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A Multimodal Romance in the Age of Transmedial Convergence

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Born together at the end of the nineteenth century, comics and film were both multimodal narrative forms from the start, telling stories using multiple, interdependent semiotic chains of text and image. Together, comics and film became the first two new narrative media of the twentieth century, and in developing their conventions they borrowed heavily from each other even as they also explored their own unique affordances (see Gardner ch. 1). The significance of this development in the history of narrative media in the last century cannot be overestimated. After all, while narrative, in one sense at least, has *always* been multimodal (see Grishakova and Ryan 4), it is hard to find sustained or culturally significant examples in the West that do not inevitably make one semiotic chain subservient to the other. An illustrated book is not multimodal, after all, in the same way that a sequential comic is; the pictures almost always serve to illustrate the text, which is primarily responsible for the work of telling the story. While our reading experience of *Oliver Twist* would certainly be different without the twenty-four illustrations that accompanied the original serialization of the novel, that they are not essential is evidenced by the fact that few modern editions include all of the original illustrations and many include none at all. And although increasingly we see examples in the twenty-first century of what Wolfgang Hallet has usefully described as the “multimodal novel” (129)—a novel in which “it is the systematic and recurrent integration of non-verbal and non-narrative elements in novelistic narration that makes the difference” (130)—this phenomenon has largely developed in the last twenty years in response to a dramatically changing media ecology. Thus I would argue that we risk misreading both the significance of the phenomenon of the multimodal novel of the twenty-first century *and* the new multimodal

narrative forms of the twentieth century—film and comics—if, as Ruth Page recently called for, we start “reconceptualiz[ing] *all* narrative communication as multimodal” (5).

Of course, multimodal narratives existed long before comics and film, with opera and theater being the most obvious predecessors for those encountering film and comics for the first time in the late nineteenth century. But here, too, the differences are worth considering. Theater and opera were experienced “live”—that is, with performers enacting the story in the narrative “present” and “live” in the sense of happening in real time. And neither opera nor theater were available yet for mechanical reproduction—for interactions such as looping, rewinding, and rereading that would be opened up by translating the experience of the multimodal *performance* out of the live space of the theater into a multimodal *text*.

1890–1910: Birth of Modern Multimodal Media

An important part of what defined the unique experience of the twentieth century’s new multimodal media is that early comics and film both told their multimodal narratives in complex *transmedial* environments—newspapers, illustrated magazines, vaudeville houses, and nickelodeons—where paratexts multiplied in profusion, creating almost infinitely varied and unruly encounters with the text. From the early Kinetoscope through the heyday of the nickelodeon, early film was experienced in environments that included vaudeville routines, live music, narration, and sound effects, not to mention the lively commentary of the audience itself. As the saying goes, silent film was never silent, but it was also never simply *film*, just as the early sequential comics were never simply comics.

The early narrative strips were experienced across the serial disruptions of the weekly (and later daily) newspaper, with its own cacophony of tragic headlines, advertisements, and data. And as was the case with early film, the audience itself contributed vitally to the transmedial experience of the early comic, with people often reading and commenting upon the comics in public spaces and collaborative environments. With the rise of the daily continuity strip in the late 1910s and 1920s, comics’ creators began inviting readers to collaborate on the stories, offering contests and often deliberately blurring the boundaries between front-page news and graphic narrative.

In both cases, at least initially, multimodal narrative was inseparable from transmedial reading experiences and environments; so it is not surprising that within a very short time both film and comics began to discover possibilities for complex transmedial storytelling. They began with the first adaptations of comics by film in 1903 and continued through the rise of the serials of the early teens. They told their stories across both newspaper and film and actively invited audiences to participate in shaping the story and, in so doing, to literally become part of the story (see Stamp 102–53).

These first multimodal narrative forms were inherently interactive in ways we often imagine are unique to new media forms of the twenty-first century, being not only inviting but often responding to active participation from readers. In addition, these narratives placed heavy demands on readers to cross the inevitably contentious relationship between the semiotic systems of text and image—to which, in the case of comics, we must also add the cognitive demands inherent to the elliptical form, requiring the reader to actively fill in the missing “action” from one panel to the next.

