Chapter 23

Roads Not Taken in Hollywood’s Comic Book Movie Industry

_Popeye, Dick Tracy, and Hulk_

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In the twenty-first century, superhero movies have become Hollywood’s bread and butter. The comic book adaptations that started off in the 1940s as B-movie serials and appeared in the 1960s and 1970s as campy television shows have developed into one of the defining genres of the post-classical blockbuster era. The emergence of popular film adaptations of comic book characters across this period can be charted in three successive waves, each spearheaded by a massively popular high-concept event film: first _Superman_ in 1978, followed by three sequels and the spin-off _Supergirl_ (1984); then _Batman_ in 1989, also followed by three sequels; and finally _Spider-Man_ in 2002, followed thus far by two sequels, a franchise reboot, and what has been an unrelenting deluge of movies, TV series, video games, and novels derived from superhero comics. From the perspective of a historical period in which longtime rivals Marvel (now owned by Disney) and DC Comics (a Time Warner subsidiary) have developed elaborate cinematic universes that spawn not one but several tentpole pictures each year, it seems clear that the superhero genre has become a reliable formula within the US film industry. It has in fact become customary for each new release to be greeted by a succession of critical essays and think-pieces bemoaning the superhero’s continued hegemony over the global box office, while documenting the notion that these films have become increasingly formulaic and predictable (see Bordwell, “Superheroes”).

Although I would not suggest that all contemporary superhero movies are identical, a dominant aesthetic has clearly emerged within this multi-billion-dollar entertainment empire.
For instance, the “gritty, realistic” approach associated with Christopher Nolan’s popular Batman trilogy now informs most DC Comics film and television projects, while the Silver Age–inspired self-deprecating humor and ironic banter established in *Spider-Man* and *Iron Man* ground the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Both of these highly lucrative enterprises have developed into serialized narratives that now follow a logic more similar to television production than the traditional film industry: executives like Kevin Feige, president of Marvel Studios, hire directors with an established style or track record to handle a particular installment, while ensuring from a corporate level that a strong degree of aesthetic consistency and narrative coherence with other franchise entries is maintained (Johnson, *Media Franchising* 87–92).

The traditional Frankfurt School perspective, which still informs many critical ideas about Hollywood as part of a larger culture industry, views these films as generic products assembled in an artificial and entirely calculated fashion. But these genres and their associated styles and conventions emerge out of creative experimentation, happenstance, and the perceived reciprocity between certain films’ financial success and popular taste as an expression of some nebulous zeitgeist. The dominant aesthetic that has emerged results not only from the adoption of a popular film’s style as a formula or template to be reproduced with minor variations. It is also, and crucially, shaped by ambitious experiments that were perceived upon their release as failures: films appearing in the wake of blockbuster successes that opened up a window for new creative work but subsequently came to be viewed as examples of how not to adapt comic books in cinema.

This essay will discuss three of these unpopular comic book movies. Each represents a provocative approach to comic book adaptation that has come to stand as a road not taken by the superhero genre: their failure to become the cultural phenomena that their context demanded effectively foreclosed the adaptive strategies these films explored. In addition,
these case studies each foreground different creative strategies that open up under-explored questions of comics-to-film adaptation. They involve not only the reciprocal relationship between the two media’s formal features, but also the complex issues of authorship, production, reception, and advertising that inform both media in different ways. My approach is informed by what can be described as a “media-archaeological” approach, a kind of “excavation” that blends analysis into media history as it was with reflections on what media history might have been (Huhtamo 303). As a result of this approach, I hope to shed new light on the dynamic relationship between comics and post-classical Hollywood.

The first of the three paradigmatic failures that make up this excavation is *Popeye*, the 1980 film directed by Robert Altman that appeared as Hollywood was transitioning from the 1970s age of “Movie Brats” to the blockbuster era of conglomerate and increased corporate control. The second is *Dick Tracy*, produced and directed by Warren Beatty in 1990, following the previous year’s blockbuster success of *Batman*. And the third is Ang Lee’s *Hulk*, released by Universal Pictures in 2003 in the wake of *Spider-Man*’s record-breaking success in 2002. While one might speculate about various fascinating “what if” scenarios showing how the genre’s history could have been different if any one of these films had been a great deal more successful, such hypotheses are impossible to validate and ultimately irrelevant. But these unusual case studies do offer insight into the trial-and-error process of popular entertainment franchises and film genres as active processes (Altman 54–59) and the unpredictable way in which media history is defined as much by its failures as by its triumphs.

