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Spandex Cinema:

Three Approaches to Comic Book Film Adaptation

A THESIS

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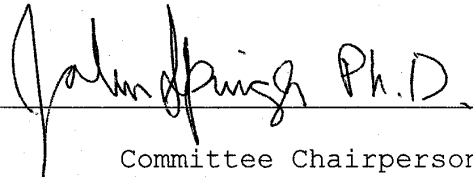MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

By

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Edmond, Oklahoma

2009

Spandex Cinema:

Three Major Approaches to Comic Book Film Adaptation

A THESIS

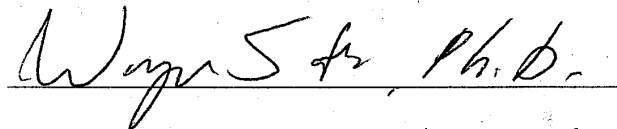APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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TITLE OF THESIS: <u>Spandex Cinema: Three Approaches to Comic</u>

<u>Book Film Adaptation</u>

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Adapting graphic novels requires new approaches in the theoretical models currently available to film theorists. Comic book films must be dissected beyond references to character, setting, plot, or story; analysis must consider the choice of plot and story within or outside a preexisting canon, the exclusion or inclusion of thematic elements, and the fidelity of visual narrative. The intertextual variability intensifies when considering comic book films and new methodologies are required for a proper examination of this genre. Using the works of comics scholars (McCloud, Eisner, and Ewert, et al), the studies of film theorists (Andrew, Wager, Ryan, Bordwell, et al) and graphic novels from highly regarded authors and artists (Miller, Moore, et al) new modes of adaptation emerge as specifically designed both for the comic book film and a greater understanding of visual narrative.

Acknowledgements

In the winter of my sophomore year of college I was told by a friend to read <u>Watchmen</u> and <u>The Dark Knight Returns</u>. As a child, I had read comic books. But they were not like these books. They depicted extreme violence and sex, and finding the "good guys" was a difficult task. More than that, they were different than my childhood comic books--the structure and the narratives were, as I was just learning, "postmodern." At the time, I didn't know what that meant, other than "cool."

It was a good time to begin reading comics again. Comic book movies began to explode at the box office, and with profit comes more of the same. When I began graduate school I was encouraged to explore these films and these comic books on an academic level. This thesis originated from their encouragement. I would like to thank each of the professors who gave much of their time, advice, and help: Dr. Dana Heller and Dr. Edward Jacobs of Old Dominion University both gave me early opportunities to explore my ideas at the graduate level and provided gracious encouragement and sound advice when I needed it the most. I must thank the members of my thesis committee: Dr. John Springer, who never doubted the importance of this project; Dr. Matthew Hollrah, who poured over each draft in the pursuit of rhetorical perfection; and Dr. Wayne Stein, who assured me that it would be finished. I am in their debt.

I must also thank my family, if only because their trust in my writings about comic book movies is something only family can provide.

My colleagues, the teaching assistants for the English Department at UCO, also deserve special mention. They have listened to me ramble on about this project for a year and a half, and they have provided advice and guidance. And, on occasion, when my passion for thesis writing overtook my pedagogy, they provided a much-needed lesson plan.

Finally, I must acknowledge Kenny Penrod, who told me to read <u>Watchmen</u> and <u>The Dark Knight Returns</u> nine years ago. Thanks to him, a new hobby became a new passion, and a new passion became the pursuit of my academic career.

Adapting comic books into films requires different theoretical models than those currently available to film theorists. Previous theoretical models, including those proposed by Dudley Andrew, Robert Stam, George Bluestone, André Bazin, and Geoffrey Wagner do not consider the process of adapting the static images of comic books to the moving images of film. As comic book films are a recent phenomena in the realm of adaptation studies

and require a different approach than those taken by both film scholars and literature scholars, this blind spot in adaptation theory is understandable. To date, there has not been a fully developed and delineated framework for thinking about the adaptation of comic books to film. Intuitively, viewers and scholars alike know that adaptations range in their fidelity to the original comic book or comic books, but do not often closely analyze what this range means for the relationship of one visually-based text to another visually-based text. Comic book films must be analyzed beyond bare-boned essentials of character, setting, plot, or story; analyses of these films must consider these choices within or without a preexisting canon[1] of comic books, the exclusion or inclusion of thematic elements, and especially the fidelity of the film's visual elements and narrative to the source material of the comic books.

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[1] For comics, the term "canon" has a different meaning than in literature. This is an important distinction between the two fields: in traditional literature studies, the canon entails a generally accepted body of the literary works of the highest quality. For comics, "canon" means the body of work which is defines the accepted narrative within the fiction world of that specific character.

Every film adaptation is an interpretation.

Because comic books are narratives with a reliance on

visual and sequential art and because film is a

narrative and visual medium, the interpretations made

on the part of the filmmakers must be based on the

film's fidelity to the comic book source material.

This fidelity must be grounded both the represented

narrative and visual style of the comic and in the

ideological interpretations of the content of the

source material. Fidelity, in these areas, is the

primary measure of analysis of these interpretations.

In order to properly study comic book

adaptations, I propose three new approaches specific

to this genre of adaptation. These models of

adaptation are more refined than previous adaptation

theories in order to increase the understanding of the

visual and narrative adaptations of comic book movies.

It is important to note that these models of

adaptation already exist; the labels and methods of

description are routes of understanding for these

films--lenses by which to focus a study of these

filmic interpretations. By analyzing the films using

these models, scholars and viewers will gain a greater

level of understanding concerning the adaptation of

visual rhetoric from one medium to another.

Like other adaptation studies, such as those

proposed by Dudley Andrew and Geoffrey Wagner, these

terms exist on a continuum based upon their relative

fidelity to the source materials[2]: the Type One

adaptation approach is maximally faithful to the

adapted texts; Type Two adaptation is for those films

which are faithful to the source text or texts but

with changes in the representative aspects of the

source text; and finally, Type Three adaptation is a

complete reinterpretation that alters the original

source text in form and content. Each adaptation

should be critiqued separately in both the form, or

the representational aspects of the adapted film (the

fidelity of narrative and visual style to the comic

book source material) and the content, here the

ideological interpretation of characters and events.

In this regard, any given comic book film may evoke a

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[2] In this vein, the terminology employed here is designed to be
neutral. No hierarchy or preference is given to one kind of
adaptation approach in relation to another.

different type of adaptation for these criteria on an

individual level; a film may be at the level of

maximal fidelity by replicating the precise visual

style of the comic books (Type One) but alter the

original theme of a text considerably (Type Three).

The purpose for this dualistic model, based on

analyses of both form and content, is to acknowledge

the visual nature of both mediums while accounting for

any ideological reinterpretations from comic book to

film. Simultaneously, as form and content are

interconnected for the mediums of comics and film, the

dualistic aspects of these approaches are synergistic,

as one invariably affects the other. In the

transference of content from one medium to the other,

form must change and therefore the change in content

will inevitably follow. What is important is the

understanding of such changes in form and content

because in doing so, scholars will better understand

both the represented aspects of the narrative and the

ideological interpretations of comic book film

adaptations.

The creation of a series of adaptation models
based on their relative fidelity to a source text is a
theoretical choice on my part. With the immense canon
of comic books colliding with the visions of
screenwriters, producers, and directors, the choice of
fidelity may be seen as, at the least, a precarious
one; my decision in approach is grounded in the
foundations of both mediums. For adaptation studies,
the tradition of fidelity is not without precedence,
as John Desmond and Peter Hawkes note that

> ...the field [of adaptation studies] has
> been preoccupied with the fidelity issue.
> The main question asked about adaptations by
> reviews and critics alike has been to what
> degree the film is *faithful* to the text.
> The practitioners of this approach tend to
> judge a film's merit based on whether the
> adaptation realizes successfully the
> essential narrative elements and core
> meanings of the printed text. ... How is it
> possible to identify the core meanings of a
> text when we know literary texts are capable

of supporting an indefinite number of

interpretations? (2)

Comparisons between the film and the source material

and the judgements over which is better that follow

are inevitable but ultimately futile. However, as

Desmond and Hawkes so readily note, with an

"indefinite number of interpretations available," is

fidelity a pertinent criterion? My argument goes

further than the understanding of the "core meanings"

of the text; certainly the thematic aspects, and all

their interpretations, are important. But for comic

book films, this issue of fidelity must be at the

forefront; as comic books and film are both visual

mediums, the transference of narrative content from

one medium to the other must account for the fidelity

to the source material because abdicating the source

material's visual aspects represents a conscious

decision to forgo fidelity in both form and content.

Some of the more idiomatic aspects of comics, such as

"thought bubbles," may be lost in the adaptation

process because of the way in which cinema functions

in terms of the relation of narrative to the viewer;

"thought bubbles" and "dialogue balloons" would not

only distract the viewer from the film's narrative,

but they would be redundant as a device since film

uses different means to convey thought and speech.