Of course this last formal feature of comics would prove significant in the different developments of these first modern multimodal narrative forms in the United States. Even as early film was exploring the transmedial possibilities for the future development of the form with the early serial dramas, the film moguls, recently settling in their new base in Hollywood, were largely consolidating their approach to narrative with the codification of what we now refer to as the “classical Hollywood system.” As David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson have effectively demonstrated, the style-less style of the classical Hollywood cinema worked to obscure the mechanics of film. A generation of filmgoers accustomed to playing with their own moving-picture devices or turning the crank on a Kinescope at the local arcade was, through the disciplines of the classical narrative system, effectively replaced by passive spectators fixed to their privileged “knot-hole in the fence” (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 215). New guidelines handed down from the industry explicitly worked to diminish many of the features of the earliest cinema that defined it as an *explicitly* multimodal form, erasing the sense of the film as a text to be actively engaged, played with, looped, and edited in favor of, as one screenwriting manual from 1919 put it,

making the audience “forget the mechanical end of picture production” (Lescarboura 110).

Whereas the early films up through the rise of the serial queen films of the early teens relished in the materiality of film—and in the spaces for interaction opened up by this new media—classical Hollywood would devote itself after 1916 to obscuring the apparatus and creating an illusion of events unfolding before the viewer in “real time.” Now, however, the audience no longer viewed the real time of the theatrical performance (where the fact that it *is* a performance is always rendered visible by the proscenium arch) but what the new screenwriting manuals termed the “illusion of reality”—a cinematic “realism” whose preservation came to trump all other considerations in the production of classical Hollywood cinema. New spectatorial disciplines—including the rise of the picture palace in the 1920s with new disciplines of promptness, silence, and darkness—also were enforced to preserve this illusion of reality and the transformation of the cacophony of the “nickelodeon party” into an “evening’s entertainment.”

Leaving aside the twenty-first-century failed experiment of “motion comics” (which I touch on later), comics never had the possibility of developing the tools and techniques that would allow them (as Hollywood cinema would do after 1920) to efface the gaps inherent in the form or to obscure the mechanics of its own making. Such acts of “suture” have never been available to comics; so as film became more committed to obscuring its status as a multimodal text (a goal aided by the addition of a new mode—synchronous sound—after 1927), comics remained bound to its formal gutters and its status as a marked text, one whose materiality does not magically dissolve in the experience of reading. If we often experience a film or novel as a kind of virtual reality in which we forget that we were, in fact, watching a movie or reading a book, such forgetting is never truly possible when reading a comic.

All of which is to say that when film began pursuing this path—exploiting certain of its affordances the better to discipline consumers and rationalize production—these two multimodal narrative media began to pursue dramatically different directions that would largely define their history during the remainder of the century. In the twenty-first century, however, this pattern has begun to change. Comics and film are seemingly engaging each other as they have not in a century, and as

both media are seeking out creative and financial futures in new digital platforms, there is reason to believe that this collaboration is much more than a passing Hollywood trend. Of course, where a century ago comics and film went their separate ways largely as relative equals, this renewed engagement takes place on very unequal terms with regard to corporate structure, audience, and cultural prominence. Therefore, while there are reasons to see the potential for a new investment in multimodal storytelling and the active and unpredictable readership it encourages, there is also good reason to question what it is Hollywood really wants from comics and their readers this time around.

1997–2013: Hollywood and the DVD

In the digital age Hollywood undeniably has been coming to terms with an audience that increasingly seeks out precisely that which the classical system had long worked to make invisible: the mechanics of film and the seams through which active readers might grab hold of a film text and make of it something other than the platonic ideal of the theatrical screening that remains, even today, what most in the industry and the academy have in mind when they refer to a film. Cinema is now in the final stages of its most significant transformation in almost a century, as it enters the final chapter of the digitization of every aspect of its production, distribution, and exhibition. For some time now theatrical ticket sales have accounted for a fraction of the overall revenue generated by “films,” which are increasingly consumed on small screens and in digital (DVD and streaming) formats. Nonetheless, both the mainstream media and academic film criticism continue to speak of “film” and “theaters,” even as film and theaters have increasingly little to do with the experience or business of cinema.