*Popeye: Two-Dimensional Auteurism*

When *Superman* became one of the biggest commercial hits of the newly arrived post-classical film era, it also marked the arrival in Hollywood of a new kind of adaptation. Unlike
earlier 1970s film hits like *The Godfather* (1972) and *Jaws* (1975), *Superman* wasn’t based on a single identifiable text or narrative. Instead, it gave new form to a pop-cultural icon that had gone through diverse incarnations over the preceding four decades. Nor were these versions limited to a single medium. While the figure of Superman is obviously associated most strongly with the comic books in which he first appeared, he had been featured prominently on the radio and in film within the first three years after his debut and had successfully migrated to television almost as soon as this new medium was introduced. With so many versions of the character constituting a Superman palimpsest, questions of authorship, originality, and fidelity are obviously complicated by decades of reciprocal adaptation across texts, as well as across media (see Brooker 56).

Like *Star Wars*, the massively influential 1977 hit that consolidated the New Hollywood blockbuster paradigm established by *Jaws* (Elsaesser 191–94), *Superman* exuded a comic book sensibility that resulted from its own hybrid nature. The entire production was geared toward the establishment of an audiovisual experience that would appeal to a contemporary audience, reintroducing a fundamentally nostalgic figure into the newly developing dispositif of Hollywood’s blockbuster-era “Cinema of Attractions” (Kessler 57). The film’s writers and producers sought to appeal to a large mainstream audience for whom Superman most likely wasn’t a part of daily life, but rather a dimly remembered childhood memory: the pre-credits sequence spells out all too clearly the film’s nostalgia for a more innocent age of childish popular entertainments.

Director Richard Donner’s film brought the character to life on the screen by giving this famously flat character new kinds of dimensionality, most noticeably in the film’s impressive use of visual effects. While the comic book page’s static images and the occasional flying sequences in the 1950s TV show were both obviously two-dimensional (though in different ways), the complex optical composite shots in *Superman* gave the worlds
of Krypton and Metropolis astonishing visual depth. At the same time, Mario Puzo’s coauthored screenplay constructed the character’s narrative arc around a conventional Oedipal trajectory that gave the superhero a newfound psychological complexity. Although the resulting film will hardly be viewed as a profound character study, Superman emphasized its own status as a movie event by adapting its source material to the kind of dramatic realism that fit Hollywood’s popular mold. Its enormous success suggested that post-classical cinema and comic books seemed made for each other: besides the general comic book sensibility of films like Star Wars, a crop of more literal comic book adaptations seemed inevitable in its wake.

The first comic book movies to follow Superman both arrived in December 1980, when Flash Gordon and Popeye opened within weeks of each other. But while the former film was—unfairly and inaccurately—described by many reviewers as a poorly executed Star Wars imitation, Popeye was something of a novelty. Unlike Superman, it involved no high-profile stunt casting. The leading roles went to untested television actor Robin Williams and character actress Shelley Duvall, while the rest of the cast was made up of faces that would be unfamiliar to the movie-going public. Like many other comic book characters, Popeye had for years been a pop-cultural icon whose familiarity was based at least as much on his appearances in other media as on his comic strip origins. And although he had been a regular presence in newspaper comic strips since 1929, audiences were at least as likely to know him from the Fleischer brothers’ popular animated films or from the many television cartoons that were produced from 1960 onward.

The film production had first come into being when producer Robert Evans, having lost a bidding war for the film rights to the Broadway musical Annie (another classic comic strip adapted for an audiovisual medium), reached somewhat desperately for a similar property to which Paramount already owned the rights. Popeye emerged as a viable basis for
a Hollywood musical, and after several years of development, it went into production in early 1980 for a Christmas release. The participation of director Robert Altman and cartoonist Jules Feiffer, who had by that time already spent several years developing the screenplay, set it apart from Superman and Flash Gordon. Feiffer and Altman’s work fused 1970s cinematic auteurism with blockbuster-era production values, resulting in a whimsical and quixotic diegetic world played out on the largest possible canvas.

