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The Power of the Panel: How American Comic Book Media Utilizes the Panel to Alter Audience Interaction

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THE POWER OF THE PANEL: HOW AMERICAN COMIC BOOK MEDIA
UTILIZES THE PANEL TO ALTER AUDIENCE INTERACTION

By

Austin J. Biese

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

In Rhetoric, Theory and Culture

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
1 Interesting Introduction.....	1
1.1 Marvelous Methods.....	5
1.2 Realistic Recognition.....	7
1.3 Comics Connection.....	8
1.4 Inherently Individual.....	11
1.5 With Great Power.....	12
2 Breaking the Panel.....	14
2.1 Expanding the Fourth Wall of Film and Television.....	16
2.1.1 The Fourth Wall Currently.....	17
2.2 The Five Fourth Wall Breaks.....	19
2.2.1 Break 1: Referring to the Audience.....	20
2.2.2 Break 2: Referencing the Audience.....	21
2.2.3 Break 3: Referencing Other Media.....	23
2.2.4 Break 4: Referring to the comic.....	26
2.2.5 Break 5: Recognition of Self as a Character.....	27
2.3 The Merc-with-a-mouth’s Metafiction.....	29
3 Adapting the Panel.....	32
3.1 Panel Recreation.....	35
3.1.1 Narrative Progress.....	36
3.1.2 Visual Iconicity.....	37
3.1.3 Fan Service.....	39

3.2	Panel Representation	41
3.2.1	Style Representation	44
3.3	Framing Panels	46
4	Reading the Panel	48
4.1	Digital Transition of Comics	49
4.1.1	Digital Translation of Comics	50
4.2	Panel Evolution and Intent	52
4.3	Flexibility in Comic Reading	53
4.3.1	Flat Reading	56
5	Conclusion	58
	Reference List	60

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Abstract

This thesis traces the evolution of the panel across decades as well as various mediums. In one form, the panel becomes stretched when characters break the fourth wall to immerse readers in a new perspective on how the panel functions and creates meaning. In another form, comic book film adaptations comic imagery to instill a sense of nostalgia and to wink and nod at the audience, stretching the conventions of what the panel can be to impact the devoted audience. Lastly, in modern comic-reading apps, a ‘Smart Reading’ function remediates panels to provide an easier and unified path to read comic books. This indulgence requires the panel to break in a way that is less individual to the reader. Through analysis of these various aspects, we can see comic books have a medium specific requirement derived from panels that gets removed, redefined, and adapted to provide new experiences.

1 Interesting Introduction

We are nearing a full century of the American comic book heroes we have grown to love. The same heroes that have become household names, action figures, icons, and role models for young children (and for adults who are young children at heart like me). I would venture to argue that it is nearly impossible for anyone alive right now in the United States of America to have never experienced or encountered any kind of interaction with American comic books in some fashion throughout their life. Marvel Comics, and Detective Comics (DC) have created an ever-extending reach in their production that is just too far at this point, even pushing past national lines to create plenty of comic book fandoms in many other foreign countries (Borodo, 2018).

When comics were first released into the wild, they were not meant for adult consumption, at least that is not how they were received. They were meant to be read by children and children alone per societal pressures and views. This societal hinderance even lead to major regulation in comic production to limit the impact comics had on children. The Comics Code Authority (CCA) was created in retaliation to filter and censor comics to remain appropriate for younger audiences. They did so by disallowing comics with violence, drug use, and more adult material to be published with the Comics Code seal brandished on the cover signaling approval from the CCA. There was no law that required this seal of approval and it remained a voluntary practice however, the seal did have an impact on comic sales and advertising so comic publishers chose to follow this censorship to remain in business and retain profit (Nyberg, 1998). Only after multiple

decades did authors, artists, and audiences begin to take the comic form as seriously as it deserves and break free from CCA restriction until the entire authority was rendered defunct after major comic companies such as Marvel, DC, and Archie Comics had all abandoned the practice by 2011.