The devices for film, voice-over narration and sound

dialogue, replace these essential comic book devices

simply because they are not needed. But when comic

books are adapted to animated works (such as 2007's

Persepolis, dir. Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane

Satrapi) higher standards of fidelity can be achieved

in order to capture the maximal level of fidelity, as

comic books and animated films are exceptionally close

in the nature of their respective mediums--the major

difference being the number of panels used to create

the illusion of motion through the persistence of

vision[3]. In this instance, "thought bubbles,"

"dialogue balloons", and even "narrative boxes" could

have a diegetic place within the animated film

adaptation.

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[3] An animated version of a comic could, in fact, replicate the comic book. What changes are made could, potentially, be relegated to the motion connecting panel to panel in the comics as well as any sound added for dialogue or non-diegetic music.

As both film and comic books are visual narratives, it is my belief that the art of translating one medium (comic books) to another (film) will, to varying degrees, rely on the visual aspects of the source material to create a screen version of a comic book story. Additionally, as each comic book series or character has potentially hundreds of stories available, the avoidance of a selection from the canon is conspicuous--just as the omitting of details, characters, or events from a novel's adaptation are equally conspicuous. By comparing the degree of fidelity in a film to its comic book source, both at a level of visual style (form) and ideological interpretation (content), theoretical evaluations of comic book films can be analyzed with greater understanding. Because no adaptation can be a complete replication of a source text, even adapting a visual medium to a different kind of visual medium will entail a series of interpretive choices on the part of the filmmakers. Deciphering these choices and examining these films will allow for a greater understanding of the adaptation of still imagery into

cinema. This thesis outlines these approaches and
applies them to appropriate examples of comic book
films.

Terminology

The term "comic book" refers to a single issue,
usually around thirty pages, of an on-going series--
part of a whole. In terms of generic content, comic
books are unlimited in subject mater, ranging from
superheroes, drama, humor, fantasy settings, horror,
and any number of other possibilities.

Other terms identify different formats in which
comic books narratives may appear, such as "trade
collections," which refers to a single volume
containing several single, usually continuous, issues
from one series of comic books. The term "miniseries"
denotes either the issues published in a limited-run
series or a single volume collecting all the issues of
a given series.

A "spinoff" comic book denotes a comic book that
features a singular character from another on-going

series in a separate series. Oftentimes, these new

series will be aimed towards a particular

demographic--usually younger audiences. A "crossover"

is an issue of a comic that contains a character not

normally present in the series; this may include

characters owned and licensed by other companies.

The "gutter" is the space between panels in the

layout of a comic book. The gutter is the point in a

comic book where the reader must make interpretive

leaps in understanding to connect panels together.

Time and space are stitched together in the mind of

the reader to make sense of the narrative structure of

a comic book. The gutter is not the same as a frame

of film in the sense of on-screen and off-screen

space. On a technical level, a frame of film must

speed by at twenty-four frames per second in order to

create the persistence of vision phenomena and the

illusion of motion from still frames. A panel of a

comic book may be absorbed for any length of time, and

the gutter that follows before the next panel relies

on the imagination of the reader to connect the two.

This reliance on the imagination paradoxically allows

for a freedom in the interpretation of action and time
from one panel to the next.

Although these are more publishing and marketing
terms than critical concepts, they are included here
in large part to demonstrate the varieties of
narrative construction in the medium of comic books.
Narrative in comic books operates differently than in
film; these terms are a reflection of the expanded and
intertextual structure of comic book narrative.

Historical Aspects

Understanding the history of comic book films as
a genre of film adaptation is essential because the
development of this genre provides insight into the
evolution of the adaptation approaches in both
ideological interpretations and representational
aspects of the adapted work. It is not coincidental
that comic book adaptations began at the financial

peak of both mediums[4]. Comic book films enjoyed a
brief renaissance in the serial film era (1912-1956)
as the mainstays of Marvel and DC, the two major comic
book publishing companies, were adapted to films. As
McAllister notes, comics-licensed serials in this
period included the influential film serials <u>Flash
Gordon</u> (1936, dir. Frederick Stephani), <u>Superman</u>
(1948, dir. Spencer Gordon Bennet and Thomas Carr),
<u>The Adventures of Captain Marvel</u> (1941, dir. William
Witney), <u>Dick Tracy</u> (1937, dir. Alan James and Ray
Taylor), <u>Spy Smasher</u> (1942, dir. William Witney), <u>The
Phantom</u> (1943, dir. R. Reeves Eason), and <u>The Batman</u>
(1943, dir. Lambert Hillyer). In addition to their
immense visibility in the film business from the 1930s
and 1940s and their role as early, typically
financially successful, attempts at adapting comic
books and comic strips to film, the style and format

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[4] In 1946, both mediums were at their respective heights of
popularity and profit. According to Bradford Wright, "seventy
million Americans--roughly half the U.S. population--read comic
books" (57). For film, "[the] studios' year-end gross revenues
rose from a record $1.45 billion in 1945 to just under $1.7
billion in 1946" (Schatz 290). The catalyst in both cases can be
traced to World War II; comics were readily available and sold
well in PXs at army bases. The peak of film attendance
"accelerated immediately after the war, thanks to millions of
returning servicemen, increased courtship activity, the easing of
wartime restrictions, and a ...populace with both time and
wartime savings on their hands" (Shatz 290).

of these films have, by exploiting the serialized

structure of the narrative modes of comic book visual

rhetoric, arguably influenced the nature of the modern

action film; in particular action films have become

episodic and utilize cliffhanger endings, some of them

self-consciously so, such as <u>Raiders of the Lost Ark</u>

(1981, dir. Steven Spielberg) (110). Comic books were

readily adaptable to films because the two mediums

share similar narrative attributes. Both mediums were

also considered "throwaway" material, that is, serial

films and comic books were not regarded as art and

thus were often quickly forgotten. However, film

theorists and historians are fortunate in having

reliable data on the first comic book adaptation, <u>The</u>

<u>Adventures of Captain Marvel</u> (1941, dir. William

Witney). This serial was the first comic book film

adaptation; the only other adaptations comparable at

this point took material from comic strips[5]. Where

comic book films had whole issues and lengthy story

lines to adapt, comic strip adaptations had a limited

narrative space.

Other comic book properties quickly followed:

Batman, Superman, and Captain America were all adapted

to serial films, and then feature films, television

series, or cartoons. The medium of cel animation

shorts were, for the time, best able to provide

control of the special effects necessary for superhero

action[6]. By 1966 and the <u>Batman</u> television series,

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[5] Originally, <u>Superman</u> was to be the first adaptation as this was
a safer choice in terms of profit and marketability. William
Witney, the director of <u>The Adventures of Captain Marvel</u>, recalls
the change in the production, when National Comics (now DC
Comics) relented:

> It was late in the afternoon about four weeks before
> we were to start when a call came from Manny
> Goldstein's secretary that Manny wanted to talk to
> Bunny, Jack,and myself. Manny told us that <u>Superman</u>
> was out and we had to go with another title. They
> just couldn't make a deal with the <u>Superman</u> people
> for what we could afford to spend on the title.
> (Witney 177).

Budgets being the prime mover in the production of serial films,
Republic Pictures would look to a similar title for a film, a
choice that astounded Witney: "After all the hassle with <u>Superman</u>
being canceled, I couldn't believe the front office buying one
that I thought was an infringement on the <u>Superman</u> title. It was
called <u>Captain Marvel</u>" (Witney 182).

[6] The most notable comic book cartoon series is arguably the
seventeen Superman cartoons created by the Fleischer Studios (and
later Famous Studios) between 1941 and 1943. Using rotoscope
animation, a technique invented by Max Fleischer where action is
filmed using human actors and then artists draw over the action,
the Fleischer company was able to produce animation with the
special effects necessary to create superhuman action.

comic book adaptations became more complex as comics changed from their original tone and subject matter. While the Batman television series had a markedly different tone than the original comics by Bob Kane and Bill Finger, it did resemble the concurrent Batman comic book series, which was considerably more light-hearted. Additionally, unlike other serial adaptations, Batman was in color, had the complete villains gallery, and overtly utilized the onomatopoetic "biff!" and "pow!" onscreen, just as the comic books utilized these sound effects titles in panels. These attempts to recreate the conventions of comic book form and narrative are unusual for the period and in many cases (specifically, the villains gallery), only available in a television format because of the restraints of time in film. What is notable about this series is the complex problems which arise when discussing the adaptive process; the Batman television series complicated the understanding of a comic book adaptation not only on a formal level, but in the selection of source texts. The parodic style of the Batman television series arises as a

result of Batman character, and comics in general,
becoming objects of nostalgia. The Batman television
series does have the same character as the Batman
comics, but the television series utilizes different
interpretations in tone and style than the source
texts of Bill Finger and Bob Kane, but not those of
the concurrent Batman comic series--a complication for
comic book adaptation studies.

