

Moving Stillness, Expressive Silence: Reframing the Semiotic Resources of the Comics Medium

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Comics and film have always been closely related. They even arose roughly contemporaneously: the first comic strip to achieve major success in Britain, *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday*, was published in the mid-1880s, the same decade that saw inventors such as Louis Le Prince and William Green present the first functional motion picture cameras, and Richard Outcault's *Yellow Kid* was first published in 1896, three years after Thomas Edison presented his pioneering Kinetograph and Kinetoscope at the Chicago World's Fair. Both media underwent a complex evolution during which they first borrowed their artistic conventions from older art forms, and then gradually developed their own grammars based on the specific resources inherent to their means of expression and production, though a constructive cross-fertilization began in very short order. It is not my purpose here to give a detailed historical outline of the mutual influence of these media on one another, but comics did have an influence on film in a number of ways: pioneering comic artists like Winsor McCay, the creator of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, were some of the first illustrators to move into animated films, bringing with them many of the conventions and techniques they had developed as comic artists. By 1911 McCay had illustrated a film version of Little Nemo, and in 1914 he produced *Gertie the Dinosaur*, the most sophisticated animated film prior to Disney. In the 1930s animation studios also began to use storyboarding to plot and pace their films, a practice that was adopted by live-action film producers in the 1940s and has since grown to be common pre-production practice for directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, and Steven Spielberg—many movies are created through a series of still drawings that resemble comics. Finally, popular characters from comic books began infiltrating first radio, then film serials in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1950s adaptations began to appear on television, and following the success of Richard Donner's 1978 film *Superman*, a plethora of different motion picture adaptations of superhero films have been produced, most notably the Superman, Spiderman, and Batman series. Many of the adaptations have been financially successful; in fact, of the twenty-five top-grossing films of all time, four are comic adaptations, all drawn from the superhero genre. In addition, alternative and auteur directors also began to produce critically-acclaimed films based on non-superhero comics, including Sahri Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini's *American Splendor*, Terry Zwigoff's *Ghost World*, and David Cronenberg's *A History of Violence*.

Of course, while comics have had an influence on film, it is undeniable that film has also had an influence on comics, one that is increasing. While a number of early comic artists were responsible for importing cinematic pacing and composition into comics, perhaps the most influential figure was Jack Kirby, whose first worked at Max Fleischer Studios as an in-between on animated films. Kirby's detailed backgrounds, dynamic figure drawing, and innovative composition and layout revolutionized the medium of comics and influenced every comic artist that followed, particularly those who worked within the superhero genre. Kirby's influence is most thoroughly captured in John Buscema and Stan Lee's seminal instructional text, *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way*, which explicitly references film in its sections on layout and composition. Buscema stated in an interview with the *Comics Journal* that comic artists are "in a position of movie director—but whereas movie directors have thousands of dollars of tools at his exposure, all we have is two hands and a brain." While Buscema and other artists who worked during the 1960s and 1970s were self-consciously incorporating cinematic techniques into their artwork, most acknowledged that their earliest influences were other comic artists. The generation of comic artists that followed, however, more directly relied on cinema for their inspiration. Frank Miller, for example, states that "I generally don't study comic books ... I study movies. I've found that the Hitchcock/Truffaut book is the best book I've read on doing comics" (qtd. in Callahan 12), and in a presentation at Laurentian University, comic artist Ho Che Anderson, creator of *King: A Comics Biography*, cited movie director Martin Scorsese as his main influence.

The increasing symbiosis of comics and film, and in particular the practice of storyboarding, has led to a widening practice of viewing comics in terms of film: it is a commonplace in instructional texts on storyboarding to characterize storyboards as comics, and to claim that filmmakers can learn from comics because comics are frozen films. Certainly a story board fits Scott McCloud's definition of comics as "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). While such juxtaposition has led to a constructive cross-fertilization between film and comics, it also poses the danger of distorting or eliding the characteristics of the comics medium, particularly when, given the financial possibilities of turning comics into lucrative films or interactive games, the motive for comparison is not an understanding of the relationships between the different genres, but an assessment of the adaptability of comics to other media. As a result, the unique resources that distinguish comics and give them, as a medium, the ability to represent and interpret reality in a distinctive way are often framed as insufficiencies. Under the cinematic gaze, comics are viewed as incipient films: pictures that want to move but can't, words that want to sound but don't. Film, it follows, is the medium that can compensate for this lack and bring the frozen characters to life and allow them to speak. But I would like to argue that, while comics can and should borrow from film to expand the means by which comics artists can express themselves, it is to a great degree these very qualities of the comics—their stasis and their silence—that give the comics medium its unique power.