As a result, and in retaliation to censorship, we have received genre challenging and game changing comic creations that include poignant themes, narratives, and characters in an otherwise unsophisticated medium. Without such authors and artists, the comic audience and beyond would have never experienced masterpieces like *Maus* (1980) from Art Spiegelman, *Persepolis* (2000) from Marjane Satrapi, and *The Arrival* (2006) from Shaun Tan. If these authors and artists never decided to push the envelope of what a comic book is capable of, comic books may have never entered the public eye and would have remained as children's entertainment.

In a similar vein, classic comic characters have also seen intriguing revival and evolution as more than just a vehicle for onomatopoeia and pretty colors for children to ogle at. Often, the character of Batman specifically lends himself to benchmarks in the superhero genre with graphic novels such as *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), *The Killing Joke* (1988), and *Arkham Asylum* (1989). All of which have received critical acclaim as well as audience appreciation from within and outside of the avid comic loving community. As a result of this development and pushing the boundaries of comics, graphic novels have won literary awards (University of Toronto Libraries), hit the New York Times best seller

list (DC Publicity, 2019), and their modern film adaptations have taken over the rankings of top box office records.

In the modern age, comic book characters and stories are constantly being reformatted to the silver screen by major corporations like The Walt Disney Company and Warner Media that dedicate their production companies to comic book film adaptations - Marvel Studios for Marvel comics and Warner Brothers Pictures for DC properties. Currently, Marvel Studios is dominating the comic book film adaptation game with recognizable franchises for Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and many more classic characters. This studio also innovated modern cinema by creating an expanding universe across these franchises to have heroes appear in each other's franchises as well as creating a trans medial opportunity for major team up films as well as plenty more exterior opportunities (Brinker, 2017).

Up until March 13th, 2021, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the fourth installment of the commonly known Avengers franchise from Marvel Studios, was the highest grossing film of all time with a whopping \$2,797,501,328 at the box office (IMDbPro). The film's release toppled the long-standing front runner of that title at the time which was James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) until the film was rereleased on March 11th, 2021 to take the top spot back. However, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) was the culmination and finale of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) that began with Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* in 2008. The first saga, known as the Infinity Saga, amassed 23 films for theatrical release and has made an approximate \$18.2 billion from the box office (CNBC, 2019). This does not

include home releases, merchandise, toys, and collectibles that can take the box office profit and multiply it to an inconceivable number.

But where would we be, if not for those humble beginnings? Would we ever receive the dark and emotional modern Batman without the classic blue and yellow silly detective Batman? Would we ever get critical commentary regarding American politics from Captain America without his propaganda beginnings? Would a comic book film adaptation ever take the top box office record without Stan Lee's simple creations?

I highly doubt it.

And this incredible history began with just four lines that define the building block of comic books - the panel, the little box where a comic book narrative develops. The panel is the singular unit of comic book creation as every comic book starts with one panel, then a second, and another until a comic strip, page, or book has been created. Comic books end with hundreds of panels that provide a plethora of intrigue, imagination, and entertainment for the readers. But these panels are not just a basic tool for story creation. Panels in American comic books have developed just as much, if not, more than the comic books themselves. They have been broken, shattered, and expanded in the decades since Superman first flew onto the page in 1938.

While Scott McCloud may have started the conversation in *Understanding Comics* (1993) surrounding the comic panel's purpose, allowances, and its limitations, the comic panel has evolved past a point of recognition in modern media as comics have extended outside of their own medium while breaking previous conventions within their own

medium. Since panels are the building blocks of comic books, evaluating and theorizing on the aspects, changes, intricacies, and purpose of the panel will give rise to more comic-related scholarship that focuses on the comic artform as opposed to focusing on the narrative elements within comic books. Situated within comic studies, literary theory, and film theory, this thesis explores the various functions of the panels as well as the associations that come with each function. Each of these functions require the panel to act as a window, a frame, and a screen that alters audience reception for each medium the panel encounters. The project also focuses on the different types of breaks within these functions, focusing on three major breaks: a break of panel constrictions, a break within film adaptations, and a break within mobile smart reading adaptations. Now that comics are more accessible in a variety of ways, the medium in which the panel is utilized comes with critical theory that has yet to be significantly tapped.