At least insofar as the press is concerned, the decision to ignore the changing realities of film production and exhibition in favor of an anachronistic fantasy of the theatrical spectator is no simple case of nostalgia or institutional laziness. For the industry and its attendant media, as Edward Jay Epstein has argued, the relentless attention to theatrical box office receipts obscures the byzantine economy of digital cinema for which the theatrical run largely serves as a loss leader. More important for our purposes, this continued privileging of the theatrical audience allows for the preservation of the ideal of the passive, focused spectator

in the dark and distracts attention from the far messier realities of narrative film increasingly being consumed on mobile screens and with controls that allow the spectator to rewind, slow, remix, and break the film down frame by frame as never before.

Paradoxically, even as Hollywood continued to trumpet box office records as if they were meaningful data regarding audience preferences or behaviors, the same industry began exploiting what would prove its most important profit center in the last decade: the DVD. And here, in addition to affording a means through which audiences could explore the unprecedented power accorded them by the remote control in the digital age, many DVDs come loaded with paratexts claiming to provide behind-the-scenes insights into the mechanics of the film, including director's commentaries, deleted scenes, bloopers, and "making of" featurettes (see Gray). Studios created official fan websites for fans to discuss and debate aspects of both the film and its viral marketing, held contests, planted "Easter eggs" in DVDs, and even in some cases provided clues to hidden meanings outside the film itself on websites and other digital environments. All of these efforts make film in the first decade of the twenty-first century look similar to film a century ago when the serial dramas of 1912 were playing out in newspapers and magazines, as well as on the screen, and when audiences were invited to contribute solutions to the mysteries and rescues from the perils that awaited the heroines at every turn.

When we couple the new tools film viewers have at their disposal through the DVD player with the explosion of paratexts that seem to push against the very dictates that the industry began enforcing a century ago in its drive to discipline an active and unruly audience and mystify the mode of production itself, it might appear that in the digital age film is finally, belatedly, returning to that fork in the road to meet an increasingly engaged, interactive, and media-savvy audience. Certainly many academic critics greeted the early years of the new century in these terms. Writing in 2000, for example, Catherine Russell envisioned "a construction of spectatorship that challenges the unitary, transcendental spectator position of the classical period," returning us to the possibilities of early cinema when spectatorship was "more fluid, unstable, and heterogeneous" (553). And a few years later, Graeme Harper saw in the DVD "the culmination of thirty years of change in styles of film production

and consumption” originating with “the immediate new punk technologies of videotape and CD-ROM” (100).

Today, however, it is harder to find scholars who see in DVD technology and its attendant paratexts the kind of “punk” or “utopian” possibilities for a transformed and liberated spectator that Russell and Harper quite rightly imaged as possible a decade earlier. More typical is the cautious skepticism that Jo T. Smith articulated in a 2008 essay, “DVD Technologies and the Art of Control,” in which she argues that “the promise of greater consumer control and interactivity [. . .] contributes to an ever-expanding regime of capture and immersion that paradoxically enables the media producer to assert a firmer control over the audiovisual market” (141). More recently, Jonathan Gray has convincingly argued that far from destabilizing traditional notions of authority and the “master text, [. . .] new media such as webpages, DVDs, and podcasts surround texts with a paratextual veneer of artistry, aura, and authority” that seeks to reclaim the authority and value of the auteur for media texts that never had access to such cultural capital before the advent of digital media (115).

The growing skepticism on the part of film critics and historians about the more utopian possibilities of film in the digital age is fairly easy to understand. A technology that transformed completely the ways in which we teach and study the medium has, in the course of the last decade, become intimately familiar, making it impossible not to attend to the ways in which the new freedoms of the medium came hand in glove with new restrictions and a *loss* of freedoms enjoyed for a generation on VHS—for example, regional codes and encryption and the inability to skip past trailers or warnings from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Interpol about the consequences of violating those codes. Further, the growing sameness (and smallness) of the paratexts over recent years in particular has made more visible how little is truly being given away and how carefully circumscribed are the freedoms active viewers are being invited to explore. What results is a growing sense of malaise on the part of film scholars regarding a technology once perceived as potentially democratizing and liberating.

It is a malaise felt equally, if not more so, by consumers, whose appetite for DVDs has diminished in the last couple of years after an unprecedented saturation during the first decade of the new millennium. Since

2010 DVD sales have dropped precipitously as audiences have moved to streaming and digital downloads for their films, choosing the convenience, portability, and often reduced pricing of renting or “owning” film content through their PC and mobile devices.

