital allows for the possibility of seamless fusion between media forms, and for infinite combinations of these diverse representational strategies, as seen in the previous chapter. Ultimately, the superhero is merely a microcosm of the broader issue addressed by this dissertation, for the comic book itself is a hybrid form that combines static images (mostly drawn) with written text in a structured way; its mediating effects are unhidden since it makes no claim to represent the world as it is; consequently, it would be impossible to mistake a comic book for reality—even the rare one composed using photographs. But regardless of how convincing the individual images that make up a comic book are, the reality effect is forever incomplete by design; the joy of the comic book is that it is *read*, that it requires the intellectual effort of the reader in order for its content to come to life. Though the cinema is hardly a passive medium, its dominant, classical style was designed to produce the most seamless, unambiguous immersion into the diegesis possible. Even the post-classical intensified continuity style aims to accomplish this, albeit in a more frenetic manner.<sup>169</sup> And though film has a photographic basis in the world put before the camera, it too cannot be mistaken for unmediated reality, which contains neither zooms nor cuts nor closing credits. The primary difference between conventional comics and film, then, is that where film can efface its mediating intervention in service of creating a seemingly unmediated world, comics rely on the *visibility* of its mediating codes to function at all. This is why the strategies of remediation discussed in the previous chapters, in contrast to Bolter and Grusin's view of remediation, tend to *emphasize* rather than efface the distance between the viewer and unmediated reality; to lay bare the fiction that is The Film by demonstrating its constructedness for all to see; to rely, as the comic book does, on the *visibility* of its mediating codes to communicate something to the viewer. The comic book film accomplishes this by temporarily exchanging photography for drawings or cartoons; by borrowing compositions from comic book panels; by fracturing the screen into “panels”; by imposing text over the image; by freezing, slowing, or otherwise manipulating the viewer's perception of time; and by engaging with the narrative or diegetic materials found in comics. In sum, the comic book film is designed as a palimpsest that must be *read*, not merely seen, on multiple levels.

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<sup>169</sup> See Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*.

## CONCLUSION

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### The Comic Book Film Out of Focus

In the Introduction to *Cinema Journal*'s "In Focus" section on comics studies, Bart Beaty suggests three areas on which present and future comics scholars ought to concentrate: form, narrative, and the comics world (108-10). Obviously, the preceding chapters have been overwhelmingly concerned with the form of comics and how it becomes remediated into cinematic style. The narrative strategies of comics (defined largely by shared universes, cross-overs, and intense serialization) and the culture of comics (including fandoms, consumption patterns, and marketing) were largely irrelevant to this project, though I agree that in expanding our purview—bringing the comic book film somewhat *out* of focus—we might better consider these crucial areas. This dissertation has been concerned with a specific set of comic book films—live-action/photographic, sound, studio-made, mostly American—to the exclusion of others. The resulting gaps suggest productive areas for future research. Animated comic book films, including the wide world of Japanese anime, is a huge corpus whose specificities and differences from the live-action remediations considered here placed them beyond the scope of this study. The seemingly linear continuum from comic book to limited animation to full-motion animation is an obvious starting point for such a study, which could include the recent phenomenon of "motion comics" (e.g., *Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic*, dir. Jake Strider Hughes, 2008-09) as well as a variety of animated adaptations, from 2D hand-drawn animations (e.g., *Little Nemo: Adventures in Slumberland*, dirs. Masami Hata and William Hurtz, 1989) to CG animations (e.g., *Big Hero 6*) to films animated from motion-capture data (e.g., *The Adventures of Tintin*, dir. Steven Spielberg, 2011). The wide variety of comic book-based television series are also worthy of analysis. The serialization and consequent length of such works makes them more similar to the complex, serialized narratives that comics have specialized in for decades. For instance, *Smallville*'s (WB/CW, 2001-2011) two hundred and eighteen episodes eclipse the running time of all previous Superman films and television series combined. The marketing of comic book films of all sorts also demands a closer look. While

individual case studies have considered key texts like *The Dark Knight*<sup>170</sup> and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*,<sup>171</sup> a broader view of comic book film hype could extend this dissertation's interest in the genre's inherent intermediality in productive ways. The interactivity of video games also suggests the possibility of interesting interactions with comics' form, from *Comix Zone* (SEGA, 1995) to the wildly popular *Batman: Arkham Asylum* games (*Arkham Asylum*, Rocksteady, 2009; *Arkham City*, Rocksteady, 2011; *Arkham Origins*, Warner Bros. Games Montreal, 2013; *Arkham Knight*, Rocksteady, 2015).