1.1 Marvelous Methods

In analyzing comic panels and their hidden meanings, functions, and purposes, semiotics will guide the way with specific attention to synecdoche, iconicity, and association within a visual language. In semiotics, the way we build meaning from stimuli is a bit more complicated than just signs sent and meaning retained as Saussure defines it (Saussure, 1916). Signs in this case are anything that attempts to communicate meaning – the signifier. When we receive these signs, we incorporate many different functions, concepts, and more to create the meaning we assume that sign to mean – the signified meaning of the sign. To build such a relationship, we can rely on plenty of other aspects

of life to build our sense of meaning. When we see the word “spider” for example, we may think of many different instances of our encounters with such a signifier: the visual appearance of a physical spider we once saw, the written word’s appearance, Spider-man’s logo perhaps, and plenty more. These things compiled together evoke the idea of a spider without the actual spider needing to be present in the moment for us to create meaning and understand what the signifier is really attempting to communicate to us. There are plenty of other more in-depth examples of semiotics at work (physical actions representing commands, colors representing ideas, etc.), but inherently in this regard, we make our own meaning (the signified) from what we are given (the signifier).

Going a bit further, Charles Peirce expands the process of meaning making by including a triadic structure to semiotics instead of a dynamic structure like Saussure. Instead of just signified and signifier, Peirce argues that we create meaning by receiving a sign, the object of the sign sustains limits as to guide our meaning making, and lastly, we create our translation of the sign’s intended meaning, creating the interpretant (Chandler, 2007). This system of meaning making is most integral to comics – the object of comics guides our interpretations while allowing for flexibility in our reception. We are provided a panel (the sign) in a visual fashion, the context surrounding the sign, the icons within it, and more guide our meaning making process (the object), and we create our meaning or perception of the panel within those limits using our individual experiences (the interpretant).

If we shift the language of semiotics, specifically synecdoche, just a bit, we can start to discuss recognition when it comes to a visual standpoint. Especially when we can consider words as more of a sign of an idea, concept, or object, the main premise of a comics literacy comes into play when all we are provided with are representations of ideas, concepts, or objects in a visual format. This provides the reader with seemingly less work to do, but this is not necessarily true. On the surface, readers, or in this case viewers, are provided with snapshot images of moments in time otherwise known as what Jakobsen (1956) refers to as slices of life within the field of semiotics in which a panel, or a slice, is a part representing the whole. Viewers can easily and quickly discern the action, emotion, sound, taste, and, in some cases, even smell that fall within those slices of life through their own interpretations of the experience being represented within the confines of a single panel.

1.2 Realistic Recognition

However, per Scott McCloud's graphical guidance from *Understanding Comics* (1993), a lot of the previous paragraph would be considered unquestionably wrong. Readers are not provided with snapshot images nor are they provided moments in time as the idea of time in comics is relatively difficult to establish and very flexible. Also, none of those actions, emotions, sounds, tastes, smells, whatever... are real. They are representations of those concepts: wavy lines above an object to indicate a sour smell, motion lines to depict specific movement, as well as onomatopoeia to indicate a specific sound like "THWIP" for Spider-man's web shooters or "SNIKT" for Wolverine's claws. In real observable

life, wavy lines do not appear above something radiating a sour smell, motion lines do not appear when we move, and onomatopoeia unfortunately does not explode out of the sound effects that we make; these things do not actually exist in our perception of reality.

As a visual representation of these slices of life, panels utilize various symbols and icons within themselves to represent more than just one sense. However, panels can represent multiple senses through the delivery of just one sense: sight. We receive these sight-based stimuli and can extend their reception to the four remaining senses. As a result of these slices of life and representations, we, as readers, are charged with responsibility to fill in the gaps. McCloud calls this phenomenon closure where readers are “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). This idea of closure builds upon the idea of synecdoche within semiotics where we can make judgments on an entire idea or action from a provided part of the whole - in this case, a panel representing the story of a comic.

1.3 Comics Connection

If all these things have no place outside of the comic form in real observable life, then how do they continue to be used in the comic form to this day? Also, how can we assign meaning to these things that have no place outside of comics?