 The return of comic books to cinema was marked by
the milestone of 1978's Superman (dir. Richard
Donner); despite Superman's profit[7] and popularity, it
would be more than a decade before comic books would
be seen as a viable genre for screen adaptation.

 1989 was a banner year for comic book films and
was the next step in the progression of comic books as
a profitable genre of cinematic adaptation. Tim
Burton's Batman was the biggest hit of the year.
However, by the third film in the series, Batman had
returned to the parodic tone of the television series.

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[7] The influence of the studios on comic book properties must not
be underestimated. Many of the decisions in making a comic book
adaptation are based solely around profit; to what effect this
may have on the adaptation as a whole or what has been retained
are questions which result from such changes made in the name of
profit.

Where the late 1970s and early to mid 1980s were the era of <u>Superman</u>, and the late 1980s and 1990s were the era of <u>Batman</u>, the new Golden Age of comic book adaptations would begin in the year 2000 with a Marvel property, <u>X-Men</u>.

<u>X-Men</u>, directed by Brian Singer and written by David Hayter, took the comic book genre to a new level of profitability and profundity. Following 2000's <u>X-Men</u>, a myriad of other comic book adaptations followed, spanning all genres of comic books and cinema[8].

Frame to Panel Adaptation

As both comic books and films are visual narratives, both contain comparable features and notable differences. Will Eisner, in his book <u>Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative</u>, notes that in "graphic storytelling, the writer and artist retain their sovereignty because the story comes from the text and is embellished by the art" (Eisner 27). But

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[8] See Appendix A for a list of comic book film adaptations.

this blanket statement does not encompass all of

graphic storytelling; if anything, it ignores the

diversity in comic books and assumes a pair of

creators for every comic book text. Furthermore,

Eisner seems to favor text over the art, which he

states has a purpose of "embellishment". The very

notion of "graphic storytelling" implies art at the

forefront rather than an embellishment. Eisner does

refer to comic books and their twin visual and verbal

narrative tracks, but a similar observation could be

said of the medium of film--particularly in the

relationship of screenwriter and director. Eisner

notes the differentiation of the two mediums: for film

"the audience is carried through the telling. It

provides no time for savoring passages or

contemplation. The view is [that of a] spectator of

[an] artificial reality" (69). Conveniently, Eisner

forgets that comic books also present an artificial

reality, composed not of photographic images but of

artistic recreations or imaginings. But for Eisner,

the key difference between comic books and films is

relegated to the modes of reception; comic books may

Smith 20

be read at the pace chosen by the reader whereas films
dictate the viewer's rate of speed. Such an immersion
into a filmic reality of invisible artifice provides
the pacing and *mise-en-scene* to guide the viewer,
whereas in comic books a different kind of active
reading--participation on the part of the reader
within the text--is dependent on the reader's chosen
pace for a complete absorption of the text. Both
mediums require active participation on the part of
the audience, but the speed of engagement is creator-
controlled for film and reader-controlled in comics.
In her article "Art Spiegelman's Maus and Graphic
Narrative," Janet Ewert notes: "the visual
presentation of the graphic narrative may also
condense information that would otherwise have to
appear in the verbal/textual narrative" (181). Ewert
is referring to semiotics; for comic books, the
description of a cat is unnecessary if that cat can
instead be drawn. Descriptive information relayed
through text in novels can become line drawings in
comic books. As more and more information is drawn
rather than written, a density of visual elements is

created. This visual density is only heightened in

film since film is typically composed of thousands of

photographic images in sequence[9]. Comic book

adaptations could exploit this density so that the

construction of an adapted visual narrative from a

comic book is appropriated to the medium of film. The

animated film <u>Persepolis</u> uses the same sparse style of

the comic book when the comic book could have been

filmed as a live-action movie. <u>American Splendor</u>

(2003, dir. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini)

utilizes comic book panels as transition effects.

Both films are examples of how comic book adaptations

may retain the reduced visual density of comic books

when made into films. Invariably, the transformation

of comic book to comic book film will require changes

in the pursuit of a coherent narrative--making the

reinterpretation of a source text a necessity.

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[9] Comic books are constricted to a 32 page-per-issue format; films
are generally between ninety minutes and two hours long (although
longer and shorter exceptions are certainly available). Both
strive towards the telling of a complete story, but comic books
are constrained to a shorter format and therefore must condense
their narrative or consciously extend their narrative over
multiple issues; in either case, comic books have overlapping
information in the narrative in order to inform new readers of
the current plot. Comic book adaptations are singular narratives
and therefore do not need this overlapping continuity of
information. A comic book adaptation that uses only a single
issue of a comic is a rare feat; it is questionable whether any
comic book film has accomplished this.

The panel-by-panel format of comic books resembles film editing; in his book <u>Understanding Comics</u>[10], Scott McCloud writes of the space between panels as

> ...what comics aficionados have named "the gutter," and despite its unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics! ...in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you something must be there! ...Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But [the mental phenomena of] closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. (66-67)

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[10] McLoud's seminal text, <u>Understanding Comics</u>, is a book about comic books and written as a comic book. The use of exclamation marks is tied directly to the format; the text's scholarship should not be called into question based on this aesthetic choice.

This statement equally describes film moving at 24

frames per second; in fact, it bears a striking

resemblance to Eisenstein's theory of dialectical

montage[11]. As Robert Richardson notes, "The film

is...proud, and justly so, of its capacity to present

a stream of images which make a point or create an

effect without logical connection or

explanation" (52). Film and comic books are inherently

attached to the specific structural approaches to

visual narrative within their respective mediums. Or

more precisely, as George Bluestone notes that "in the

novel, the line of dialogue stands naked and alone; in

the film, the spoken word is attached to its spatial

image" (Bluestone 58)[12]. But what Bluestone ignores is

any surrounding dialogue which lends context to spoken

words. Even with such similarities in the visual

aspects of both mediums, the problems of adapting

comic books to film, on a theoretical level, has

largely been ignored by theorists of both mediums.

[11] Briefly, Eisenstein's theory of dialectical montage refers to
the idea that juxtaposing two images together in a film could
elicit an emotional response; the panel-by-panel format of comic
books lends itself to such a theory with ease.

[12] While the work of George Bluestone is relatively outdated, his
sentiment here evokes an entirely new sense as it relates to
comic books and the potential of pairing word to image.

This may be precisely because of their similarities;

the question of fidelity in adapting a visual medium

to a different kind of visual medium, when

reinterpretation inevitably enforces change, becomes a

balancing act that requires more than understanding

one source text and its adaptation--it requires an

understanding of the mediums behind each text.

　　　To cross from one visual narrative form to

another entails a transference of more than mere words

on a page, although that is part of the change.

Static panels become moving frames; filmmakers must

fill in the gaps between panels with connective motion

or editorial cues. Panel shape and size is a

continual issue as comic books are allowed some

freedom in the size and placement of panels where film

has a fixed aspect ratio. Such changes in the formal

aspects of comic books may not necessarily dictate

changes in content of the filmed version but it would

certainly entail a change. Changes in the formal

aspects are interpretive changes; those differences of

content are not based in interpretation. Other, less

technical issues also present obstacles in the process

of adaptation: the selection within a canon, a reduction in the number of characters, and a condensation of the necessary background information--information which may span decades[13]. These issues, however, are relatively miniscule when the matter of the construction of narrative is addressed. With two mediums of differing narrative structure and one having more freedom in representing the story while the other has a fixed aspect ratio, what is paramount to the understanding of comic book adaptations is the consideration of the changes and presentations of their filmed narratives.

Type One/Type Two/Type Three

Type One Adaptation

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[13] For example, in the X-Men film, the character of Cyclops wears an eyepiece in every scene, presumably because without it his mutant power of emitting energy "blasts" from his eyes would be uncontrollable. The film does not reveal that the reason he cannot control his mutant power is because of severe head trauma incurred as a child--head trauma that also caused amnesia for much of his youth. Nor does the film reveal anything about his extended family who are responsible for many events in the X-Men comics books. The film merely hints of Cyclops' leadership role in the beginning of the film and that his visor helps to control his power in the Statue of Liberty scene at the end of film.