On a related note, the implications of this study extend beyond comic book films to other genres that are usually considered through the limiting lens of adaptation theory. For instance, the video game film presents itself as another cinematic genre that would be usefully understood as an intermedial palimpsest, remediating the form and gameplay experience of video games into cinematic style. As was the case in the comic book film, this corpus is not limited to adaptations: films like *TRON*, *Crank: High Voltage* (dirs. Neveldine/Taylor, 2009), *Gamer* (dirs. Neveldine/Taylor, 2009),<sup>172</sup> *TRON: Legacy* (dir. Joseph Kosinski, 2010), and the aforementioned *Scott Pilgrim* all remediate video games' form without being adapted from a specific text. Analyses of films based on other non-traditional media (e.g., theme park rides, board games, toys, etc.) might also benefit from the present work. Whatever the subject, it is my hope that other scholars will find the approach and conclusions of this study useful in their own research. I encourage them to take up the six levels of remediation provided in Chapter Two and adapt them to different case studies, from other kinds of comic book-related media to video game films and beyond; to be mindful of the difference between intertextuality and intermediality; and to eschew adaptation-centric approaches to works and genres whose style might better understood through the lens of remediation.

Beaty's as-yet-unreleased research project "Comics Off the Page" analyses a host of works that span a vast array of art forms, from architecture and ballet to theatre and site-specific art installations. The connective tissue between all of these works is that they present themselves—like *Superman*, *Creepshow*, and other of the films discussed in previous chapters—

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<sup>170</sup> See Amaris, "Seriously Fun: Marketing and the Gaming Experience of Nolan's *The Dark Knight*."

<sup>171</sup> See Morton 268-85.

<sup>172</sup> See Shaviro 93-130.

as comics, in Beaty's assessment.<sup>173</sup> The cinematic genre identified and explicated here is thus one part of a much larger trend. If nothing else, this signals that though comics are perhaps less popular as a medium (i.e., sales figures for comics are lower than they have been in the past, especially in boom periods like the 1940s and 1990s), their influence on contemporary culture and all forms of expression within it has never been more pervasive. At the moment, comic book film production is at an all-time high and seems unlikely to slow down anytime in the foreseeable future. Every major Hollywood studio has already announced future instalments of their existing comic book film franchises—Marvel Studios claims to have their film slate sketched out until 2028 (McMillan)—and most have plans to aggressively expand these universes.<sup>174</sup> As such, this study represents a crucial intervention, providing a framework through which to understand the kinds of interactions that occur between media in this genre and, by extension, other cinematic genres that also embody a similar kind of intermediality.

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<sup>173</sup> I've seen in-progress excerpts from "Comics Off the Page" at Bournemouth (<http://comics.bujournalism.info/>) and McGill (<http://www.mcgill.ca/ahcs/speakersseries>).

<sup>174</sup> Sony, for instance, intends to produce a series of villain-centric films within *The Amazing Spider-Man* universe (Kit).