Publicly, Hollywood is wringing its hands over this sudden change of fortunes in what was, briefly, its life raft in the face of declining theatrical attendance. But there is good reason to believe that the rapidly declining appetite for DVDs is not a coincidence. One need only compare the kinds of DVD extras, Easter eggs, and other interactive features available on early DVD films such as *Memento* (2000) and *Seven* (1995) to what is found on the average release in 2012 to see that the studios of their own volition have been quietly and deliberately killing the golden goose. After trading the VHS for the DVD a little more than a decade ago—a trade most willingly made both for increased picture and sound quality and for the improved freedoms to zoom, rewind, remix, and rewatch—audiences are now “voluntarily” trading the DVD for streaming video services. Not only do these services severely limit most of the freedoms and powers of the DVD but also, in the vast majority of cases, they completely eliminate the paratexts—from Easter eggs to deleted scenes—that promised to make the cinematic experience a more interactive one.

I pause at length over this story of the media transformation unfolding as I write in early 2012 because it gets to the heart of a larger issue that should be central to any attempts to theorize the future of multimodal storytelling in a media ecology dominated by a handful of horizontally integrated multinational media conglomerates. Too often in transmedial narratology we are inclined to theorize a future independent of capital and its controls, but the story of the DVD and its imminent demise should have taught us an important lesson: fostering the kinds of futures for texts or their readers we like to imagine might arise organically with the emergence of new technologies is not in Hollywood’s long-term interest. Even the word “Hollywood” is an obfuscation—like the fetishization of box office receipts and, now, DVD sales—one that conjures up images of palm-lined streets, bustling bungalows, and movie sets in Los Angeles. Hollywood in the twenty-first century, of course, is Viacom (Paramount), TimeWarner (Warner Bros.), News Corp. (20th Century Fox), Disney (Disney, Pixar), and GE (Universal). The “Big Five” major studios of classical Hollywood are still there, but each is now one enti-

ty in a larger multinational corporation that also owns cable networks, newspapers, publishing houses, Internet service providers, sports teams, and theme parks. The vertical integration of the classical Hollywood system, whereby the five major studios controlled all aspects of production, distribution, and exhibition, has been replaced by the horizontal integration of the twenty-first-century media conglomerates. Now the “Big Six” (which includes CBS, the only one without major film holdings) have an almost monopolistic control (roughly 90 percent by most calculations) over the commercial content that is supplied to our increasingly mobile screens (Epstein, *Big Picture* 82; Campbell, Martin, and Fabos 213). The culture of convergence with all of its utopian possibilities is ultimately inseparable from the economics of transmedial corporate integration. Any fantasies we might have about the possibilities of multimodal storytelling in the twenty-first century must always be attenuated by the realities of transmedial corporations that are determined to shape storytelling environments to serve their horizontal monopolies.

Film + Comics in the Twenty-First Century: A Spectacular Reunion

Returning to the recent re-convergence of comics and film since 1997 and the birth of digital cinema only, the most starry-eyed observers still believe that cinema as we know it is over, that Hollywood producers will now be sharing power with an increasingly savvy and engaged audience, that new voices outside of the Big Six will gain meaningful access to the means of production and distribution, or, to put it more bluntly, that digital cinema will increase in quality or the diversity of the films being commercially distributed. Remarkably little, however, has changed. The vast majority of Hollywood productions are still targeting the same young adult audience with safe, modular products designed primarily to optimize the possibilities for merchandizing, franchising, and synergizing across the media company’s television networks, publishing houses, and theme parks. As we have seen, the explosion of transmedial storytelling is intimately related to the horizontal monopolies that seek to maximize the profitability of a “property” by exploiting it via multiple media producers within the corporation.

Of course, if the majority of the ways in which the digital revolution has impacted filmmaking have been in areas that remain largely invis-

ble to audiences (and increasingly so as digital cameras catch up with the quality of the best traditional equipment), one major exception to such claims comes in the area loosely defined as “special” or “visual effects.” After all, one of the most important reasons why comics and “live-action” film went in separate directions a century ago was because comics, in addition to engaging an active and unpredictable reader, increasingly came to feature unruly and plastic bodies in dynamic flights of fancy that were impossible to duplicate on film in 1910 or even 1980. While animation developed as a viable narrative form in its own right after 1910 (and it is telling that the cartoonist Winsor McCay served as a pioneer in the new field of animation as well), photographic film began to focus more strenuously on cinematic “realism,” leaving to comics and cartoons what Scott Bukatman has recently termed the “poetics of slumberland” (*Poetics*).