It may seem odd, perhaps even a bit perverse, to use G. E. Lessing's 1766 work *Laocoön, or On the Limits of Painting and Poetry* as a starting point for a discussion on comics, but it is, historically, the first extended work in media studies, and its attack on the sister arts tradition, as embodied in Horace's *ut pictura poesis* (as painting, so poetry), anticipates many of the arguments over media universality and specificity that are taking place in contemporary adaptation theory. More specifically, its argument over the respective roles of time and space in poetry and art can, with some modification, be applied to the relationship between film and comics. With the aim of showing that poetry and visual art are more distinct than Horace's epigram suggests, Lessing compares the poetic and visual portrayal of Laocoön, a Trojan priest who tries to warn his countrymen that the wooden horse outside the city gates is a trick; for his efforts, the partisan Athena sends two serpents to strangle Laocoön and his two sons. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil describes how during his death Laocoön, like an ox, "with loud bellows breaks the yielding skies" (2.223), but Lessing notes that the famous sculpture of Laocoön's death does not show him at the height of his sufferings. Lessing argues that the sculptor's restrained portrayal of the priest stems in part from a desire to avoid visual grotesquerie, but more importantly, it is a matter of "the single moment of time to which art must confine itself by virtue of its material limitations" (558). Because he can portray only a single moment, the sculptor or painter must choose a moment "which gives free rein to the imagination The more we see, the more we must be able to imagine" (558); furthermore, "this single moment, if it is to receive immutable permanence from art, must express nothing transitory" (559). If the sculptor had portrayed Laocoön in extremis, he would have deprived the viewer of imagining this climax and would have presented an image that, however horrible, would have lost its impact over time. As it is, the viewer of the sculpture will always be imagining the climactic suffering which will follow the moment depicted in the sculpture, and so the impact of that suffering will always be fully felt. In Wolfgang Iser's terms (subsequently lifted by McCloud), the artist engages the viewer in an act of perpetual closure. Conversely, because "succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter" (567), the poet is mandated to depict, in a focused way, a series of actions rather than objects—the medium of poetry is fluid and transient, and so objects are not so much presented as they are created by a dynamic flow of words.

Robert C. Harvey makes a similar point when comparing the selection of images by filmmakers and comic artists:

The question of emphasis for the filmmaker is resolved not so much by what should be filmed (although that's clearly important) as it is by how much time should be devoted to each scene and how the motions within that time allotment should be portrayed in order to achieve the desired effect. While the cartoonist faces similar issues in composing each panel for maximum narrative impact, the piece of action he's selected to draw has already stressed that action dramatically. Simply by being

chosen, it is captured and thus destined for longer contemplation than is possible for an equivalent action in a film. (178)

The single storyboard frame and comic panel both depict particular images, but the storyboard image, unless it represents a freeze-frame, is part of the ongoing flow of a particular shot, whereas the image in the comic panel is all the reader will encounter before moving on to the next panel. The stasis of the comic image makes its selection more difficult and crucial, but it also gives the isolated image a weight and impact that is difficult to achieve in film. For example, in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, the ironic juxtaposition of the exploding bodies of young Iranian soldiers with the dancing of Marjane's friends at her first party (102) would be difficult to achieve in a film, since the differing trajectories and rates of motion of the bodies in the two frames, even shown in split screen, would undermine the comparison. The static nature of the selected images allows for an intimate counterpointing of the two realities in visual terms, including a juxtaposition of the keys of paradise worn by the soldiers with the faux-punk necklace worn by Marjane.

Films can employ freeze-frames to achieve emphasis through stasis (one thinks, for instance, of the famous final shot of Francois Truffaut's *400 Blows*), and comics can employ an extended series of panels with moment-to-moment transitions that approximate movement so closely that they minimize or obviate the need for reader closure. But such techniques are particularly intrusive precisely because they transgress the conventional practices of the medium and work counter to its inherent resources. The use of moment-to-moment transitions involving a progressive action unfolding over adjacent panels is usually interpreted by comics readers as a form of slow motion, and tends to be used relatively rarely. In alternative comics, however, repeated images that straddle the line between moment-to-moment and action-to-action transitions are sometimes used to reduce the pace of a narrative without explicitly invoking slow motion. Chris Ware uses strategic moment-to-moment transitions throughout *Jimmy Corrigan* (133) to slow down the pace of scenes that involve Jimmy's Dad so that the reader can maximally sense Jimmy's mortification at his father's behaviour, and Robert Crumb often uses repeated talking head shots of characters when illustrating dialogue-heavy stories by Harvey Pekar (see, most famously, "The Harvey Pekar Name Story" in *American Splendor*). Viewed sequentially without pausing, the repeated images do resemble a strip of film, and the sequences could easily occur in a movie. Yet such sequences are in direct opposition to the "cinematic" techniques presented by artists like Kirby and Buscema—in fact, many alternative comics artists seem to be working from an instructional manual entitled *How Not to Draw Comics the Marvel Way*. If these exercises in repetition most resemble the physical medium of film, what then is meant by the term "cinematic?" As the term is used in mainstream comics, cinematic technique employs breakdowns and compositions that influence the reader, in the act of achieving closure between adjacent images, to imagine motion—the reader becomes a projector. But the repetition of almost identical images in Ware and Crumb doesn't facilitate closure, but