Type One is my first model of comic book to film adaptation and is simultaneously the easiest to understand yet the most difficult to achieve. The Type One approach indicates an adaptation that is as faithful to the source material as possible, including characters, plot, and mise-en-scene. A maximally faithful adaptation of the comic book onto the screen is the primary goal in the Type One adaptive process, with a constant challenge to set a medium composed of still images transmuted into moving images--a challenge that will always rely on directorial interpretation. The Type One approach is similar to Dudley Andrew's concept of "intersection"; this is the idea that "the uniqueness of the original text is preserved to such an extent that it is intentionally left unassimilated in adaption," (99) that is, "we are presented not with an adaptation so much as a refraction of the original" (99). Furthermore, as Geoffrey Wagner defines adaption as "transposition, in which a novel is directly given on the screen, with the minimum of apparent interference" (154). The difference between the definitions of Andrew and

Wagner and the Type One approach, however, is that novel-to-film adaptations do not have to account for the immense number of specific images contained within comic books that the film will be compared to. The Type One approach represents a reliance on the written and visual aspects of the source comic book narratives for the adaptation; in addition to this concentration, there is, in most cases, a heavy reliance on technology to create such an adaptation. For Type One adaptations, the representational aspects of the visual style must be maximized; the filmed version should match, as closely as possible, the visual style of the comic books. Ideally, all that should change is the addition of motion.

Sin City (2005, dir. Robert Rodriguez) is the definitive example of the Type One adaptation approach in terms of both narrative representation and ideological interpretation; indeed, it is one of a only a few examples available. Frank Miller's gritty and violent noir comic book, with its roots in the objective realist school of literature, is projected as complete on screen:

One of the most stylistically faithful
movies to its graphic novel origins was <u>Sin
City</u> (2005), so much so that it literally
broke Hollywood rules. Calling the film a
"translation" rather than an adaptation,
codirector Robert Rodriguez attempted to
mimic--virtually shot by shot--the
distinctive angles, visual tone and color
schemes of Frank Miller's graphic novel
stories. (McAllister, et al., 113)

But the loose usage of the term "translation" is
problematic[14]; while there are idiomatic tropes within
both mediums, the idea of "translation" implies
connotations that I do not wish to associate here[15].
Rodriguez uses Miller's art as storyboards and
verbatim dialogue. In Figure 1, there is a a panel-
to-frame comparison of the same moment in the film and
the comic. Although the representation of the comic
is considerably similar in the film, certain

---

[14]Rodriguez is a filmmaker, not a film theorist.

[15] "Translation", for one, implies a different sort of
transference than comic books to film. If a language is
translated, it is done so to a different language and the changes
are made within the same format (i.e., speech to speech or text
to text). When comic books are adapted to film, the change comes
about because the adaptation is made into a different format.

differences are
noticeable. While both
are high angle, wide shot
perspectives with
chiaroscuro lighting and
both have the character
Hartigan walking out of a
large prison door, the
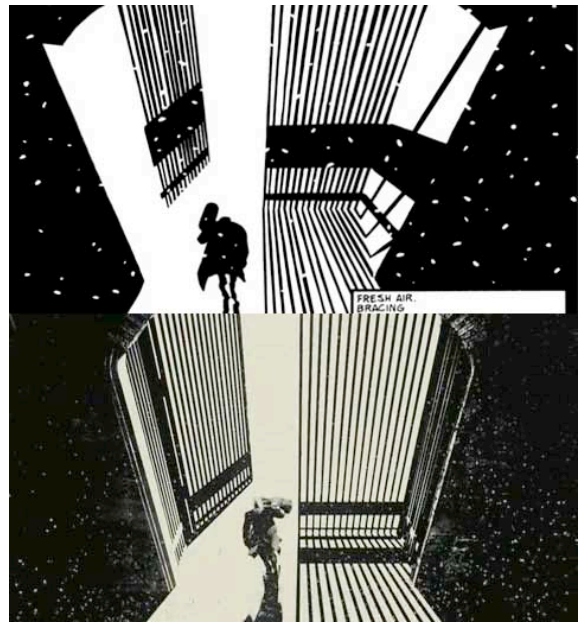film loses the inner

Figure 1

monologue box in favor of voice-over narration. The

lighting in the film is not as stark as the comic

book, and the shadows have less of an expressionistic

style.

One notable difference between the film narrative

and the comic book narratives is the use of moving

compositions and restructured chronology of each plot

by interweaving of storylines. While the change from

sequential images to moving frames is an inevitable

change, it is the most important change as it

encompasses the entirety of the interpretational

aspects of the "gutter" in between comic panels. The

decision to weave together the narratives of the Sin

City comic books is faithful to the interconnectedness

of the seven-volume comic book series, as characters

in the Sin City books do overlap into other stories,

thus allowing this violent world to resonate to a

great degree in cinematic form.

What is more pertinent here is the separate

challenge of how the filmmakers retain some semblance

of the stark art of the comic book series using a

fluid cinematic style. Melding multiple panels into a

single, continuous frame is necessary to create motion

from these singular comic book panels. Sin City is

one of the few comic book films to achieve a near

completely faithful rendition of the source material;

scenes in the film replicate the panels in the comics

using every technical element of film: lighting, mise-

en-scene, costumes, camera angles, and make-up effects

are all used to replicate the comic book on film. In

Figure 2, a comic-to-film comparison of an image from

the scene in which Hartigan reunites with Nancy, shows

the use of lighting in the film matches the comic with

exceptional accuracy: a key light on right of

Hartigan, a bright fill light on the left, and

backlighting covering Nancy. But there is a divergence in the film adaptation; the bleak backgrounds of the comic are replaced for the film by full sets. Miller's stylized art style, while provocative in the comics, leaves the background of a

Figure 2

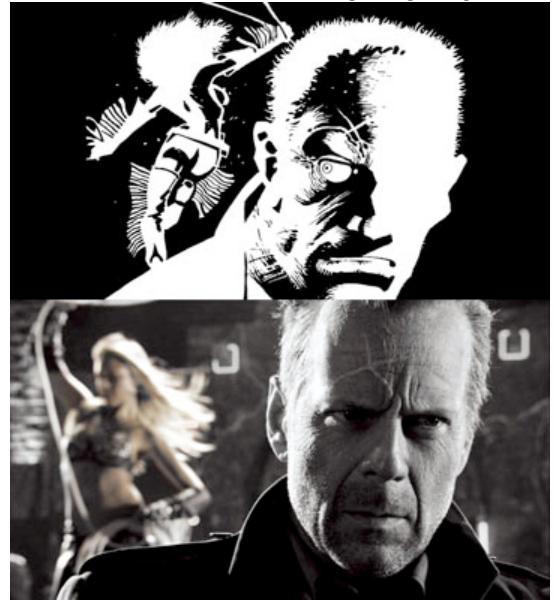film set empty. However, other panels in the comic book do contain the imagery of the bar, and for the sake of continuity--an important part of the classical model of Hollywood cinema-- these empty spaces are filled in. In Figure 3, depicting the character Junior, these backgrounds are again filled in, despite the white backdrop of the comic. This may also be due to the need to convey the spacial

Figure 3

relationships in the frame.

Adapting comic books using the Type One model entails considerable reliance on the source material both in the ideological and representational aspects of the narrative. And when this reliance is undertaken, as in the case of Sin City, then a question arises as to why adapt the text at all? If a shot-for-shot cinematic version with moving images is the only separation between a few dollars' worth of comic books and a forty-million dollar film, it makes little sense to endure such an effort. Of course, there are monetary reasons. Comic book films command large audiences, primarily due to their ability to appeal to multiple audiences; in this case, both comic book fans and action film fans. But if this were the sole reason, then the filmed version need not be so loyal to the source material. By adapting a comic book so faithfully, what is gained in the creation of a film version? Adapting a work to such a close approximation of the source text does not necessarily imply a "gain," in the sense that something is added to the comic book source material. By filming the

text exactly as it occurred as a comic book, there is

an expansion of the capacities of both mediums because

such a close replication of a traditional novel is

impossible. But in a comic book adaptation, the

possibility of a maximally faithful replication of a

comic is much more likely due to the visual nature of

comic books. In addition, close adaptations of comic

books test the boundaries of narrative structure and

arrangement for each medium. Again, while classical

film narratives relay information as rapidly and

efficiently as possible, comic books may utilize

several pages or several issues in order to tell a

story. In this manner, close adaptations of comics do

not adhere to the narrative structure of classical

film. Seymour Chatman notes:

> One of the most important observations to
>
> come out of narratology is that narrative
>
> itself is a deep structure quite independent
>
> of its medium. In other words, narrative is
>
> basically a kind of text organization, and
>
> that organization, that schema, needs to be
>
> actualized: in written words, as in stories

and novels; in spoken words combined with

the movements of actors imitating characters

against sets which imitate places, as in

plays and films; in drawings; in comic

strips. (403)

In other words, the similarities are greater than the

differences in terms of narrative structure between

comic books and films. However, his argument extends

only to the principles of narrative structure, not the

construction or adaptation of stories from one medium

to another. Indeed, Chatman outright ignores any

narrative schema that operates without a strictly

textual basis, eschewing much of the primitive and

silent film eras. As he specifically states, "in

spoken words combined with the movements of actors

imitating characters against sets which imitate

places, as in plays and films." Chapman further

ignores the vast majority of the history of comic

strips[16]. Chatman glosses over the narrative structure

---

[16] According to to McCloud, "the father of the modern comic book in many ways is Rudolphe Topffer, whose light satiric picture stories, starting in the mid-1800's, employed cartooning and panel borders, and featured the first independent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe" (Understanding Comics, 17), but the history of comic books--sequential art--can be traced at least as far back as Egyptian hieroglyphics

of comic strips and comic books; he leaves out the visual aspects of comics in his study and in doing so relegates the whole of narrative to words in comic books and ignores the visual rhetoric saturating every panel. In terms of narrative, film and comic books have much in common; without an understanding of the rhetorical function of the visual aspects of both mediums, aspects which clearly inform the narrative, Chatman's point is completely moot.