In short, they are still used to this day because we allow it, we give comics their necessary agency. The comics audience has provided the construct to allow these things to persist. We have assigned more abstract ideas to these specific visual elements, like wavy lines above an object representing a sour smell. Then, the comics community

agreed upon these uses in concurrence with representational methods that can attach to more abstract ideas as a branch of visual meaning-making. With this lack of verity in the presentation of such visual stimuli, actual use can become flimsy where one symbol may be used to represent multiple aspects of life, i.e., vertical wavy lines can represent a sour smell, smoke from a cigarette, or heat from a cup of coffee (McCloud, 1993).

Especially in a more technologically leaning world, how can a medium such as comics persist with such a lack of giving or clarity to the audience? In all honesty, it is not; the comics market is having quite a rough time right now for a variety of reasons (Itzkoff, 2020). But outside of the influence of recent film adaptations from the MCU, this specific question leads to its own answer. The reason why comics are still relevant and contain impact to this day is because the audience is the focus in this format. This individualistic aspect of comics provides for opportunity for an intense connection between the medium and readers to the point that pushes past conventional expectations in print media. In a way, we create these comics using our individual identities and input part of ourselves in and between the panels, in the gutter (the space between the panels), and thus, in the comic.

Comics give us the tools and materials in the panel, and we must build how we perceive them as well as build what we do not perceive in the gutter. Comics provide panel after panel to build the narrative and can only present a certain amount of information within each panel. This is where the reader must do some work as this is where readers cross over from being a spectator to being a participant in the comic. The gutter allows and

requires comic readers to build aspects of the narrative on their own using their interpretation, previous context, and the comic itself to create a fully seamless idea of how the transition between panels occurs (McCloud, 1993) by filling the space between panels in our minds. We regularly use this idea of building meaning through sequential information daily in how we communicate by speaking one word after another to create a fully realized sentence. Or how reading word after word of this thesis creates the overall message I intend to present to my audience. But it is even still not that simple when it comes to comics.

Will Eisner, popular cartoonist, argues that “comic book art deals with recognizable reproductions of human conduct. Its drawings are a mirror reflection and depend on the reader’s stored memory of experience to visualize an idea or process quickly” (2008, p.11). Once we have these building blocks, we take them and put our unique spin on them using our own experiences and memories to give meaning to comics and everything they include. Since we have little else to work with, we create our own version of a comic narrative using our individual personal experience as the necessary context. As Molly Bang writes outrightly in the opening page of *Picture This* (2016), “we see shapes in context, and our reactions to them depend in large part on that context” (3). When we are required to fill in the gaps using our own context, we focus our reactions to those gaps on a more personal and individual level. This is exactly what makes comics so unique as panels rely on the entire idea of synecdoche for an individual to allow each reader to create their own distinct interpretation for every comic. McCloud’s definition of closure

in comics even mirrors the language used to define synecdoche, showing a relationship between the two concepts.

1.4 Inherently Individual

Further, interpretations are not uniform replicas between readers. What I decide to happen between panels will inherently be different from everyone else's in some way. What we decide for a character's voice to sound like will vary, what actions they take between panels will vary, and so on and so on. Inherently, each person's individual reading of a comic will vary since the previously mentioned context we base our reading on is our own personal and unique experience. Just as well, since readers have had to create their own version of a narrative in their mind using their personal experience as context, readers have a sense of ownership or authority over their reading and share a connection to their specific version of the narrative since it is partly their own individual and unique creation.

With this idea in mind, we can see that reading a comic book, or even a single comic strip, is not a simple process, or at least not as simple as one may think. It requires participation from the reader to fill these gaps and our active participation creates the necessity for what Gee (2003) defines as a semiotic domain, a collective consciousness for a group of similar people. Even though our interpretations and personal experiences that we can apply to comics varies in their application to the comic form, comics work on the use of symbols and icons to portray suggestive visual elements as a guiding light to direct our application of our individual context. McCloud argues "symbols are the basis

of **language**! Taken out of their original context, they can now be applied anywhere, and the reader will instantly know what they mean” (128-129). Relating to the previously mentioned wavy lines and their interchangeable meanings, those symbols include a common agreement on the meaning of said visual elements from the audience. While symbols work as signs here, the audience can also define the boundaries of the object. This common agreement suggests the necessity for a collective consciousness in the comics community where we are all on a similar page, pun intended, in making meaning for the panel, gutter, narrative, and any aspect of the comic book. Comic books speak to us and we speak back.