The creation of this world took an approach that was the opposite of Superman’s expansive production, which ranged from the remote planet of Krypton via the cornfields of Kansas to contemporary Metropolis. Instead, Popeye’s setting was limited to the imaginary village of Sweethaven, which was constructed as an elaborate set on the coast of Malta. Within this stylized but highly detailed visual environment, the film introduces familiar characters that are ostentatiously two-dimensional. Where Superman had constructed its comic book world on the basis of the “reality effect,” an aesthetic choice that grounds the diegetic world in our understanding of our experience of daily reality, the highly artificial caricatures that populate Sweethaven rely much more heavily on the “fiction effect,” allowing the artificial to become “a primary focus of the narrative” (Affron 39).

This distinction is especially relevant to the realm of comic book adaptations because comics and cartoons are ontologically grounded by a “comic aesthetic” that is “a move away from the potential ‘realism’ of cinema, and towards abstraction and excess” (Cohen 21). Superman’s production team had gone out of its way to approximate as closely as possible this reality effect, an ambition that is illustrated most clearly by the film poster’s famous tagline, “You’ll believe a man can fly!” Popeye, through its setting in an unfamiliar and clearly constructed environment, alienates the audience from cinema’s more traditional realism by insistently foregrounding its artificial nature. This internally coherent but quite alien diegetic world is inhabited by three-dimensional human actors doing their utmost to
transform themselves into two-dimensional cartoon characters, as per director Robert Altman’s instructions: “So I would say to [an actor], ‘You can only show two dimensions. You cannot show any depth of character whatsoever—so how do you want to walk?’ And we would work it out so that each person had their own way to walk or would look or sing a certain way. I figured that if you were to stand everyone up on the hill, then from miles away you could tell who each character was by their silhouette” (qtd. in Thompson 120–21).

This approach creates unusual and unique effects that explore the tension between these two media. For example, when Bluto comes face-to-face with his fiancée Olive Oyl in the company of his romantic rival Popeye and the baby Swee’pea, his explosive rage is expressed not through Method acting, but by literal steam coming out of his ears—a familiar visual metaphor in comic books and cartoons that acts as conventional shorthand for intense anger. Adding further to the striking stylization of the scene, a point-of-view shot demonstrates that Bluto is literally seeing red with rage, as we switch to a point-of-view shot in which the other three characters stare back at him dressed in shades of red, while the walls around them have also momentarily changed color (Figure 23.1). Monochromatic moments like this serve to underline even further the cartoonish nature of the diegetic world, foregrounding its constructed nature and thereby its predominant fiction effect.

<Insert Fig. 23.1 about here>

While Altman’s use of an immersive and realistically detailed environment might seem to point toward the kind of realist aesthetic employed by the same director in his similarly designed masterpiece McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971), the effect in Popeye is not that of a fully realized and three-dimensional narrative world. Instead, it draws on the archetypal comic book tension between a “deep,” richly detailed environment and “flat,” two-dimensional characters. Comic book theorist Scott McCloud describes this specific tension between seemingly opposite aesthetic registers in terms of its unusual potential for
audience identification. His cognitive theory of comic book style proposes that readers more easily identify with characters that are visually abstract or “iconic,” while photorealistic figures tend to create distance and to be perceived by readers as “other” (McCloud 24–45). McCloud uses Hergé’s Tintin as an example of an iconic character surrounded by a highly realistic background, a combination that “allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world” (43).

In film, a similar effect is most easily achieved in animation, the most obvious example being the Disney studio’s classical style in films like Pinocchio (1940). In this film, the overwhelmingly detailed backdrops and the use of Ub Iwerks’s legendary multiplane camera open up a realistic diegetic world with texture and depth, which is populated at the same time by highly iconic and unrealistic cartoon characters. But in live-action filmmaking, the indexical nature of photochemical cinematography makes it more difficult to create this kind of masking, as human actors in principle have the same degree of aesthetic detail, texture, and photorealism as their surroundings. Popeye is one of the most provocative examples of live-action cinema attempting to remediate a key feature of comic books, making every effort to reduce its human avatars to two-dimensional vessels for comic strip characters that function as the kind of “visual stereotypes” on which comic books have traditionally thrived (Eisner 18–20).