Film is now able to capture the fantasy of comic books thanks to technology, and comic book narratives can be transmuted to cinema with a greater ease than ever before. In this sense, Sin City is an expensive experiment, testing the limits of narrative fidelity through technology. Ultimately, this mode of adaptation drives at both the intrinsic nature of what makes a comic book a comic book and a film a film and to what extent the boundaries of each medium blend with the other[17].

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[17] This blending of the two mediums, in a kind of hybrid fashion, is beginning to be explored in what has been dubbed "motion comics", and are deserving of a study all their own.

Type Two Adaptation

Type Two is the second model of adaptation I am proposing. Essentially, the Type Two approach entails capturing certain representational elements, such as characters, settings, and plots, and thematic and ideological requisites from the individual source comic books and utilizing these requisites in the film version. Films using the Type Two approach do not attempt to recreate any specific comic book or books with the maximum level of fidelity, only including certain elements, most notably the theme of the source comic book. The inclusion of the thematic elements are essential to the Type Two approach because retaining the theme of the source text is the distinguishing factor for the Type Two approach. The available canon invariably leads to a challenge of selection from possibly decades of existing stories. From these years of stories, heroes and villains, plots and conflicts, and thematic motifs are chosen and presented in cinematic representations. In addition, various degrees of the Type Two approach, in

terms of form and content are available. Spider-Man

(2002, dir. Sam Rami) contains the essential themes of

power and responsibility from the first comic book

appearance of Spider-Man[18]. In both the film and the

comic, Peter Parker (Spider-Man) finds his uncle dead

due to a robbery which he could have prevented. After

finding the criminal and bringing him to the police,

in both comic book and the adapted film he walks away

saying "with great power comes great

responsibility" (advice his uncle originally gave

him). While the film does contain these events and

this theme, the entirety of the film does not employ a

specific identifiable comic book storyline. The film

does keep plot elements from the origin of Spider-Man

while utilizing typical story arcs in Spider-Man comic

books: specifically, Peter Parker's balancing act of

attending high school (and later college and then a

career) and being a superhero. Some amount of

recognizability is necessary for brand recognition,

but such elements also allow for rapid comprehension

by audiences. Spider-Man, then, is a Type Two film

_____

[18] Amazing Fantasy #15, August, 1962.

specifically in terms of narrative representation.

Much of the plot is derived from the first appearance

of Spider-Man in comic books, but is then interwoven

with other stories and later events, thus altering the

narrative structure of the source material. V for

Vendetta (2005, dir. James McTeigue) alters its theme

from fascism versus anarchism to conservatism versus

liberalism (arguably a minor change for the audience

of the film), although the film still retains the

basic plot structure and story outline of the comic

books. This decision did, in essence, allow for a

greater appeal to American audiences from an

originally British text. As noted by McAllister,

Gordon, and Jancovich:

> V for Vendetta... translates the original
>
> Alan Moore-created critique of Thatcher-era
>
> conservatism to filmic symbolism more
>
> closely related to the recognizable, well-
>
> circulated iconography of the era of George
>
> W. Bush, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo Bay.
>
> The film deals metaphorically with a Gordian
>
> knot reminiscent of Iraq in a way that few

other fictional films have to date; the fact

that the hero was a sympathetic "terrorist"

was, to say the least, unusual for the time,

and clearly struck a controversial

note with critics (see Giles; Els).

Although the original graphic novel was

commenting on a different and quite specific

historical context, Moore's use of allegory

to explore contemporary political abuses and

the role of violence as resistance

facilitated the story's application to

post-9/11 society. The fact that the film

version was not produced until well over 20

years after the original [comic book]

version debuted speaks to the uncomfortable

political nature of the source material for

Hollywood (qtd. in Els 86). (112-113)

V for Vendetta, as a film, carries a theme similar to

the comic books; in this regard it does temper itself

to the "spirit" of the original, as Dudley Andrew

noted in his ideas on "fidelity and transformation."

The film does not employ the theme of fascism versus

anarchy, but it does utilize a theme of extreme left

wing ideals versus extreme conservatism; both themes

are concordant with their surrounding political

culture. Just as V for Vendetta, the comic book, was

a reaction against the era of Margaret Thatcher in

England during the mid-1980s, the film version of V

for Vendetta is a reaction against the Bush

administration in 2006. In this vein, the film

version does adhere to the spirit of the original,

although the changes made are notable. As a

contemporary reinterpretation, the ideological

interpretation of V for Vendetta must be considered a

Type Two film. While the Type Two approach is

currently the most common form of adaptation of comic

books, the primary example of the Type Two approach is

the second X-Men film, X2: X-Men United (2003)

directed by Bryan Singer.

    Created in the beginning of the 1960s, the X-Men

are one of the most allegorical of any long-running

series of comic books:

        In the early 1960s writer and editor Stan

        Lee invigorated Marvel Comics with the

revision of older heroes and the creation of

new ones that struck a responsive chord with

a generation that was challenging convention

on all fronts-- political, sexual, and

artistic. (Johnston 48)

Over time, the X-Men have come to include members with

backgrounds from nearly every nationality and

religion, as well as a decidedly liberal perspective

on political issues. The very nature of the X-Men

lends itself to multiple levels of allegory making

nearly any minority group or Othered demographic

issues relatable to the X-Men (including racism,

xenophobia, and homophobia).

A major challenge in pursuing the Type Two

approach is the selection of a plot or plots from a

canon of literature; X-Men comic books have been

printed since 1963 and have had numerous spinoffs and

crossovers. In the case of the X-Men film series,

each film is simultaneously self-contained and part of

a greater whole. Selecting material from existing

canonical X-Men stories and adapting them to film must

result in successfully retaining the narrative of the

source text or texts so as to make the film

recognizable both as a comic book film, but more

importantly as a part of a comic book film series. To

use the canonical comic book stories for the X-Men

films is to use stories which overlap and have long-

lasting effects on characters and future events; one

narrative is tightly woven into the next and therefore

presents a challenge to the filmmakers. Narrative

adaptation in X-Men is muddled here; the characters

are familiar to their comic book counterparts, but the

plot is culled from pieces of different stories.

    Again, that the X-Men live outside of "normal"

society makes for stories potentially rife with

allegorical significance, particularly in terms of

homosexuality. Bryan Singer's X-Men films are largely

a gay parable, in that these "mutants" conceal their

powers, and eventually must "come out" of their

genetic closet. X2: X-Men United, directed by Singer,

an openly gay filmmaker[19], has a scene in which Bobby

Drake, also known as the mutant Iceman, "comes out" to

his parents, to which his mother asks, "Have you tried

not being a mutant?" Furthermore, the character of

Senator Robert Kelly in the first X-Men film "is a

self-proclaimed 'God-fearing' senator, whose

intolerant anti-mutant speeches sound a lot like

current anti-gay and anti-immigrant rhetoric" (Harti).

   Adapting the X-Men comic books with the Type Two

approach is a relatively easy task, as so many themes

are already available. X-Men Ideologically, the X-Men

films do adhere to this theme of Otherness throughout

the series; however, because the first X-Men comic

book was released in 1963--the year of Martin Luther

King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and "Letter from

---

[19] In an interview with the BBC, Singer stated:

I'm actually part of a number of minorities. I grew up being a
horribly awkward kid. A terrible student. And now I find myself
as a filmmaker, and you feel kind of alone in the world because
you're separate from everyone else. So, yeah, it's definitely
everything from the [coming out] scene with Bobby Drake and his
family, to Wolverine's journey to uncover his past. I'm adopted,
so even my own origins I'm not completely precise on...Well,
yeah. That is also a very relevant analogy because where certain
races, even a Jewish boy or a Jewish girl, will be born into a
Jewish family, or a Jewish community sometimes, or an African
American or whatever minority in any given area, a gay kid
doesn't discover he or she is gay until around puberty. And their
parents aren't gay necessarily, and their classmates aren't, and
they feel truly alone in the world and have to find, sometimes
never find, a way to live. (Applebaum)

Birmingham Jail," as well as President Kennedy's call for a Civil Rights bill--the origins of X-Men allegory are deeply rooted in American society's confrontation with racism. A change to homosexuality is related to the theme of racism through the idea of Otherness, but the change is still present.