If we accept this as well, then comics persist because they give little to the audience. They give what they can in a visual format, but outside of representation and their use of symbols, responsibility lies on the reader to create meaning using their necessary individual context within the pages of a comic book. Comic books have no agency, just as words have no tangible agency according to semiotics. We, the viewers, are responsible for assigning comic books and everything they include with that agency. In doing so, we attach a bit of ourselves onto the comic page. We must use the only context that an individual is capable of from their own experience to bring these comic pages and panels to life.

1.5 With Great Power...

McCloud argues that the comic book form has a unique attribute that does not appear in any other medium out there. He notes that comic books are defined plainly as sequential

art where each image, or panel, has a specific relationship between each other. Oddly enough, this is where the magic of comics occurs - the spaces between the panels. Outside of the panel is all the reader's responsibility. This is where readers decide what happens between the provided slices of life panels that provide a bit of guidance towards what the readers should be deciding. McCloud writes that this aspect of the comic reading experience, "is unique to comics. No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well" (92). This specific attribute, the requirement to decide, provides for an immersive connection between reader and comic book. We are given just what we need in a comic's visual representation and, while there may be similarities or patterns in how we perceive them, these representations are unique to the reader. Comics have a hidden function of individuality which, in turn, requires higher engagement from us, the readers which allows for more innovative creations regarding the comic book's panel to impact the audience.

2 Breaking the Panel

One of these innovative panel developments is the metaphorical breaking of the panel constraints. As mentioned, comics work within the confines of four lines that dictate the boundaries of the panel. Just as well, terminology has dictated that, in a way, theater, television, and film works within four boundaries or walls as well. This term arose because of the identification of the fourth wall in theater being an invisible one between entertainment and audience as fourth wall breaks were first a theatrical convention, but it has taken plenty steps distinguishing itself from its origins. For film and television, this fourth wall is basically the camera lens as a limitation toward the audience. When a character does something to negate the restrictions of this invisible wall and crosses it toward the audience, it is known as breaking the fourth wall (Brown, 2012).

In the realm of comics media, there is only one character that can truly capture what it means to break the fourth wall so elegantly and consistently while doing so in an innovative fashion. This character is none other than the regenerating degenerate himself: Wade Wilson, more popularly known as Deadpool. Created by Rob Liefeld, The Merc-with-a-mouth breaks the fourth wall of the Marvel Comics universe with such ease that this action has become synonymous with the character, appearing across entertainment mediums constantly just to break its fourth wall. To fully capture what fourth wall breaks can do to the panel in comics, Deadpool needs to be considered as a singular character across each of the mediums that he appears in as well, whether the medium is comics, film, video game, etc. As his fourth wall breaking character identity is used in other

forms of media, we can always expect the same unique identity of Deadpool to endure. Also, breaking the fourth wall is not exclusive to Deadpool in Marvel comics. Other characters like She-Hulk, Loki and even the Fantastic Four have broken the fourth wall too, but not nearly as often or nearly as well as he does (Lavell, 2020). For these characters, breaking the fourth wall was basically a once and done deal. We do not expect every character that has ever broken the fourth wall of comics to constantly break the fourth wall; this expectation is reserved solely for Deadpool as he has made this abundantly clear in his years of existence.

Outside of comics, Deadpool has two solo Hollywood films that released in 2016 and 2018, he is a playable character in plenty of Marvel licensed video games, and he makes multiple appearances in various animated Marvel cartoon shows and films. Within comics, Deadpool has had plenty of his own solo comic series as well as a few notable graphic novels. In comics, Deadpool interacts directly with the reader. In film, Deadpool physically interacts with the camera and its lens. In video games, Deadpool uses health bars as weapons. The list goes on and on. Deadpool, as a character alone, is a masterclass in the various ways of breaking the fourth wall. This chapter will define the ways that Deadpool breaks the fourth wall in the comic format, how this action is similar yet different to fourth wall breaking in film, and what this action ultimately does to a comic book reader and Deadpool's reception by bending the panel to the character's will.