Part of this remarkable tension between a textured, fully realized diegetic world and wholly unrealistic, iconic characters results from Feiffer and Altman’s explicit fidelity to one particular incarnation of the Popeye franchise. E. C. Segar’s comic strip Thimble Theatre, in which the character was first introduced in 1929, had a distinctive visual style and created an eccentric, surreal world in which Popeye and the Oyl family’s adventures played out across daily three-panel black-and-white strips and Sunday’s full-page color mini-narratives. For Altman and Feiffer, the idea from the start was “to do more of the early Segar thing than the
cartoons through which most of the public knew Popeye” (Altman, qtd. in Anderson 120), with a strong emphasis on Segar’s obsession with modern bureaucracy, and with costumes that were “very faithful to the way the characters looked in the comic strip” (121).

After a notoriously difficult location shoot full of much-publicized personal conflicts, weather calamities, substance abuse, and budget overruns, the end result, which premiered as a holiday family musical in 1980, was released to poor reviews and abundant “bad buzz” (Morris). And while BoxOfficeMojo.com reports that its domestic gross alone returned nearly twice the film’s estimated $25 million budget, Popeye’s failure to connect to the popular imagination has nevertheless led to its general perception as a flop. With even a sequel like Superman II raking in well over $100 million, a high-concept comic book film that didn’t break box office records clearly didn’t provide a template worth repeating. Popeye’s fate, taken together with Flash Gordon’s even less spectacular earnings, made it clear that such costly comic book adaptations remained risky propositions for the corporate executives increasingly making the decisions at Hollywood’s rapidly diversifying film studios.

Dick Tracy: Remediating the Comic Book Frame

While the Superman film franchise slowly petered out, few other literal comic book adaptations featured prominently in the developing culture of blockbusters and high-profile sequels as “consolidated entertainment” (Maltby 22) in the 1980s. The most successful and influential productions of this era, like the Star Wars trilogy and the Indiana Jones series, embraced a style of pop-cultural pastiche that many people associated with comics. But hardly any of them were actually based on existing comic book characters. And given the notable lack of critical or commercial success for the occasional high-profile comic book adaptation (most memorably the critical and commercial fiasco of Howard the Duck in

Toward the end of this decade of corporate mergers, buyouts, and takeovers, however, changes in the comic book industry and the composition of its readership led the newly merged global media conglomerate Time Warner to invest in a comic book franchise. Time Warner subsidiary DC Comics had found great success publishing graphic novels—“literary” comic books like Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s *Watchmen* (1986)—which had revived adult interest in what had by this time become a niche medium. As a direct result, the decision was made to develop a blockbuster film around the comic book character Batman, which could be used as a central brand to unite products across Time Warner’s diverse publishing channels: music, film, television, comics, novels, toys, and fashion. The media conglomerate’s plan to use the *Batman* film as the tentpole for countless branded products was so successful that the ubiquitous black-on-gold logo became much more than just a movie poster: it was the signifier for “participation in a particular cultural moment” (Pearson and Uricchio 183).

*Batman*’s impact as a successful example of “corporate synergy” was followed the next year by *Dick Tracy*, Warren Beatty’s long-gestating adaptation of another comic book character dating back to the 1930s. While the production had been green-lit in 1988, the ambitious marketing and merchandising campaign surrounding it was designed entirely to replicate the previous year’s Bat-success, with the film’s already staggering $47 million production budget overshadowed by the $54 million advertising campaign that introduced it. With the minimalist design of its one-sheet publicity posters mimicking *Batman*’s iconic logo, composer Danny Elfman penning another rousing orchestral score, a tie-in pop album by Madonna resembling the previous year’s Prince record, and toys and T-shirts galore,
nearly every published review made the connection to the previous year’s game-changing blockbuster: “‘Tracy’ has carbon-copied almost everything from last year’s ‘Batman’” (Howe).

Even apart from the fact that Dick Tracy made less than half the amount Batman had earned at the box office, the two films also represent quite distinct approaches to comic book film adaptation. While Burton’s film featured striking production design that resonated with comics’ representation of urban fantasy, it otherwise followed mostly in Superman’s tracks by combining an imaginary story-world with a reality effect that grounds characters, setting, and narrative in the conventions of classical Hollywood film style. In the same ways as Star Wars, superhero films like Superman and Batman strove to present their fantasy worlds as immersive and credible environments, with little interest in the formal conventions of comics.