rather frustrates it. We expect change, but perceive only slight variations in the images as we move through them, and the variations we perceive against this background of almost complete stasis assume a significance that causes us to read them as signs rather than to imagine them as motions. The technique is actually counter-cinematic: as projectors, we are jammed, prevented from converting space into time until we turn to the dialogue in each panel. The frustration we feel, of course, contributes to our understanding of Jimmy Sr., who talks interminably in this scene about how some people just won't shut up, and of Harvey Pekar, who circles obsessively around the question of whether there is a significance in shared names without coming to an answer. So, while these sequences may be easily filmed in a way that preserves the *mise-en-scene* and dialogue, the medium-specific effects of the repeated images will be lost in translation.

While Lessing's opposition of visual art and poetry in terms of space and time can inform a consideration of the relationship between comics and film, it is also true that the relationship of comics and film to time and space is in many ways more complex than those of sculpture and poetry. In material terms, comics are primarily a spatial medium, but the juxtaposition of panels allows the reader, through closure, to create a temporal relationship between individual images. Similarly, for a film to be a film, as opposed to an image projected on to a screen, it is necessary that the actions of the film unfold in time, yet because film is a visual medium, those actions also unfold in space. Both comics and film then are temporal and spatial, but the ways in which time and space are related to one another differ between them. Film effects closure mechanically, and therefore the viewer is not in control of the pace of the work; furthermore, except in the case of special techniques such as split-screen formatting, film presents single images sequentially, so that, while the discourse of a narrative can be manipulated temporally through flashbacks and flashforwards, any given shot is experienced within a single visual and temporal field. In contrast, comics require the reader to actively effect closure, and any given image persists indefinitely, functioning not only individually but as an element in a larger composition that may include a particular row or column on a page, an entire page, or even a two-page spread.

While the presence of multiple static images is the most obvious difference between comics and film, there are also significant differences in the resources and requirements associated with the creation of a single panel versus a single shot. In comics, each individual panel represents, visually, an instant in time, though, as McCloud (94-103) and others have shown, panel shape and border, content within a given panel and its adjacent panels, and especially the presence of narration or dialogue are elements that can significantly affect the way the reader interprets time within an given panel. As Lessing points out, modes of manipulating time within a single image were used within classical painting as well: "in great historical paintings the single moment is always somewhat extended, and perhaps there is not a single work comprising a wealth of figures in which each one of them is in exactly the motion and position it should be in at the moment of the main action: some are represented in the attitude of a somewhat earlier, others in that of a somewhat later moment" (567-68).

This subtle effect, present in paintings such as *The Last Supper* (see Leo Steinberg's *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper* for a detailed analysis of time in the painting), is a staple of comics. It is often present in larger compositions, such as splash pages or two-page spreads, where it can be used to give a sense of progression and scope to the reader; as many art critics have pointed out, larger works of art, while they are spatial in terms of their material existence, have an inherent temporal element in terms of how they are experienced, since the viewer cannot take in the entire work at once. But this manipulation of time is also present in almost any comics panel where there is an exchange of dialogue, since the temporal relation of visual elements in the panel must be fitted to the verbal elements. For instance, when two people are speaking in a comics panel they are often both depicted with their mouths open, making the appropriate gestures that would accompany their respective statements, showing that while the visual elements within a panel seem to reflect a single moment, there is a subtle temporal blurring occurring. The static nature of drawing, painting, and sculpture allows for this kind of single-image temporal manipulation, an effect which is difficult to achieve in film. Further, comics can easily represent multiple events occurring in the same moment in a way that allows the reader to attend to the significance of all of them, or to relate them to one another. But because all events occurring within a film take place within the same narrative now at a pace that the viewer cannot control or pause, a film shot tends to focus the viewer's attention on a single element or interaction within it in order to prevent confusion on the part of the viewer. Film makers can deal with issues of simultaneity and focus in a number of ways: Robert Altman simply allows multiple conversations and events to take place and lets the viewer sort it out, while Brian De Palma often resorts to split screen formatting, though even in split-screen formatting it can still be difficult for readers to determine where their attention should go. Directors like Gus Van Sant (*Elephant*) and Christopher Nolan (*Memento*) deal with the paradox that in film simultaneity often has to be represented sequentially by employing leitmotifs or repeated images that signal to the reader that we have returned to an earlier point in the film from a different perspective. It's not that film can't deal with the issue of simultaneity, but that, due to the nature of the medium, much more effort is required to achieve an effect that occurs in almost any comics panel.