In the twenty-first century this long-standing distinction between animation and live-action cinema has increasingly eroded. Digital compositing allows animation and photography to blend seamlessly in a digital environment, such that in both special effects–dependent films (such as *Transformers*) and “indie” films (such as *A Scanner Darkly*) the distinction between “live action” and “animation” often feels as anachronistic as the obsession with “box office.” Similar technologies allow actors’ bodies to be digitally augmented, transformed, or disguised behind layers of digital animation (*Sin City*, 300); and advanced motion-capture technology now complicates the category of “actor” itself, as in the digital performances of Andy Serkis in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*.

It is not a coincidence that several of the films I have mentioned are based on comics. The digital environment that makes it possible for photographic and animated elements seamlessly to share the frame has brought Hollywood back to the plastic, fantastic possibilities of the comic book body that initially proved impossible to imitate with twentieth-century cinematic technologies. As Bukatman points out, superhero comics were the ideal subject matter for the new digital effects: “The cinematic superhero is a function of special effects, effects of programming[. . .]. [T]he terrain of special effects is a human body that will become uncontainable, a body that not only expresses emotion and physical power (not to mention emotion and physical *trauma*), but also the more-human-than-human capabilities of digital imaging” (“Secret Identity

Politics” 115, original emphasis). Like Shilo T. McClean and Angela Ndaljian, Bukatman is challenging the critical assumption that special effects solely serve to foreground the wonders of the cinematic technology and not any narrative function. But as his previous point suggests, in the end the turn of Hollywood to the comic book superhero has less to do with inherent interest in comics or their readers than in the superhero as the ideal vehicle to display the industrial and technical powers of twenty-first-century digital effects. There is no reason to reinvent the wheel, when the “studio” already owns the superhero.

After all, as we consider the future for comics in the digital age, we must remember that the two major comic book companies in the United States are now wholly owned subsidiaries of two of the Big Six: Marvel Comics is owned by Disney, DC by TimeWarner. And these comic book companies, which have long served as the Big Two within “mainstream comics,” are now relatively minor entities within larger media corporations. Making the relationship between comics and film still more unequal, the readership of comics is shrinking markedly in the twenty-first century even as comics-related stories and characters are visible on screen as never before. A best-selling comic book today might hope to sell 100,000 issues, while a movie such as *Spider-Man* (2002) sold more than five million tickets in Germany alone. Despite the flattering attentions bestowed on once-marginal events such as the annual Comic-Con in San Diego, Hollywood is not counting on comic book readers. Instead, Hollywood now understands that comic book readers’ ways of reading—ways of reading that the film industry had worked to foreclose a century ago—are increasingly vital to multimodal storytelling in the twenty-first century and to Hollywood’s economic vitality in a horizontally integrated transmedial corporate environment. Comic book readers had been exploring the pleasures of multimodal serial storytelling for generations, following their favorite characters and narratives across installments, media, and industries. If Hollywood could translate those investments from a relatively small community of active comic book readers to a mass audience, then its success in the twenty-first century was guaranteed. So what better place to start, especially now that movies can finally convincingly make superheroes fly, transform, hurl cars, and catch airplanes?

Yet in 2012, we can confidently say that Hollywood’s love affair with Comic-Con’s heavily invested and critically engaged fans is cooling fast.

At the convention in 2011, Big Hollywood, which had dominated the convention floor and the largest ballrooms for most of the previous decade, was a greatly diminished presence (Barnes and Cieply). This shift occurred not because comics-related movies are no longer part of the studios' long-term plans; in fact, 2013–14 will likely see the largest number of comics-related films yet. Instead, what the declining interest in comic book readers suggests is that, as with the imminent demise of the DVD, Hollywood's period of bending knee to the active reader (whether film geek or comic geek) is coming to an end. The comic book communities and reading practices that appeared so promising a laboratory for big media to learn about the appetites and demands of twenty-first-century readers now increasingly seem an unnecessary expense as new and more tightly controlled networks of digital distribution and exhibition begin to take shape. If the comic book readers in 2000 represented the ideal transmedial consumers that the horizontally integrated conglomerates desperately desire (inclined to seek out collectibles, merchandizing, and extensions of the narrative world across various media), then their reading *practices* (as with those encouraged by the first wave of DVDs) have proved precisely what Hollywood does *not* wish to encourage. In the very short time since I wrote the conclusion for *Projections* (in 2011), where I described an ongoing interest by Hollywood in the kind of multimodal reading practices that comics have long encouraged, Hollywood has apparently begun to move on.