In this sense, Dick Tracy operates in a substantially different register from those other comic book movies. At nearly every level, Beatty’s film eschews Hollywood’s conventions of transparent realism, opting instead for a conspicuously stylized take that enters into dialogue with the comic book form from which it has been adapted. As in Popeye, this stylization is not achieved through the slavish visual fidelity to the original artwork exhibited by later films like Sin City (2005), 300 (2006), and Watchmen (2009). What Dick Tracy achieves instead is a productive negotiation of some of the comic book medium’s specific formal characteristics, further hybridizing the already famously impure forms of cinema and comic books.

The most striking way in which Dick Tracy references its comic book origins is in its use of color. The film’s celebrated production design, with a limited palette of gaudy colors employed not just for the characters’ costumes, but for vehicles, props, and entire sets, is easily the film’s most-discussed feature. While this unconventional use of color already
vividly establishes the film’s fiction effect, the impact of the film’s radical comic book aesthetic is achieved in concert with the film’s editing patterns and, even more crucially, its use of framing. As Michael Cohen demonstrates in his analysis of the film, *Dick Tracy* uses several unusual strategies of framing and mise-en-scene that illustrate the way it moves “away from the language of ‘cinema’ towards the language of ‘comics’ in which the spatial arrangement articulates the narrative” (34). While the images in the film are not exact duplicates of existing comic book panels, their framing and organization reproduces and incorporates comics’ semiotics. Throughout the film, we encounter stylistic devices that are rare in post-classical Hollywood cinema, such as the use of deep focus (including the repeated use of the notoriously distracting split diopter lens), a largely static camera, montage sequences that move the narrative forward through the equivalent of sequential images, and conspicuous framing that mimics the shape and function of comic book panels within the cinema frame.

This approach is illustrated clearly by a short sequence early in the film, when detective Dick Tracy is called away from his visit to the opera to investigate a crime in progress. Establishing a form of mise-en-scene that will dominate the film, the characters and location are introduced in a single over-the-shoulder close-up: both Dick Tracy and Tess Truehart are visible in profile as they turn toward each other, while the colorful but blatantly artificial backdrop of the opera stage is in clear focus in the far background (Figure 23.2). Upon Tracy’s return shortly thereafter, the shot is replicated perfectly, the later scene’s altered stage backdrop the only visual element of the shot that has changed (Figure 23.3). In addition to offering a subtly self-reflexive comment on the film’s already obvious degree of theatrical artifice, the sequence of shots communicates the passage of time not through the traditional cinematic techniques of dissolves or continuity editing, but by the swift
juxtaposition of shots in which small changes in otherwise identical images lead the viewer to infer meaning.

<Insert Fig. 23.2 about here
Insert Fig. 23.3 about here>

While the short duration of the entire sequence would in most cases signify a similarly short onscreen duration with minimal elisions, the film here calls upon the audience’s ability to fill the gap between two similar shots in a way that resembles what McCloud calls the process of “closure,” a formal technique he describes as the most fundamental to comics or “sequential art.” In order to construct a meaningful narrative out of a sequence of comic book panels, readers must continuously suture the gaps, or gutters, in between successive images. This activity underlies McCloud’s main argument concerning the emphatically active nature of comic book readership, as he seeks to reposition comics as a legitimate and diverse medium, rather than a fundamentally immature and degenerate form of children’s literature. By incorporating formal strategies and forms of staging, framing, and narration that are clearly derived from the comic book medium, *Dick Tracy* provides a provocative and challenging experiment with comics-to-film adaptation. As an adaptation of material from another medium, the film moves far beyond the common strategy of simply viewing comic book characters as a form of recognizable intellectual property that is wholly transformed to fit the dominant style of Hollywood film.

Several more detailed examples of the ways in which *Dick Tracy* organizes its comic book aesthetic have already been provided by Michael Cohen’s rewarding close analysis of the film, which argues that this style constitutes “an aesthetic translation of the characteristics and conventions from the comic medium by using the stylistic and functional equivalents in cinema” (36). But although Cohen’s work illuminates several key aspects in which *Dick Tracy* enters into a productive dialogue with comic book aesthetics, he leaves some crucial
questions about the effects of these decisions under-explored. For while one can identify certain formal characteristics that are more or less typical for the dominant style in any given medium, both cinema and comics are highly diverse and flexible media in a constant state of mutual transformation. This makes it difficult to assign absolute qualities to either without falling into the trap of media-essentialism.