2.1 Expanding the Fourth Wall of Film and Television

As I will touch on in Chapter 3, the relationship between film and comics has grown to become very dissimilar in terms of their mediums and their reception. But down to its most basic form and especially during the silent film era, physical film could indeed fit the definition for comics which McCloud defines as, “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). McCloud previously pointed out in this same argument while creating the definition for comics that, “before it’s projected, film is just a very very very very slow comic!” (8). Yes, he did indeed include four, count ‘em, four uses of the word very. In this case, film frames are synonymous with comic panels, but their gutters are invisible and non-existent in their usual reception of watching the film as it is intended without any necessity for separation between frames. If we want to be incredibly technical with this idea, then this definition fits for film. In film reels, the panels are the various film frames that generally appear around 25 times in a single second (Morrison, 2020). The gutters are miniscule, however.

However, in its form meant for actual presentation to an audience, film could rarely be even considered to fit the definition of comics with the addition of sound effects, music, observable movement in real time, and more. The modern conception of what a film is defined as diverges farther and farther from film being considered in the comics definition. My point here is to establish the fact that there lies a difference between these two mediums all while they seem alike to a certain degree. Given this relationship

between these two mediums, certain aspects of film theory can be applicable to aspects of comics and vice versa. Since fourth wall breaking is already a niche subtopic for study, the literature available for fourth wall breaking in comics is miniscule if it exists at all. I will have to apply theory surrounding fourth wall breaks in film and television shows (since these mediums are similar), back to comics to make sense of fourth wall breaks within comics to translate the effect that these breaks have on the audience.

2.1.1 The Fourth Wall Currently

As I mentioned, entertainment has been breaking the fourth wall for a while now. Theater had the capacity to do it, film adopted the technique, and modern sitcoms like *The Office* (2005-2013), *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), and *Modern Family* (2009-2020) all have reworked the conventions of fourth wall breaks, sitcoms, and documentaries to allow for character interaction with the camera to become commonplace. Each of the previously mentioned shows center the characters around a mock documentary situation, or a mockumentary, where the show is filmed with handheld cameras that utilize crude camera zooms as well as hold character interviews to give the feeling of a real-world documentary being made, but in a fictional reality for our enjoyment. The degree to which the purpose of the documentary presence in each show varies where *The Office* (2005-2013) includes an exact purpose for shooting in this fashion (they are making a documentary show within the show), but *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) never explicitly states the reason for character interviews. This allows for comedic moments that could not happen in a classic sitcom without the mockumentary style. Characters in

these mockumentary shows can look directly into the camera as a non-verbal reaction to the situation at hand. Adam Scott's character, Ben Wyatt, does this in *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) constantly and John Krasinski's Jim Halpert from *The Office* (2005-2013) made this concept into the meme it is popularly known as today – commonly called the “Jim-Face” (Urban Dictionary, 2017).

Outside of the narrative of the show, the use of character interviews specifically allows for the character to speak their thoughts, feelings, and opinions on the situation at hand directly to the audience without a filter, inherently breaking the fourth wall of television and stepping across that invisible line with just a look. The path toward the sitcom character's mind has been made extremely clear with this technique. Currently, a character speaking directly to the camera is something we almost expect from modern sitcoms or at least the sitcoms dominating the streaming service community of binge watchers. This allows for direct connection from audience member to character as we feel like a character's confidant or someone they can vent to, like a friend (Brown, 2012).

As a result of this direct line of communication characters can have with the audience, our sympathy for characters has the capacity to grow immensely. It is much easier to understand a character's feelings and reasonings for their actions and reactions within the show if they can explicitly state them to us rather than to someone else or needing to be inferred. And even more than that, they can explicitly state them toward the audience. In the show, the characters are speaking directly to and making eye contact with the camera which is a relatively taboo technique for actors to complete as they spend most of their

career doing their best to ignore the camera as much as possible (Bottrell, 2019). Usually, the camera is an omnipresent observer that does not exist in these fictional realities that are being recorded and it is not supposed to necessarily exist in media that does not break the fourth wall. So, when an actor or character does recognize the camera, it does something a bit different to the viewers. Audience perception of this tactic causes us to assume that since the character is making eye contact with the camera, the substitute for our eyes in film and television (Adamson, 2017), that the character in the show or film we are watching is communicating directly with the viewer.