I have already mentioned the unique effect that repeated images can have in comics. But even when panels don't repeat the same images, the simultaneous presence of multiple images on the same page distinguishes the nature of time in comics from that of film, allowing for effects that are difficult to achieve in the latter medium. While film can, of course, present the episodes of a story in any order, materially speaking, the presentation of images in a film unfolds one image at a time in chronological order. In this respect, film resembles Lessing's depiction of poetry as a medium that exists primarily in time. In contrast, comic readers convert space into time by relating successive panels to one another, a process that does not give the comic artist as much control over duration and pace as the filmmaker has, since the relating of images has to be performed by the reader rather than merely

perceived. Furthermore, unlike the film viewer who is restricted to viewing only the image before her, the comic reader is able to see the panels which precede and follow the panel she is reading, so that, alongside the linear temporal sequence formed by the conventional reading order, there exist a number of other possible orderings and relations. French comic scholar Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle refers to the non-linear perception of relations between panels as a tabular reading (qtd. in Hatfield 48), suggesting that in comics time is not only a line to be followed but a matrix in which events exist. For example, in *Palestine* Joe Sacco plays with the tabular perception of time in his depiction of an Israeli Jeep attempting to negotiate a traffic jam (124): while there is a linear narrative here, the different positions of the jeep are all shown simultaneously, so that the same object exists on a fixed spatial background at alternative times, a repetition that also blurs the temporal status of the background itself. The fragmented layout reflects the complex logistics of negotiating the maze of cars, but the layout and composition become more standardized once the jeep is free.

But the artist perhaps most associated with a tabular as opposed to a linear perception of relations in comics is Chris Ware, whose whimsical flow charts and convoluted layouts constantly challenge accepted reading conventions. While flow charts can be used to illustrate linear processes that proceed chronologically, they can also be used to diagram complex systems of relations in ways that allow for multiple points of entry or exit, and multiple directions for exploration. Ware's flow chart on the inside front cover of *Jimmy Corrigan* illustrating how comics work embodies a story, or multiple stories, but in a form that complicates and possibly even defeats attempts on the part of the reader to construct a single master narrative. The effect is to subsume the individual components of the drawing within the system as a whole, and to disrupt the idea of narrative as inevitably linear. Ware's flow chart is a radical manifestation of a strategy that is unique to static images. Although one could imagine a web application that could simulate it, it would be difficult to convert the diagram to a film, as its complexity requires the simultaneous perception of all the elements if a path, however tenuous, is to be traced through it. A similar chart is used at the climax of *Jimmy Corrigan* to tie together the different generations of the narratives and to establish that Jimmy's step-sister, Amy, is also related to him by blood (358-59). While the chart is in some respects linear, since it is genealogical, the reading of it is complexified in a number of ways. First, the usual reading conventions for comics would influence the reader to read the chart from left to right, whereas chronologically the chart flows from right to left—the attendant difficulties in reading embody the difficulties in reconciling memory, which progresses backwards, with history, which progresses forwards. In addition, the narrative represented by the chart contains in symbolic form simplified versions of the complex narratives that Ware's text has presented to us in a non-linear fashion, in addition to some stories that were not included in the main text. As such, the chart represents not the true or clarified story underlying Ware's book, but another version of stories we already know, and a necessarily incomplete version of others we do not. Finally, the simultaneous

presence of multiple generations in the graphic, represented through a wide variety of document types, situates Amy not as the privileged end product of a vanished past but as part of a process in which history and the present engage in a complex interaction. In short, the visual means through which Ware has presented this information to the reader perfectly embodies the themes of his work as a whole, and it would be impossible to tell the story in the same way through another medium without losing the specific connection he has drawn between medium and content.

Not every artist pushes the unique resources of the comics medium as far as Ware does, but his work vividly manifests the possibilities that are exhibited to various degrees even in the most film-friendly comic or graphic novel. While film and comics have contributed to each other's development and share some similarities because they are media that use both image and language, each has unique representational resources, and an adaptation from one medium to another may well result in some gains, but will also inevitably result in some losses, particularly for those works that most fully realize the medium's potential. Charles Hatfield suggests that "Comics theory...has tardily arrived at a crucial stage, that of dismantling the once-useful cinema/comics analogy" (33). There is a grain of truth in the statement that comics are frozen film, just as there is in the statement that films are recorded plays. But it's not the whole truth by far, and just as film makers and theorists had to get out from under the shadow of older art forms to realize the full potential of their medium, so comic artists and theorists must, while acknowledging the potential for constructive borrowing from the cinema, attend to the unique possibilities of their own.

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