A helpful perspective is offered by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s concept of remediation, which focuses on the ways in which media respond continuously to each other in a never-ending process of reciprocal adaptation. The central tension that informs this process is between what Bolter and Grusin call “immediacy” and “hypermediacy.” Immediacy indicates the perception of transparent mediation, or the point at which a set of arbitrary but historically specific conventions become all but unnoticeable to the audience. Hypermediacy, on the other hand, signals the opposite, as the constructed nature of all mediation is foregrounded, often through the co-presence of multiple media forms or traditions within a single frame. The (double) logic of remediation is therefore defined as a dialectical form in which both immediacy and hypermediacy offer different kinds of pleasure that are opposites without being mutually exclusive: immediacy represents a desire to erase all signs of mediation and immerse oneself in the text, while media-saturated hypermediacy invites us “to take pleasure in the act of mediation” (Bolter and Grusin 14).

The dialectical nature of this logic makes it more helpful than the previously discussed binary separation between the fiction effect and the reality effect. Although the distinction between the two suggests a similar type of effect, they do not function as polar opposites, nor can they be isolated from their historical context. But even more especially in the context of cross-media adaptation, the concept of remediation relates both effects to the relationship between media conventions. This helps explain why films like Superman, Batman, and Star Wars, each of which is set in blatantly unrealistic diegetic worlds full of
fantastical characters and events, can be experienced predominantly in terms of transparency and immediacy. At the other end of the scale, the logic of hypermediacy can be readily identified in *Popeye* and *Dick Tracy*. These films remediate the characteristics and conventions primarily associated with comics in unfamiliar ways, thus creating a dominant effect of hypermediacy.

This double logic also helps us better understand how the remediation of comics’ formal characteristics within the cinematic frame doesn’t automatically reproduce the same narrative or aesthetic effect. Instead, we can often identify what Kamilla Elliott has described as the “ventriloquist” effect, as the comic book source is taken over wholesale by its cinematic adaptation (143). In *Popeye*, for instance, the effect of seeing human actors performing in a way intended to mimic the two-dimensional caricatures of comic strips is clearly quite different from viewing drawings (either still images or animated cartoons) that are truly iconic. By the same token, the effect of working with a limited but remarkably garish color palette on the cinema screen is difficult to compare with the way in which American comics were historically limited in the range of available colors in print. Instead, *Dick Tracy*’s excessive use of saturated colors seems to function as an intertextual reference to the history of the medium, while at the same time evoking Hollywood’s classical age of lushly saturated Technicolor cinematography.

**Hulk: Fracturing the Screen**

Bolter and Grusin’s logic of remediation, which constitutes a general theory of the structural interdependence of (visual) media, offers a refreshing perspective on the nature of media change that can itself be transhistorical by always foregrounding specific historical media transformations. But the work itself emerged in the context of digital media’s emergence, and
the book’s subtitle, *Understanding New Media*, illustrates its focus on digitization and media convergence.

As had happened before, with the commercial success of *Superman* in 1978 and that of *Batman* in 1989, the door was opened in the early twenty-first century to further large-scale experiments with comic book movies, especially those based on superhero characters. Ailing comic book publisher Marvel, having gone through bankruptcy in 1996, concluded that the only way forward was by moving its characters from comic books to other, more popular media. Acknowledging that comic books had become an insufficiently profitable medium, Marvel concluded that its “primary product was no longer printed volumes of superhero adventures, but the intellectual property of the superhero itself” (Johnson, “Marvel’s Mutation” 72). Marvel therefore strategically developed the licensing of its characters to film studios, following the modest initial success of *Blade* in 1998 and *X-Men* in 2000 with the smash hit *Spider-Man* in 2002 (Rauscher 26).

Like *Popeye* and *Dick Tracy*, *Hulk* also had its own long and complex development history. But it was advertised, reviewed, and broadly received as the successor to the previous year’s phenomenally popular *Spider-Man*, with which it did appear to have many things in common: it marked the blockbuster debut of one of Marvel’s most iconic superheroes; it provided an origin story that introduced a new audience to the franchise’s main characters; it made innovative use of groundbreaking computer-generated visual effects; and it was directed by a maverick auteur with established credentials in both independent and art house cinema and Hollywood genre films. From a marketing perspective, the objective with *Hulk* was once again to appeal to a much larger mainstream audience that extended far beyond the limited readership of comic books and that might respond to the film in the same way that general audiences had embraced *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Spider-Man* before it.
However, Ang Lee’s adaptation of comics’ green monster, itself an atomic-age adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1886 novella “Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” was a much more radical formal experiment than any previous comic book movie to emerge in the context of the post-classical Hollywood blockbuster. Where Altman’s Popeye had remediated comics’ formal strategy of masking and Dick Tracy had adapted framing and coloring conventions to the cinematic image, Hulk attempted to incorporate comic books’ panel arrangements by making innovative use of digital editing and compositing techniques.