As we can see, this technique is still developing for the screen based medium where form is being challenged and innovated in ways that give rise to entirely new styles as recently as the turn of the 21st century. American comics have had even less opportunity for such innovation within its genre as Deadpool is one of the few major proponents of this technique outside of his comic byproducts like Gwenpool, Lady Deadpool, and plenty of other iterations usually ending in the tag ‘-pool’ to represent a link to the original character. Deadpool has created an anomaly in the comics world as has the mockumentary style format on the world of television.

2.2 The Five Fourth Wall Breaks

Deadpool breaks the fourth wall in a few distinct ways. However, these different forms of breaking the fourth wall may overlap where Deadpool could be talking to the audience at the same time he references other media, combining a few of the following defined fourth wall breaks. As we will see, the different kinds of breaks overlap frequently.

2.2.1 Break 1: Referring to the Audience.

One of the more common and easily recognizable forms of breaking the fourth wall, in general, is directly speaking to the audience from within the confines of the four walls of the panel, frame, screen, etc. This technique is often used as a commonly accepted device to bring the inner thoughts of a character, usually a main character, out in a less abstract fashion. It is recognizably used in films and television such as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Wayne's World* (1992), *House of Cards* (2013-2018), and many more properties such as the shows I have previously mentioned. The audience is given the opportunity for explicit explanation of a character's thoughts, feelings, and ideas directly because of said character speaking to the audience, usually with an eyeline pointing toward the camera to indicate the break visually as well, for a variety of purposes (comedy, dramatics, shock value for a few examples). Deadpool refers to his audience in this way often also for a variety of purposes.

Since actors are supposed to ignore the camera in most films, the audience is given a visual stimulus that the characters are talking to the audience by making eye contact with the camera and thus, the audience. It is the most straightforward way to break the fourth wall and acknowledge the medium by directly referring to the audience of said medium. Usually, when characters break the fourth wall toward the audience in this way, they do so by speaking or monologuing to the camera and/or audience. Within the fictional world we are observing, this monologue takes place out of reality where other characters will

not notice or recognize the character make any reference to the audience. For other characters outside of the break, it is as if nothing happened.

For Deadpool, the opposite is the case. Whatever character that may be in attendance for one of Deadpool's breaks will notice Deadpool's actions, but not understand them. A prime reasoning for each character's conception about Deadpool being relatively insane sprouts from this action – where Deadpool talks to seemingly no one in his reality, but in our reality, he is speaking right to us. While his universe sees him as acting oddly, the audience reading the comic is in the know on what Deadpool is really accomplishing and allows for an even closer relation to Deadpool from the audience as this type of break in other media does. We are technically the only ones in his world who really understand him; we know he is not crazy (to a certain degree), and we can continue to sympathize for him and relate to him while his peers do not. This concept is almost like the idea of Jim-Face; we know what is happening between the character and viewer without being explicitly told, and in turn, this builds a relationship between character and audience that is built through these moments that are meant to speak directly to the audience, thus feeling more personal. This brings us to the second kind of break where Deadpool is forced to talk about the audience or reader to characters confined by the fourth wall.

2.2.2 Break 2: Referencing the Audience.

When the first kind of break occurs, something unique happens for Deadpool. As I mentioned, Deadpool's surrounding characters are unaware of the comic form. They are characters in the classic form – characters to be contained within the story and nothing

more. When Deadpool speaks to the audience, his surrounding characters will question his actions by asking him, “who are you talking to?” or “are you talking to me?” as does the ghost of Benjamin Franklin does to Deadpool in Issue 3 of his 2012 volume (Duggan, G.). Yes, you read that correctly: the ghost of Benjamin Franklin – I am not kidding. These are the kinds of questions that we would ask of any human that would look in a general direction and speak to an entity that is, from our perception, not physically present. But, from within the confines of the comic book, Deadpool often must refer to the audience, or the individual reader, as the entity he monologues toward. He explains to the questioning characters that he is speaking to “them” and points in our direction or waves the question off. Since Break 1 and Break 2 often come hand in hand, the occurrence of Break 2 is about as common as Break 1, further emphasizing the connection that Deadpool shares with the audience and vice versa separating him from the other comic characters.