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- Creepshow*. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Hal Holbrook, Leslie Nielsen, Adrienne Barbeau, and Stephen King. Warner Bros., 1982. DVD.
- Danger: Diabolik*. Dir. Mario Bava. Perf. John Phillip Law, Marisa Mell, Michel Piccoli, and Adolfo Celi. Paramount Pictures, 1968. DVD.
- Daredevil*. Dir. Mark Steven Johnson. Perf. Ben Affleck, Jennifer Garner, Colin Farrell, and Michael Clarke Duncan. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2003. DVD.
- The Dark Knight*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Michael Caine, and Aaron Eckhart. Warner Bros., 2008. Blu-ray.
- The Dark Knight Rises*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Christian Bale, Anne Hathaway, Tom Hardy, and Marion Cotillard. Warner Bros., 2012. Blu-ray.
- Dick Tracy*. Dir. Warren Beatty. Perf. Warren Beatty, Madonna, Al Pacino, and Dustin Hoffman. Touchstone Pictures, 1990. DVD.
- Dream of a Rarebit Fiend*. Dirs. Wallace McCutcheon and Edwin S. Porter. Perf. Jack P. Brawn. Edison Manufacturing Company, 1906. DVD.
- L'espoir*. Dirs. André Malraux and Boris Peskine. Perf. Andrés Mejuto, Nicolás Rodríguez, José Sempere, and Julio Peña. Lopert Pictures Corporation, 1945. Film.
- eXistenZ*. Dir. David Cronenberg. Perf. Jude Law, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Ian Holm, and Willem Dafoe. Alliance Atlantis, 1999. DVD.
- The Fantastic Four*. Dir. Oley Sassone. Perf. Alex Hyde-White, Jay Underwood, Rebecca Staab, and Michael Bailey Smith. New Horizons, 1994. Film.
- Flash Gordon*. Dir. Mike Hodges. Perf. Sam J. Jones, Melody Anderson, Max von Sydow, and Topol. Universal Pictures, 1980. DVD.
- G-Men from Hell*. Dir. Christopher Coppola. Perf. William Forsythe, Tate Donovan, Gary Busey, and Bobcat Goldthwait. Sawmill Entertainment Corporation, 2000. DVD.
- Gamer*. Dirs. Neveldine/Taylor. Perf. Gerard Butler, Michael C. Hall, Ludacris, and Alison Lohman. Lionsgate, 2009. DVD.
- Ghost World*. Dir. Terry Zwigoff. Perf. Thora Birch, Scarlett Johansson, Steve Buscemi, and Brad Renfro. United Artists, 2001. DVD.

- The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Dir. Sergio Leone. Perf. Clint Eastwood, Eli Wallach, and Lee Van Cleef. United Artists, 1966. DVD.
- Grand Prix*. Dir. John Frankenheimer. Perf. James Garner, Eva Marie Saint, Yves Montand, and Toshirô Mifune. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1966. DVD.
- The Green Hornet*. Dir. Michel Gondry. Perf. Seth Rogan, Jay Chou, Christoph Waltz, and Cameron Diaz. Sony Pictures, 2011. Blu-ray.
- Green Lantern*. Dir. Martin Campbell. Perf. Ryan Reynolds, Blake Lively, Peter Sarsgaard, and Tim Robbins. Warner Bros., 2011. Blu-ray.
- Guardians of the Galaxy*. Dir. James Gunn. Perf. Chris Pratt, Zoe Saldana, Dave Bautista, and Benecio del Toro. Marvel Studios, 2014. Film.
- A History of Violence*. Dir. David Cronenberg. Perf. Viggo Mortensen, Maria Bello, Ed Harris, and William Hurt. New Line Cinema, 2005. DVD.
- Hulk*. Dir. Ang Lee. Perf. Eric Bana, Jennifer Connelly, Sam Elliott, and Nick Nolte. Universal Studios, 2003. DVD.
- I, Frankenstein*. Dir. Stuart Beattie. Perf. Aaron Eckhart, Bill Nighy, Miranda Otto, and Jai Courtney. Lionsgate, 2014. Film.
- Inception*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Leonardo Dicaprio, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Marion Cotillard, and Tom Hardy. Warner Bros., 2010. Blu-ray.
- The Incredible Hulk*. Dir. Louis Letterier. Perf. Edward Norton, Liv Tyler, Tim Roth, and William Hurt. Marvel Studios, 2008. DVD.
- The Informer*. Dir. John Ford. Perf. Victor McLaglen, Heather Angel, Preston Foster, and Margot Grahame. RKO Radio Pictures, 1935. Film.
- Iron Man*. Dir. Jon Favreau. Perf. Robert Downey Jr., Jeff Bridges, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Jon Favreau. Marvel Studios, 2008. DVD.
- Iron Man 2*. Dir. Jon Favreau. Perf. Robert Downey Jr., Mickey Rourke, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Sam Rockwell. Marvel Studios, 2010. Blu-ray.
- Iron Man 3*. Dir. Shane Black. Perf. Robert Downey Jr., Gwyneth Paltrow, Guy Pearce, and Ben Kingsley. Marvel Studios, 2013. Blu-ray.
- Jerry Maguire*. Dir. Cameron Crowe. Perf. Tom Cruise, Cuba Gooding Jr., Renée Zellweger, and Kelly Preston. TriStar Pictures, 1996. DVD.