Whatever their differences, all definitions of the comics medium emphasize the centrality of “juxtaposed images in deliberate sequence” (McCloud 9). In its traditional printed form and in most digital distribution formats, this juxtaposition results in the medium’s characteristic page design, made up of multiple panels. One of the most intriguing paradoxes of comic books is the way this representational form relates to questions of temporality. For although the reader’s eyes may read the panels in the intended sequence, multiple studies have shown that the surrounding visual/temporal landscape is taken in as well (Szczepaniak 92). By navigating back and forth not only between individual images, but between the larger frame of the page layout and the smaller frames contained therein, readers infer meaning on the basis of both the implied causal relationship between sequences of panels and possible differences in scale, variations in borders, differences in panel arrangement, and other aspects of page design.

The most striking aspect of Hulk as an adaptation of superhero comics is its remediation of paneling by complex split-screen arrangements. As a formal technique in narrative film, split-screen has most commonly been used to represent simultaneous action from multiple angles, for instance by visualizing both parties engaged in a telephone conversation, or to build suspense by giving the audience access to two different points of view at the same time. But apart from the established use of this technique for phone
conversations and the recognizable stylistic tics of idiosyncratic auteurs like Brian De Palma, the use of split-screen has been rare since the late 1970s, especially in the context of post-classical Hollywood blockbuster cinema.

_Hulk_ went into production just as new digital tools were rapidly replacing traditional photographic visual effects in Hollywood film production and were becoming the norm for film editing and compositing. Tools like Avid’s digital film editing suite and the Cineon compositing tool made it possible for filmmakers to explore new narrative techniques, often by adapting conventions from other visual media. Although the medium’s transition from analog to digital had the potential to transform cinema’s visual style and narrative technique radically, the dominant aesthetics remained largely unchanged. Digital technology was used to create spectacular effects like the liquid-metal shape-shifter in _Terminator 2: Judgment Day_ (1991) and Spider-Man’s dizzying web-slinging chases through Manhattan. But given the range of options offered by the new tools for editing and compositing, the Hollywood blockbuster offered primarily what David Bordwell has described as an “intensified” version of classical Hollywood film style (“Intensified Continuity” 24–25).

In his attempt to adapt superhero comics to the realm of digital cinema, Ang Lee and the rest of his creative team extended post-classical Hollywood’s narrative vocabulary by exploring a much wider range of editing options, including the use of complex split-screen compositions (Figure 23.4). The simultaneous presence of up to five different frames on the screen contributes to what Lee in his DVD commentary describes as a “comic-booky” effect, visually evoking the paneled page design of superhero comics. But even though the intermedial reference to comics’ “spatio-topia or mise-en-page” (Ecke 17) seems obvious, the effect is also clearly different from that of navigating comic book panels on the page. Since the complex split-screen compositions featured throughout _Hulk_ generally present
multiple perspectives on simultaneous actions, they demand from the viewer a heightened engagement with what may appear to be an overload of visual information.

<Insert Fig. 23.4 about here>

The overload itself is heightened by the fact that the multiple frames making up the split-screen composition are rarely static, as they have appeared in symmetrical half-screen arrangements in such popular films as *Carrie* (1976) and *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2003). Instead, the dynamic split-screen panel arrangements in *Hulk* typically move in and out of the frame, creating a visual environment that “employs split screens to *express meanings* that are more closely related to those expressed by multi-panel layouts in comics than with the uses of split screen conventionalized in film” (Bateman and Veloso 137). The primary effect of this ongoing visual reference to the aesthetics of another narrative medium is clearly that of hypermediacy: the film frame no longer appears to the viewer as a transparent window onto an internally coherent and self-sustaining diegetic world, but as an interface in which competing and dynamic visual elements jostle for attention.