The fidelity of the X-Men film to the spirit of the source texts is not in question, in part, due to their comic book library, which spans decades. Stories must be hand-picked and altered so as to appeal to an audience that may be vastly different than the audience of the 1960s. What is in question is to what extent the X-Men films are faithful to which source text or texts. The first film of the series, X-Men, has no specific source storyline; the film is a conglomeration of characters and ideas from multiple story lines. As previously noted, it does retain themes and motifs characteristic of the comic book series. For X2: X-Men United, Chris Claremont's X-Men comic book God Loves, Man Kills (1982) is an obvious point of inspiration; still, radical changes have been made.

These alterations are often in the name of profit and brand recognition. As in the first film, Wolverine is the protagonist; as he is the most popular character in Marvel Comics, this is perfectly reasonable and understandable at the business level. Instead of "Reverend" Stryker, from the comic books, it is now "General" Stryker. Because religion is a touchy subject in mainstream cinema, the change from a reverend to a military leader provided an impetus and causal relationship for further sequels. These are not major points of difference, but they do provide insight into how comic books and films differ because of the influence of business--and how that necessitates change for each adaptation.

New films utilizing the Type Two approach, such as Zack Snyder's adaptation of Frank Miller's 300, complicate this mode of adaptation; these films are represented faithfully with original themes still in place, but more information and emphasis are added to the original in order to create a heightened sense of the themes, expand upon character development, or simply to extend the running time of the film. Zack

Synder's adaption of Frank Miller's <u>300</u> (2006)
embodies the ideas of the Type Two approach in terms
of stylistic representation, largely because the film
does retain the theme of the comic books and utilizes
the original art design, even taking a further step
and using aspects of film editing to replicate the
pacing a comic book reader might enjoy; in using slow
motion and various camera speeds, the film reads in a
similar manner to the comic--an innovative step in
adaptation processes. In addition, the film version
adds new material in the areas of plot and character.
<u>300</u> does little subtraction in these areas; in this
vein the filmmakers are, in fact, loyal to the source
texts by making interpretive leaps to what *other*
actions the characters would do. But the added
material, in particular the subplot of Queen Gorgo and
the Senate bureaucrats created specifically for the
film, confuses viewers attempting to decipher a
singular theme, allowing different and opposing
interpretations. From one perspective, a Persian
nation is attacking a small Greek nation-state in
order to gain more subjects and taxes, and the Greek

nation-state is fighting back in defense. From

another, a small Greek state destroys much of a

Persian army, propagandizing the might of a Western

army in the name of democracy and order. Queen Gorgo

states, in her address to the Senate, "Freedom is not

free, that it comes with the highest of sacrifices.

The price of blood." In his 2002 State of the Union

address, President Bush said of Iraq and North

Korea,

> States like these, and their terrorist allies,
>
> constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten
>
> the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of
>
> mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and
>
> growing danger. They could provide these arms to
>
> terrorists, giving them the means to match their
>
> hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt
>
> to blackmail the United States. In any of these
>
> cases, the price of indifference would be
>
> catastrophic.

Both statements imply a causal relationship between

war leading to annihilation and the justification of

such actions through the assurance of liberty to

accompany victory. Inaction is condemned: those who
remain stagnant and apathetic--those who fail to make
a sacrifice for victory--are assured oppression and
violence on a grand scale. It is a rhetoric of fear
disguised as insight in a complex sequence of events.
Because of this rhetoric in the film and in current
politics, the film cannot escape the relevance and the
relationship to the Iraq War. Whether intentional or
not, when a war film is released at the height of an
actual war, parallels will be drawn.

   If we accept that the source material and its
adaptation take similar roads with regards to
narrative themes, any divergence must come by way of
analyzing the visual styles of both works. Obviously,
300 is an expanded version of the eighty-eight page
graphic novel. Stylistically, the film utilizes
different camera speeds in order to emulate the panels
of the comic books. But it diverts from this style
for the sake of narrative; the film adds scenes,
particularly at the beginning of the movie, in order
to fully explicate to the viewer a lucid, yet
Hollywood version of Spartan culture. Leonidas and

many other Spartan warriors are given slightly

different characterizations; in the graphic novel,

Leonidas is a somber, laconic general who relates more

to a soldier's archetype than a political figurehead

while he is transformed for the film into a

charismatic and beloved leader who fights for the

glory of Sparta. And in the end, the camera looms on

Leonidas as a Christ-figure in a leaded-glass window

fit for a church. For the comic book, victory is not

glory, but the squelching of evil no matter the cost.

Victory is achieved through self-sacrifice for the

greater good, even if the graphic novel lacks a

realistic representation of history. As for the film,

honor is less important than is the use of force to

achieve total victory. 300 may not be a film that

endorses the Iraq War efforts, but the relevance of

the film to current events lends an extra referential

layer that may have gone unnoticed had it been adapted

a decade later. In this regard, a new social context

allows the film adaptation to remain in the realm of

Type Two.

Type Three Adaptation

   The final form of comic book to film adaptation is the Type Three approach. Perhaps the most basic level of adaptation, the Type Three approach is the reusing of basic elements--heroes, villains, attributes, settings, and the bare elements of style-- from the source comic books. Rather than being a part of a singular story line or a specific set of stories, these elements are merely transferred to the cinema. What elements are selected may vary: main characters will surely be reused while settings, conflicts, and plots may be rewritten or newly created for the screen. Invariably, these changes would alter the meaning, tone, or theme included in the source text. This form of adaptation were common before the explosion of comic book properties; here, the best example of the Type Three approach is Tim Burton's <u>Batman</u> (1989) as the film utilizes only selected elements, including Batman, the Joker, and Gotham City, but does not use a specific comic book story nor a comic book based theme for the film. Christopher

Nolan's 2005 film <u>Batman Begins</u> is an interesting

contrast to Burton's film as both are films about the

origin of Batman but tell this story in radically

different ways; for example, in <u>Batman</u>, the Joker, as

Jack Napier, is seen killing Bruce Wayne's parents. In

<u>Batman Begins</u>, Joe Schill murders his parents--just as

it happened in the <u>Batman</u> comic books. It should also

be noted that many of the comic-book films from this

era, conceivably prior to 2000's <u>X-Men</u>, employ this

mode of adaptation.

Upon viewing <u>Batman</u>, audience members would have

experienced what is seemingly typical of the Batman

comic books and graphic novels. Every element is

present: a troubled billionaire, the batsuit, the

batmobile, the batarang, the Joker as the villain,

Harvey Dent, and Gotham City. And because every

element is apparently present, to view the film as

anything but a part of the <u>Batman</u> canon would be

difficult. But the plot is constructed specifically

for the film while the Joker, like the other

individual elements listed above, are staples in the

Batman comic books. This is the defining

characteristic of a Type Three-based film: the mise-
en-scene and characters may be accurate, but the
narrative is new.

If both films cull their source material from
several different story lines, then as critics we are
left to decipher the reasoning why. And if we
consider that both films are origin stories,
invariably a comparison will be made to the original
incarnation of the character in the comics of Batman
creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger. Are the heroes
donning cape and cowl in <u>Batman</u> and <u>Batman Begins</u>
wraiths, punishing crime with sometimes extreme
violence while being a detective in a dark, urban, and
violent environment? Both films do this to varying
degrees, but as critics we must determine to what
extent the original inception of Batman is relevant,
especially when so much of the inspiration to make
Burton's <u>Batman</u> stems from later interpretations of
the character, such as Frank Miller's <u>The Dark Knight</u>
<u>Returns</u>. From the perspective of a studio delivering
a product to an audience, it would potentially be
safer to begin a franchise with a new story tailored

for the medium of film, as the creation of a plot tailored specifically for film would adhere to the conventional narrative patterns of classical film.

The Type Three approach poses less of a challenge to filmmakers and to studios because using a pre-existing franchise without the constraints of a strict adherence to a specific plot or attached theme allows more freedom and levity but with the possibility of straying too far from the source material. However, such freedom in adapting a comic book may go unrestrained and all semblance of a series is lost, save for character names, as in David Cronenberg's <u>A History of Violence</u> (2005). At this point, is it fair to call the film an adaptation, or is the movie merely a marginal variation of a pre-existing idea? At the same time, this freedom can allow for more interpretation on the part of the filmmakers.