- La jetée*. Dir. Chris Marker. Perf. Jean Négroni, Hélène Chatelain, Davos Hanich, and Jacques Ledoux. The Criterion Collection, 1962. DVD.
- Jonah Hex*. Dir. Jimmy Hayward. Perf. Josh Brolin, Megan Fox, John Malkovich, and Michael Fassbender. Warner Bros., 2010. Blu-ray.
- Judge Dredd*. Dir. Danny Cannon. Perf. Sylvester Stallone, Armand Assante, Rob Schneider, and Diane Lane. Hollywood Pictures, 1995. DVD.
- The Katzenjammer Kids Have a Love Affair*. American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1900. Film.
- The Katzenjammer Kids in School*. American Mutoscope Company, 1898. Film.
- Kick-Ass 2*. Dir. Jeff Wadlow. Perf. Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Chloe Grace Moretz, Christopher Mintz-Plasse, and Jim Carrey. Universal Pictures, 2013. DVD.
- Kill Bill Vol. 1*. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Perf. Uma Thurman, David Carradine, Darryl Hannah, and Lucy Liu. Miramax Films, 2003. DVD.
- Kingsman: The Secret Service*. Dir. Matthew Vaughn. Perf. Colin Firth, Taron Egerton, Samuel L. Jackson, and Mark Hamill. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2014. Film.
- Lady Bountiful Visits the Murphys on Wash Day*. American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1903. Film.
- The Lady from Shanghai*. Dir. Orson Welles. Perf. Rita Hayworth, Orson Welles, Everett Sloane, and Glenn Anders. Columbia Pictures, 1947. DVD.
- Little Nemo: Adventures in Slumberland*. Dirs. Masami Hata and William Hurtz. Perf. Gabriel Damon, Mickey Rooney, and Rene Auberjonois. Columbia Tristar, 1989. VHS.
- The Losers*. Dir. Sylvain White. Perf. Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Zoe Saldana, Chris Evans, and Idris Elba. Warner Bros., 2010. Blu-ray.
- Machete*. Dirs. Robert Rodriguez and Ethan Maniquis. Perf. Danny Trejo, Michelle Rodriguez, Robert De Niro, and Jessica Alba. Troublemaker Studios, 2010. DVD.
- Madame Bovary*. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. Perf. Jennifer Jones, James Mason, Van Heflin, and Louis Jourdan. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1949. DVD.
- Man of Steel*. Dir. Zack Snyder. Perf. Henry Cavill, Amy Adams, Michael Shannon, and Russell Crowe. Warner Bros., 2013. Blu-ray.
- Marvel's The Avengers*. Dir. Joss Whedon. Perf. Robert Downey, Jr., Chris Evans, Chris Hemsworth, and Tom Hiddleston. Marvel Studios, 2012. Blu-ray.
- The Matrix*. Dirs. Andy and Lana Wachowski. Perf. Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne Moss, and Hugo Weaving. Warner Bros., 1999. Blu-ray.



- Mischievous Willie's Rocking Chair Motor*. American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1902. Film.
- Mr. Jack in the Dressing Room*. American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1902. Film.
- Mrs. Doubtfire*. Dir. Chris Columbus. Perf. Robin Williams, Sally Field, Pierce Brosnan, and Harvey Fierstein. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1993. VHS.
- Mutt and Jeff*. Dir. Bud Fisher. Pathé Frères, 1913. Film.
- Passion*. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. Perf. Isabelle Huppert, Hanna Schygulla, and Michel Piccoli. United Artists Classics, 1982. Film.
- Pastoral Symphony*. Dir. Jean Deannoy. Perf. Pierre Blanchar, Michèle Morgan, and Line Noro. Les Films Gibé, 1946. Film.
- Persepolis*. Dirs. Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi. Perf. Chiara Mastroianni, Catherine Deneuve, Danielle Darrieux, and Simon Abkarian. Sony Pictures Classics, 2000. DVD.
- The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*. Dir. Sophie Fiennes. Perf. Slavoj Žižek. Zeitgeist Films, 2012. Film.
- Planet Terror*. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Perf. Rose McGowan, Freddy Rodriguez, Josh Brolin, and Marley Shelton. Troublemaker Studios, 2007. DVD.
- The Player*. Dir. Robert Altman. Perf. Tim Robbins, Greta Scacchi, Fred Ward, and Whoopi Goldberg. Avenue Pictures, 1992. DVD.
- The Punisher*. Dir. Mark Goldblatt. Perf. Dolph Lundgren, Louis Gossett Jr., Jeroen Krabbe, and Kim Miyori. New World Pictures, 1989. DVD.
- The Return of the Swamp Thing*. Dir. Jim Wynorski. Perf. Dick Durock, Heather Locklear, Louis Jourdan, and Sarah Douglas. Warner Home Video, 1989. DVD.
- R.I.P.D.* Dir. Robert Schwentke. Perf. Jeff Bridges, Ryan Reynolds, Kevin Bacon, and Mary-Louise Parker. Universal Pictures, 2013. DVD.
- Run Lola Run*. Dir. Tom Tykwer. Perf. Franka Potente, Moritz Bleibtreu, Herbert Knaup, and Nina Petri. Sony Pictures Classics, 1998. DVD.
- Russian Ark*. Dir. Aleksandr Sokurov. Perf. Sergey Dreyden, Mariya Kuznetsova, and Leonid Mozgovoy. The Hermitage Bridge Studio, 2002. DVD.
- Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*. Dir. Edgar Wright. Perf. Michael Cera, Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Ellen Wong, and Jason Schwartzman. Universal Pictures, 2010. Blu-ray.
- Side by Side*. Dir. Christopher Kenneally. Perf. Keanu Reeves, , 2012)