As Frederic Wertham pointed out with considerable anxiety in 1954, comic book readers are *deliberate and even obsessive* readers, despite the assumption on the part of many that comics are ephemeral works that are quickly consumed and just as easily discarded. For Wertham, of course, this obsessiveness was a very real cause for concern. He saw comics and the reading practices they encouraged—rereading and hoarding treasured comics, plus the medium's demand for the reader to fill in the action between the panels—as inherently corrupting, leading the reader away from healthy, orderly reading practices. Thus, Wertham's comic book readers in *Seduction of the Innocent* are “inveterate” (26, 54, 87), “rabid” (8), “experienced” (81)—and in profound danger.

While media history has largely expunged Wertham from its pages for his association with the anti-comics hysteria that swept through the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in many ways he deserves

more respect than we have traditionally accorded him—if only for being among the first to recognize how very serious and engaging was the work of comics reading. In his last published book, almost two decades after *Seduction*, Wertham turned his attention to *fanzines*, or amateur publications by active and engaged readers of comics and science fiction. And here his assessment was almost entirely positive, acknowledging, as he did not in his earlier work, the ways in which the active, “rabid” reading practices that such multimodal forms as comic books and science fiction pulps encouraged might lead to other outcomes than those that he had feared most in *Seduction*.

The outcome Wertham celebrated in *The World of Fanzines* was one in which readers created their own networks and their own publications while repurposing the materials of mass culture that he, as well as his fellow German expatriate Theodor Adorno, had long regarded with deep suspicion. The fanzines, Wertham noted admiringly in 1973, “function outside the market and outside the profit motive. Publishing them is not a business but an avocation” (74). The thin line between the “avocation” he celebrated in one book and the “extreme avidity” (*Seduction* 50) he worried over in the other notwithstanding, clearly Wertham recognized early on that there was something unique about comics reading and the investments it generated, for better and for worse. And these investments did not work in neat consort with the efficiencies and demands of the consumer marketplace. Comic book readers were “slow” readers and compulsive rereaders, and the form had from its earliest days encouraged active agents who were inclined to become producers themselves.

DVDs and the “cinema of complexity” that was produced to engage active film readers eager for a more participatory, interactive, and multimodal storyworld exploration emerged simultaneously with Hollywood’s newfound interest in readers of comics (and comics properties). The ultimate convergence of DVD and comics storytelling in cinema might be epitomized by the 2009 adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s 1986 comic *Watchmen*. Directed by Zach Snyder with art design by Alex McDowell (one of the most influential digital designers of the present generation), the film successfully adapted what was long thought to be an unadaptable story due to the previously unrealizable effects required to tell the complex tale. In the theaters, the film was only moderately

successful in terms of box office, but Snyder and his collaborators clearly saw the DVD viewer as their intended audience. As McDowell said, “I think if this film works it will be because you have to see it ten times to really get all of that layering” (“Alex McDowell” n. pag.). Several DVD editions offered to the viewer different archives through which to engage in this rigorous archeology, remote control in hand. The feature film on the five-disc *The Ultimate Cut* alone runs more than three and a half hours. Watched ten times, as McDowell insisted that it was meant to be if all the clues and details were to be uncovered, and for the price of one (admittedly pricey) DVD purchase, fans had enough material to keep them occupied for days or weeks (see Gardner 188–89).

However, *Watchmen* and its *Ultimate Cut* DVD will likely serve as objects of film history to which we turn to mark the end of Hollywood’s flirtation with comic book readers and their reading practices. After all, if the DVD of *Memento* invited viewers to rewatch the film in “chronological order” and the original website supporting the film offered dossiers and files that promised new insights into the film’s unanswered questions, in the end all that the studios would have accomplished was to encourage an engaged, “avid” reader to rewatch the film compulsively in search of clues or Easter eggs they might have missed the first time. In educating audiences in how to be close and engaged readers and re-readers of film texts—how to be, that is, like *comics* readers—Hollywood realized that instead of golden eggs, this goose was laying only endless Easter eggs that led readers to find new pleasures in rewatching the DVD they had already purchased. The “cinema of complexity” requires a spectator with skills at breaking down films frame by frame, and to acquire these skills takes discipline and time—time that might otherwise be spent watching (and buying) new films.