Comic Books and Film

Comic books must seem as a hybrid art form when discussing adaptation; comic books combine visual

images with the written word to produce meaning. In

doing so, the audience must interpret each panel quite

differently than if reading a novel. As Robert Stam

observes:

> Each medium has its own specificity deriving
>
> from its respective materials of expression.
>
> The novel has a single material of
>
> expression, the written word, whereas the
>
> film has at least five tracks: moving
>
> photographic image, phonetic sound, music,
>
> noises, and written materials. In this
>
> sense, the cinema has...greater resources
>
> for expression than the novel ...independent
>
> of what actual filmmakers have done with the
>
> resources. (59)

Comic books employ a multi-track expression system as

well. However, the number of tracks for comic books

is not as extensive as film's nor are they as multi-

sensory. Comic books do have the written word as well

as visual images. The images are not moving, nor are

they (usually) photographic, but they do strive to

achieve a certain degree of kinesis. In addition to

these approaches, I would add an intertextual track:

the canon. While for the most part source texts for

filmed adaptations are singular works, the opposite is

true for comic books, and generally a staggering

number of stories are available to the production

companies. Therefore, while it may seem obvious to

place comic books, a visual narrative form, between

film and literature according to Stam's criteria,

comic books are still a separate art form all their

own. But, as McCloud states,

> ...visual strategies set comics far apart
>
> from prose when handling subtext, but they
>
> are also quite different from... cinema.
>
> The combination of simpler, more selective
>
> imagery and comics' many frozen moments
>
> lends a less fleeting, less transitory
>
> feeling to each moment--imbuing even
>
> incidental images with a potential symbolic
>
> charge. (<u>Reinventing Comics</u> 33)

Inherently, comics have, by nature of their medium a

selective, active process for the reader. Film may

hold on a moment of visual composition, but the choice

to move to the next shot is not under viewer control.

Conversely, film possesses a greater sense of narrative flow and pace due to film's strict guiding of the viewer.

If the idea of fidelity is the most accurate criteria for film adaptation, certainly there must be other possible ways of understanding film adaptation. Perhaps one is the idea of "translation." The idea of adaptation as translation focuses on intersemiotic transposition which must entail the usual gains and losses of any translation (Stam 62). But Stam's argument of "intersemiotic translation" is tricky even for literature, as the possible interpretations are endless. For comic books, the problem is amplified: even though there are already graphic representations of Batman, across several decades, no adaptation can be a perfect translation. I do not believe that Stam's interpretation of "translation" is entirely appropriate in my analysis of comic book adaptations. Given the canon of available material, a comic book film's success in adaption will invariably be based upon the fidelity it employs to its source material.

The idiomatic language of comic books gets in the way

of seamless translation; the simplest example

(although not the most consistent) would be the

thought bubble. Without being indelibly post-modern

or overtly campy, the comic book film cannot represent

this aspect of the comic book. By being too faithful

to the source material, a comic book film could

abnegate the nature of film and by so doing lose the

functionality of the narrative. Bazin notes that

> the novel has means of its own--language not
>
> image is its material, its intimate effect
>
> on the isolated reader is not the same as
>
> that of a film on the crowd in a darkened
>
> cinema--but precisely for these reasons the
>
> differences in aesthetic structure make the
>
> search for equivalents an even more delicate
>
> matter, and thus they require all the more
>
> power of invention and imagination from the
>
> filmmaker who is truly attempting a
>
> resemblance. (67)

In this vein, the space in between panels, the

"gutter," is filled in for the filmed version; this

interpretive aspect of comic books is what makes comic

books unique and by filling in this space, film

removes the personal interpretation for the viewer in

comic books. The interpretive aspects of film do not

rely on blank space between frames; this is not a

detriment to film's over-deterministic nature; the

controlled pacing of film and the interpretive spaces

of the gutter in comic books are simply further

challenges in adapting comic books to the screen. The

suturing of two shots in film relies on the

interpretive nature of each shot side by side, not the

space between these shots[20].

Finally, the question of what constitutes a

successful comic book adaptation must be answered.

How does one gauge the "success" of a comic book

adaptation? Is it solely relegated to the level of

fidelity of the work? If so, is there any reason to

adapt a comic book at all? If no interpretation is

made, and if the cinematic version is a shot-for-panel

retelling of the comic book, would it not be easier to

---

[20] However, certain transition effects do denote interpretation, such as the fade to black or the dissolve effect indicating a change in time.

simply read the comic books? Critical "success," on a

level of adaptation, does not rely on the typical

standards of the action genre:

> ...the relationship of Hollywood to graphic
>
> novels and other more sophisticated comics
>
> forms may be a double-edged sword. A
>
> hypercommercial Hollywood seems to tolerate
>
> sex and violence more than political
>
> edginess and character complexity.
>
> (McAllister, et al., 114)

It is possible to measure financial success in box

office receipts, although the fairness of such a

method in ascertaining critical success is certainly

questionable, at best. What is a more likely gauge of

the success of a comic book film in terms of

adaptation is how well the film is adapted on a

critical and theoretical level; a maximally faithful

adaptation of a comic book may not have a narrative

that is structured as a film is structured. This

measurement of success avoids assessment on the basis

of pure content, marketability, profitability, and

cultural surroundings. Rather, it advocates the

benefits and elements specific to each medium.

     Perhaps to define what a successful adaptation

is, the establishment of what constitutes a successful

film must come first. According to Desmond and

Hawkes, a good film adaptation must bring together all

of the contributions from a solid screenplay, a

qualified director, the cast and crew, and the

production itself. Every element of cinema (mise-en-

scene, cinematography, sound production, and editing)

must work within the plot and story (causality, point

of view, and other elements) of the source material

for the film to work. Essentially, filmic elements

must be in harmony with the novel's narrative

progression so that filmmakers can coordinate all

aspects of filmmaking--technical, stylistic, and

narrative choices--in order to achieve a greater

awareness of aural and visual meaning when adapting

the written word to the screen (43). Based on the

above-mentioned criteria, only one conclusion about

the success of comic book adaptations may be made:

that fidelity to the visual rhetoric of comic books is

not the keystone to such critical success. Fidelity

may serve to inform the elements of cinema and the

screenplay, but interpretations can be made in order

to serve the creation of a filmed narrative.

Furthermore, Desmond and Hawkes note that

> [for] the transition to be successful, it is
>
> important that the adapter understand the
>
> story as well as the means of expression of
>
> both discourses. Another way of saying this
>
> is that the adapter needs to be aware of the
>
> conventions of the literary story as well as
>
> of cinema itself... If the adapter doesn't
>
> take into account the conventions of each
>
> form, the conventions of the antecedent form
>
> will stubbornly cling to to the adaptation
>
> and make it seem uncinematic. (40)

For comic book adaptations to be "successful" as

films, any change must simultaneously refer to and

alter the significant aspects of what constitutes the

narrative structure of a comic book--moving images

must replace fixed panels and fixed images while

adapting "the gutter" between panels. Utilizing plots

from comic books and reproducing themes are different

routes towards a successful adaptation of a comic book

or comic book series, and may not be utilized in favor

of a film-friendly narrative.

In order to understand how comic book films

function in terms of narrative and ideological

representation, we must understand how they have been

adapted, and why comic book films are adapted through

the three types I have outlined. If a comic book film

has been adapted using Type One methodology, then how

we interpret that film will be radically different

than if it were made as a Type Three film in that the

level of fidelity varies considerably for Type Three

films and not for Type one. The examination of a Type

Two film will be different than the approach for

understanding a film using Type One or Three because

such a study would invariably focus on the theme of

the film. As analyzers of comic book films, we must

understand that comic book adaptations are based on

the arrangement of narrative and ideological

representation, and valuable insight is gained into

such factors and what they mean when we analyze the

these constructions.

The field of comic book film study is both open

and expanding; films from several comic book genres

are currently at various stages of production, from

development to post-production. Beyond film lay

decades of potential comic book stories; indeed, today

comic books are changing rapidly through huge story

arcs and overlapping plots spanning an entire universe

of characters. With their visual narratives, comic

book films challenge film studies for newer, well-

developed theories of adaptation. In terms of film

adaptations, these new models have been outlined so

that they too are both adaptable and expandable to

include new films, ensuring a greater understanding of

both the adapted film and the source comic book

material. For the comic book film genre, the

interpretive aspects of film adaptations are

challenged by the visual nature of comic books;

deciphering how filmmakers choose to honor or ignore

the constraints of ideological representation and

narrative content is key to understanding new kinds of

adaptation processes and approaches. Comic book films

and their strategies for visual and narrative

representation challenge film studies for newer, well-

developed theories so that we can consider the

intersections between comic books and films in which

we confront different images of the same picture.

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    Robert Pulcini. Perf. Paul Giamatti, Harvey

    Pekar, Earl Billings, James Urbaniak. 2003. DVD.

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    Iggy Pop, Gena Rowlands. 2007. DVD. Sony Pictures

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Sin City. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Perf. Bruce Willis,

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Spider-Man. Dir. Sam Rami. Perf. Toby Hooper, Kirsten

    Dunst, James Franco, Willem Dafoe. 2002. DVD.

    Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2002.