- Sin City*. Dirs. Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller. Perf. Mickey Rourke, Clive Owen, Bruce Willis, and Jessica Alba. Troublemaker Studios, Danny Boyle, James Cameron, and Christopher Nolan. Company Films, 2005. DVD.
- Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*. Dirs. Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller. Perf. Mickey Rourke, Jessica Alba, Eva Green, and Josh Brolin. Troublemaker Studios, 2014. Film.
- Sisters*. Dir. Brian De Palma. Perf. Margot Kidder, Jennifer Salt, and Charles Durning. The Criterion Collection, 1973. DVD.
- Sloper's Visit to Brighton*. Dir. James Williamson. Perf. Williamson Kinematograph Company, 1898. Film.
- Snowpiercer*. Dir. Bong Joon-ho. Perf. Chris Evans, Jamie Bell, Tilda Swinton, and Song Kang-ho. The Weinstein Company, 2013. Film.
- Southland Tales*. Dir. Richard Kelly. Perf. Dwayne Johnson, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Seann William Scott, and Justin Timberlake. Universal Pictures, 2006. DVD.
- Spider-Man*. Dir. Sam Raimi. Perf. Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, Willem Dafoe and James Franco. Sony Pictures, 2002. DVD.
- Spider-Man 2*. Dir. Sam Raimi. Perf. Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, James Franco, and Alfred Molina. Sony Pictures, 2004. DVD.
- The Spirit*. Dir. Frank Miller. Perf. Gabriel Macht, Samuel L. Jackson, Scarlett Johansson, and Eva Mendes. Lionsgate, 2008. Blu-ray.
- Steel*. Dir. Kenneth Johnson. Perf. Shaquille O'Neal, Annabeth Gish, and Judd Nelson. Warner Bros., 1997. DVD.
- Strange Days*. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. Perf. Ralph Fiennes, Angela Bassett, Juliette Lewis, and Tom Sizemore. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1995. DVD.
- Super*. Dir. James Gunn. Perf. Rainn Wilson, Ellen Page, Liv Tyler, and Kevin Bacon. IFC Midnight, 2010. Blu-ray.
- Superman*. Dir. Richard Donner. Perf. Marlon Brando, Gene Hackman, Christopher Reeve, and Margot Kidder. Warner Bros., 1978. Blu-ray.
- Suspense*. Dirs. Philips Smalley and Lois Weber. Perf. Lois Weber, Valentine Paul, Douglas Gerrard, and Sam Kaufman. Universal Film Manufacturing Company, 1913. DVD.
- Tales from the Crypt: Bordello of Blood*. Dir. Gilbert Adler. Perf. Dennis Miller, Erika Eleniak, and Angie Everhart. Universal Pictures, 1996. DVD.

- Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight*. Dir. Ernest R. Dickerson. Perf. Billy Zane, William Sadler, Jada Pinkett, and John Kassir. Universal Pictures, 1995. DVD.
- Tamara Drewe*. Dir. Stephen Frears. Perf. Gemma Arterton, Luke Evans, Dominic Cooper, and Roger Allam. Sony Pictures Classics, 2010. DVD.
- Tank Girl*. Dir. Rachel Talalay. Perf. Lori Petty, Ice-T, Naomi Watts, Malcolm McDowell. United Artists, 1995. DVD.
- Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Dir. Jonathan Liebesman. Perf. Megan Fox, Will Arnett, William Fichtner, and Whoopi Goldberg, 2014. Platinum Dunes, 2014. Film.
- Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Dir. James Cameron. Perf. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Linda Hamilton, Robert Patrick, and Edward Furlong. Lionsgate, 1991. Blu-ray.
- The Thomas Crown Affair*. Dir. Norman Jewison. Perf. Steve McQueen, Faye Dunaway, Paul Burke, and Jack Weston. United Artists, 1968. DVD.
- Thor*. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Perf. Chris Hemsworth, Natalie Portman, Tom Hiddleston, and Anthony Hopkins. Marvel Studios, 2011. Blu-ray.
- Timecode*. Dir. Mike Figgis. Perf. Jeanne Tripplehorn, Stellan Skarsgard, and Salma Hayak. Screen Gems, 2000. DVD.
- Touch of Evil*. Dir. Orson Welles. Perf. Charlton Heston, Janet Leigh, Orson Welles, and Marlene Dietrich. Universal Pictures, 1958. DVD.
- TRON*. Dir. Steven Lisberger. Perf. Jeff Bridges, Bruce Boxleitner, and David Warner. Walt Disney Productions, 1982. DVD.
- TRON: Legacy*. Dir. Joseph Kosinski. Perf. Jeff Bridges, Garret Hedlund, Olivia Wilde, and Bruce Boxleitner. Walt Disney Pictures, 2010. Blu-ray.
- Trouble in Hogan's Alley*. American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1900. Film.
- Ultraviolet*. Dir. Kurt Wimmer. Perf. Milla Jovovich, Cameron Bright, Nick Chinlund, and Sebastien Andrieu. Screen Gems, 2006. DVD.
- Unbreakable*. Dir. M. Night Shyamalan. Perf. Bruce Willis, Samuel L. Jackson, and Robin Wright Penn. Touchstone Pictures, 2000. DVD.
- Vampyr*. Dir. Carl Th. Dreyer. Perf. Julian West, Maurice Schutz, and Rena Mandel. The Criterion Collection, 1932. DVD.
- WALL•E*. Dir. Andrew Stanton. Perf. Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, Jeff Garlin, and Fred Willard. Pixar, 2008. Blu-ray.

*Wanted*. Dir. Timur Bekmambetov. James McAvoy, Angelina Jolie, Morgan Freeman, and Terence Stamp. Universal Pictures, 2008. DVD.

*Watchmen*. Dir. Zack Snyder. Perf. Malin Akerman, Jackie Earle Haley, Patrick Wilson, and Billy Crudup. Warner Bros., 2009. Blu-ray.

*Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic*. Dir. Jake Strider Hughes. Perf. Tom Stechschulte. Warner Home Video, 2008–09. Blu-ray.

*Woodstock*. Dir. Michael Wadleigh. Perf. Jimi Hendrix, Joan Baez, Joe Cocker, and Country Joe and the Fish. Warner Bros., 1970. DVD.

*X-Men: Days of Future Past*. Dir. Bryan Singer. Perf. Hugh Jackman, James McAvoy, Michael Fassbender, and Jennifer Lawrence. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2014. Film.

## TELEVISION

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*60 Minutes*. CBS. 1968–. Television series.

*Batman*. ABC. 1966–68. Television series.

*The Electric Company*. Children's Television Workshop. 1971–77. Television series.

*The Green Hornet*. ABC. 1966–67. Television series.

*Heroes*. NBC. 2006–10. Television series.

*Seinfeld*. NBC. 1989–98. Television series.

*Smallville*. WB/CW. 2001–11. Television series.

## VIDEO GAMES

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*Batman: Arkham Asylum*. Rocksteady. 2009. Video game.

*Batman: Arkham City*. Rocksteady. 2011. Video game.

*Batman: Arkham Origins*. Warner Bros. Games Montreal. 2013. Video game.

*Batman: Arkham Knight*. Rocksteady. 2015. Video game.

*Comix Zone*. SEGA. 1995. Video game.

*Infamous*. Sucker Punch Productions. 2009. Video game.

*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World: The Game*. Ubisoft. 2010. Video game.

*Super Mario Bros*. Nintendo. 1985. Video game.