These lessons aren’t new. But for a little more than a decade, visions of synergy made the new horizontally integrated media monopolies forget the lessons their vertically integrated predecessors learned in the early years of the industry. Thus the DVD gives way to streaming, and Hollywood no longer goes courting the approval and insights of comic book readers at Comic-Con. After all, the industry never needed the readers, and now it seems determined to leave those reading practices in the margins of the cultural and academic ghettos, where close reading, rereading, and avid reading are valued and rewarded.

Comics in the Digital Age

Finally we turn to the fate of comics as they follow film and other media forms across the digital rubicon. In many ways comics have remained the narrative medium most resistant to digitization, and in 2013 it remains unclear what form comics will take on our screens in the years to come even as other media are developing complex and relatively stable digital formats and economies. There are, of course, many reasons for this resistance to digital translation. First, comics are always a marked and opaque text in a way that, for example, a novel or a classical Hollywood film is not; the comic page always bears the evidence of the physical labor of what Philippe Marion calls the “graphiateur” on the page (Baetens 149). Further, being a profoundly elliptical form whose parts never hide the spaces and gaps in between, comics are also, as Hillary Chute puts it, a profoundly “site specific” narrative form in a way very different from novels and films (10).

And so we have something of a paradox: the form that is best positioned to teach us how to explore the multimodal narratives of the twenty-first century is also the most resistant to the media convergence within which twenty-first-century storytelling will take place. Moreover, the vast majority of attempts to wrestle with the problem have thus far assumed the problem lies with comics and that the solution, therefore, is to make comics more like film or video games.

That the Hollywood corporations who own the most popular comic book properties have sponsored many of these wrong steps is not surprising. For example, in the buildup to the release of the *Watchman* movie, in 2008 Warner Bros. released a “motion comics” version of the original comic series, and Marvel Entertainment has developed a whole motion comics department, primarily dedicated to tie-ins to its motion picture productions. The idea behind *motion comics* is to set into movement the still figures, to provide voices, and to fill in the action between the frames. What results, inevitably, looks highly similar to early animation and very little like comics.

The other early model for the translation of comics into digital formats also came from Marvel and has since been adopted by other digital platforms with an eye toward making the comics translate to the smaller screens of iPhones, PlayStation®Portables (PSPs), and netbooks—that is,

a “guided view” in which the reading program essentially breaks down the comics page into a series of sequential slides, directing the viewer’s eye in precisely the disciplined way that the traditional comic page by its nature resists. Stripped of our Dr. Manhattan–like power to see past, present, and future in a single glance, we are also denied our ability to let the eye move across panels—back and forth in time—and to focus on the layout of the two-page spread, the page unit, and the single panel according to our own choosing.

In both of these examples, the shift to digital platforms reduces rather than augments the readers’ agency and avenues for interaction with the form. Even leaving aside issues of digital rights management and the lack of cross-platform mobility in all of the early commercial digital comics experiments, there is already reason enough to be wary of the fate of comics in an age of digital convergence. Henry Jenkins’s ideal of “convergence culture” envisions “a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing content, and toward ever more complex relationships between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture” (243). But as we have seen when the media converging are controlled by the Big Six, there is also the very real likelihood that old corporate structures will continue to dictate terms to those at the “bottom” who might have the best possibility of exploiting the affordances of digital media.

That comics have always remained a gutter form, both formally and culturally, arguably makes them best suited to help map out the narrative possibilities for the new century. But it will require a fairly dramatic change in attitude from their creators, who have long been wedded to the printed page and, especially in the last two generations, to the codex—the graphic novel.

Without more creators and readers exploring the ways in which new media convergence can expand rather than reduce the multimodal potentialities for comics, the example of comics provides a cautionary tale to more utopian visions of the future of new media convergence. Media matter, but so does the institutional history of those media. If we see multimodality everywhere, we miss how rare and important the unique century-long experimentation with multimodal narrative by comic book

creators and readers truly is. And if we assume new media convergence is necessarily a force for the emancipation of narrative and its readers, we have only to look to the story of film and comics in the early years of new media convergence to see good reason for a more skeptical and cautious approach.

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