This strategy doesn’t reproduce the effect of the comics page because the “panels” on the screen don’t represent sequential moments, but rather multiple perspectives on simultaneous action. What it emphasizes is the relational nature of comic book panel layouts, which can similarly derive meaning as much from the organization of space as from the linear progression of causal narrative from panel to panel. By breaking up the transparent film screen into dynamic and unpredictable arrangements of multiple kinds of visual information (including diagrams, blueprints, microscopic close-ups, and so on), the film’s visual design owes as much to the overwhelming visual logic of computer screens and digital culture as it does to the multiple panels of the comic book page. As in *Dick Tracy*, the remediation of formal conventions from comics simultaneously thus transforms these features into something quite different.
Unlike *Dick Tracy*, however, *Hulk* also constitutes an attempt to bring remarkable thematic depth and psychological realism to this superhero adaptation. The main contradiction in Lee’s film is therefore not between the three-dimensional photographic world and a two-dimensional comic book aesthetic that seeks to contain it. Instead, the primary tension here is between the remediation of comic book page layouts, which can produce the distancing effect of hypermediacy, and the film’s immersive and fully realized narrative world. True to Lee’s auteurist motifs, *Hulk*’s depiction of the film’s dramatic conflict is presented as a critical interrogation of family ideology, “of the lies that are often used to keep the family intact” (De Kloet 129). The film’s aesthetic break from the conventions of the post-classical Hollywood blockbuster is thus compounded by its thematic separation from the typical Oedipal trajectory of the superhero for whom the (absent) father represents the Freudian ego ideal (see Hassler-Forest 48–57; Reynolds 60–66).

This combination of a comic book aesthetic with Lee’s ambitious auteurist approach to the film’s content led most critics to dismiss *Hulk* summarily upon its release, nearly all of them mentioning both what they call the film’s “humorless” approach to its source material and its distracting use of elaborate split-screen compositions. The review in *Entertainment Weekly*, typical of the general critical response, complains that the film “divides the screen, self-consciously and to no added effect, like a comic-book page of multiple images” (Schwarzbaum). Especially interesting in these reviews is the repeated claim of aesthetic gratuitousness. When considered alongside Schwarzbaum’s criticism that *Hulk* leaves “little unanalyzed space for fun,” the hostility that has enveloped Lee’s film vividly illustrates the limitations that have continued to restrain the superhero film genre for so many years.

The first of these limitations is the unspoken demand that the films’ relationship to comic books be one in which the characters and narratives are fully absorbed by Hollywood cinema, while comic books’ formal features are either ignored or in a few cases reduced to
the occasional iconic image reproduced in one of the film’s shots. Formally audacious experiments with the adaptation of comics in the film medium like Popeye, Dick Tracy, and Hulk are not unique. Scott Pilgrim vs. The World (2010), for instance, combines audiovisual references to videogames with the formal features of comics, such as the constant interplay between words and images on the screen. But these three films offer provocative alternatives that appeared at what in hindsight have been pivotal moments in the genre’s history.

The second limitation is historical rather than theoretical. The contradiction between these films’ formal audacity and their status as mainstream entertainment products has stranded them in a critical no-man’s-land: too big to be perceived as cult texts, but not successful enough to become popular classics. Each straddles the boundary between what many perceive to be mutually exclusive categories: the artificially created Hollywood blockbuster and the authentically expressive auteurist art film. Their contradictory nature can be summed up by the fact that they are ultimately an insufficiently popular form of popular culture. And yet their existence demonstrates that explorations of the relationship between these two media can teach us a great deal about the possibilities and limitations of comic book movies and the way they are perceived by critics and audiences.

Looking back on them from a context in which global superhero franchises have established a remarkably stable aesthetic vocabulary, from DC’s Christopher Nolan–inspired gritty realism to Disney’s more brightly lit and colorful Marvel Cinematic Universe, these three films demonstrate the untapped potential of comic book adaptation. By adapting and remediating features such as masking, paneling, and page layout on the cinema screen, each one shows how incorporating specific aesthetic features produces new and under-explored effects that occupy a middle ground between art house cinema and post-classical Hollywood.

Works Cited


Figure 23.1.

The cartoonish two-dimensionality of Robert Altman’s Popeye (1980).

Figure 23.2.

Dick Tracy and Tess Truehart framed in profile during a self-reflexively theatrical performance at the opera.

Figure 23.3.

Upon Tracy’s return, the passage of time is indicated visually by the altered lighting and backdrop.

Figure 23.4.