V for Vendetta. Dir. James McTeigue. Perf. Natalie

    Portman, Hugo Weaving, Stephen Rea, Stephen Fry,

    John Hurt. 2005. DVD. Warner Bros., 2005.

X-Men. Dir. Bryan Singer. Perf. Patrick Stewar, Hugh

    Jackman, Ian McKellen, James Marsden. 2000. DVD.

    20th Century Fox. 2000.

X2: X-Men United. Perf. Patrick Stewar, Hugh Jackman,

    Ian McKellen, James Marsden. 2003. DVD. 20th

    Century Fox. 2003.

Appendix A: Comic Book Movie Index

The comic book films listed here are adapted originally from comic books. No television series have been included, although movies made for television are listed. Animated films are listed, although animated television series and japanese anime have not been included.

1940 – 1949

<u>Adventures of Captain Marvel</u> (1941, dir. William Witney)

<u>Batman</u> (1943, dir. Lambert Hillyer)

<u>Captain America</u> (1944, dir.Elmer Clifton and John English)

<u>Batman and Robin</u> (1949, dir. Spencer Gordon Bennet)

1950 – 1959

<u>Superman and the Mole-Men</u> (1951, dir. Lee Sholem)

1960 – 1969

<u>Batman</u> (1966, dir. Leslie H. Martinson)

<u>Barbarella</u> (1968, dir. Roger Vadim)

1970 – 1979

<u>Fritz the Cat</u> (1972, dir. Ralph Bakshi)
<u>Tales from the Crypt</u> (1972, dir. Freddie Francis)

<u>The Vault of Horror</u> (1973, dir. Roy Ward Baker)

Doctor Strange (1978, dir. Philip DeGuere)
Superman (1978, dir. Richard Donner)

Captain America (1979, dir. Rod Holcomb)
Captain America 2: Death Too Soon (1979, dir. Ivan Nagy)

1980 - 1989

Superman 2 (1980, dir. Richard Lester)

Heavy Metal (1981, dir. Gerald Potterton)

Swamp Thing (1982, dir. Wes Craven)
Conan the Barbarian (1982, dir. John Milius

Superman 3 (1983, dir. Richard Lester)

Conan the Destroyer (1984, dir. Richard Fleischer)
Sheena (1984, dir. John Guillermin)
Supergirl (1984, dir. Jeannot Szwarc)

Red Sonja (1985, dir. Richard Fleischer)

Howard the Duck (1986, dir. Willard Huyck)

The Spirit (1987, dir. Michael Schultz)
Superman 4: The Quest for Peace (1987, dir. Sidney J. Furie)

Batman (1989, dir. Tim Burton)
The Punisher (1989, dir. Mark Goldblatt)

1990 - 1999

Captain America (1990, dir. Albert Pyun)
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1990, dir. Steve Barron)

Power Pack (1991, dir. Rick Bennett)
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 2: The Secret of the Ooze (1991, dir. Michael Pressman)

Batman Returns (1992, dir. Tim Burton)

Batman: Mask of the Phantasm (1993, dir. Eric Radomski and Bruce W. Timm)
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1993, dir. Stuar Gillard)

The Crow (1994, dir. Alex Proyas)
The Fantastic Four (1994, dir. Roger Corman)
The Mask (1994, dir. Chuck Russell)
Richie Rich (1994, dir. Donald Petrie)

Judge Dredd (1995, dir. Danny Cannon)
Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight (1995, dir. Ernest R. Dickerson and Gilbert Alder)
Tank Girl (1995, dir. Rachel Talalay)

Barb Wire (1996, dir. David Hogan)
The Crow: City of Angels (1996, dir. Tim Pope)
Tales from the Crypt: Bordello of Bood (1996, dir. Gilbert Adler)

Batman & Robin (1997, dir. Joel Schumacher)
Justice League of America (1997, dir. Felix Enriquez Alcala)
Men in Black (1997, dir. Barry Sonnenfeld)
Spawn (1997, dir. Mark A.Z. Dippe)

Batman & Mr. Freeze: Subzero (1998, dir. Boyd Kirkland)
The Batman/Superman Movie (1998, dir. Toshihiko Masuda)
Blade (1998, dir. Stephen Norrington)
Nick Fury: Agent of Shield (1998, dir. Rod Hardy)

Batman Forever (1999, dir. Joel Schumacher)
Mystery Men (1999, dir. Kinka Usher)

2000-2009

Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker (2000, dir.
The Crow: Salvation (2000, dir. Bharat Nalluri)
Heavy Metal 2000 (2000, dir. Michael Coldeway and Michel Lemire)
X-Men (2000, dir. Bryan Singer)

<u>From Hell</u> (2001, dir. Alert Hughes)
<u>Ghost World</u> (2001, dir. Terry Zwigoff)

<u>Blade 2</u> (2002, dir. Guillermo del Toro)
<u>Men in Black 2</u> (2002, dir. Barry Sonnenfeld)
<u>Road to Perdition</u> (2002, dir. Sam Mendes)
<u>Spider-Man</u> (2002, dir. Sam Rami)

<u>American Splendor</u> (2003, dir. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini)
<u>Batman: Mystery of the Batwoman</u> (2003, dir. Curt Geda and Tim Maltby)
<u>Bulletproof Monk</u> (2003, dir. Paul Hunter)
<u>Daredevil</u> (2003, dir. Mark Steven Johnson)
<u>Hulk</u> (2003, dir. Ang Lee)
<u>The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen</u> (2003, dir. Stephen Norrington)
<u>X2: X-Men United</u> (2003, dir. Bryan Singer)

<u>Blade: Trinity</u> (2004, dir. David S. Goyer)
<u>Catwoman</u> (2004, dir. McG)
<u>Hellboy</u> (2004, dir. Guillermo del Toro)
<u>The Punisher</u> (2004, dir. Jonathan Hensleigh)
<u>Spider-Man 2</u> (2004, dir. Sam Rami)

<u>A History of Violence</u> (2005, dir. David Cronenberg)
<u>Batman Begins</u> (2005, dir. Christopher Nolan)
<u>Batman vs. Dracula</u> (2005, dir. Michael Goguen)
<u>Constantine</u> (2005, dir. Francis Lawrence)
<u>The Crow: Wicked Prayer</u> (2005, dir. Lance Mungia)
<u>Elektra</u> (2005, dir. Mark Steven Johnson)
<u>Fantastic Four</u> (2005, dir. Tim Story)
<u>Man-Thing</u> (2005, dir. Bret Leonard)
<u>Sin City</u> (2005, dir. Robert Rodriguez, Frank Miller, and Quentin Tarantino)
<u>V for Vendetta</u> (2005, dir. James McTeigue)

<u>300</u> (2006, dir. Zack Snyder)
<u>Art School Confidential</u> (2006, dir. Terry Zwigoff)
<u>Hellboy: Sword of Storms</u> (2006, dir. Phil Weinstein and Tad Stones)
<u>Justice League Heroes</u> (2006)
<u>Superman Returns</u> (2006, dir. Bryan Singer)

Ultimate Avengers (2006, dir. Curt Geda and Steven E. Gordon)
Ultimate Avengers 2 (2006, dir. Will Meugniot and Dick Sebast)
X-Men: The Last Stand (2006, dir. Brett Ratner)

30 Days of Night (2007, dir. David Slade)
Doctor Strange (2007, dir. Jay Oliva and Frank Paur)
Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer (2007, dir. Tim Story)
Ghost Rider (2007, dir. Mark Stephen Johnson)
Hellboy: Blood and Iron (2007, dir. Victor Cook and Tad Stones)
Hellboy: Iron Shoes (2007, dir. Tad Stones)
The Invincible Iron Man (2007, dir. Patrick Archibald and Jay Oliva)
Persepolis (2007, dir. Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi)
Spider-Man 3 (2007, dir. Sam Rami)
Superman: Doomsday (2007, dir. Lauren Montgomery and Bruce W. Timm)
Teen Titans: Trouble in Tokyo (2007, dir. Michael Chang and Ben Jones)
TMNT (2007, dir. Kevin Munroe)

Batman: Gotham Knight (2008, dir. Yasuhiro Aoki, Yichiro Hayashi, Futoshi Higashide, Toshiyuki Kubooka, Hiroshi Morioka, Jong-Sik Nam, and Shoujirou Nishimi)
Hellboy 2: The Golden Army (2008, dir. Guillermo del Toro)
Iron Man (2008, dir. John Favreau)
The Incredible Hulk (2008, dir. Louis Leterrier)
Justice League: The New Frontier (2008, dir. Dave Bullock)
Next Avengers: Heroes of Tomorrow (2008, dir. Jay Oliva)
Punisher: War Zone (2008, dir. Lexi Alexander)
The Dark Knight (2008, dir. Christopher Nolan)
The Spirit (2008, dir. Frank Miller)
Wanted (2008, dir. Timur Bekmambetov)

Watchmen (2009, dir. Zack Snyder)