Indirectly acknowledging the presence of a viewer or an audience shows a direct break in the form and fourth wall for any kind of medium. This is almost like dramatic irony where the characters are unaware of the situation at hand, but the audience knows exactly what is happening or will happen. It gives the audience member a peek behind the curtains of a narrative and we can further predict the outcome of certain plot structures since we are the only ones that can possibly know everything that occurs because of the present dramatic irony. Since our awareness of the situation at hand for Deadpool is separated from plot in a way, Deadpool is viewed as our only link between the fictitious world he exists in and our observed and real reality.

2.2.3 Break 3: Referencing Other Media.

It is not a new concept for comics to refer to events that occurred in other comic book issues as storylines converge with immense frequency for comics. Often, the comic will have a direct listing of what issue to refer to in a text box outside of the current situation at hand. It acts almost as a caption for the moment, explaining or providing an outlet to receive context for us to understand. Deadpool's third kind of break can accomplish the same objective here but cutting through the weeds for him to tell us, the audience, directly. We can already see this direct form of fourth wall break used to inform readers of story elements that they may have missed like in Issue 3 as well, when he tells us something happened "Waaaay back in issue one" (p. 5). Instead of seeing a text box tell us what issue to refer to, Deadpool can look at the audience and tell us to read a certain issue from a certain volume so we can keep up. Deadpool shows his capacity to reference media that should only exist in our reality, and by him referencing specific issues from a comic shows another example of the grey area where his character operates – in limbo between his reality and our own, as our ambassador. However, this kind of break is more focused on the mention of other media, including other comics, within the confines of Deadpool's character.

Deadpool can also reference other media without explicitly stating a reference. In the comparison between two comic cover pages, one for the first appearance of Spider-man in *Amazing Fantasy Issue 15* (1962) and the other for the cover of Deadpool's 11th issue in his second volume (2008-2012), the two images are near carbon copies in the

positioning of Deadpool and most included elements. Again, this is also not a new concept of recreating popular imagery within comics. Many comic covers have done this in recreating iconic covers as a nod, reference, or memorial of an anniversary or important event whether the event was comic based or a real-world event. For the 30th anniversary of *The Amazing Spider-man* (1962), Issue 365 recreated the iconic imagery of Spider-man's first appearance on a special edition comic as a celebration of the characters long running comic series and the impact the character had, has, and will have. In this case, Deadpool has nothing to memorialize as well as no reason to recreate such iconic imagery. The comic does not include Spider-man, it is not an anniversary of anything important, and this serves no narrative purpose, so this image must be acting as a reference for comedy's sake, just to wink at the reader in a more abstract way.

Film and television also provide similar instances within their medium. Known as homage, filmmakers and the like can include reference to popular and well-known pieces of media without explicitly stating their reference. They do so by recreating iconic imagery, similar lines of dialogue and delivery, and even in the sound or score that accompanies these homage related moments. At first glance, this cinematic tradition may seem like copying another's work for the sake of tailing the referenced work's popularity. But homage is seen to honor and pay tribute to the inspiration for the creators. It is a sign of respect and can be used for a variety of purposes: homage can evolve into parody for comedy's sake, a nostalgic marker for legacies, and plenty more (Phillips, 2009).

However, Deadpool's use of homage is a bite more complicated than that.

On top of referencing media from our reality, Deadpool references more than just comic books and he does so explicitly in a step behind or above homage (dependent on your perception of such techniques). Deadpool will refer to popular media that we, the readers, experience and remains a part of our culture in our reality within his own reality. He takes catchphrases from popular characters, like quoting Tweedy Bird in a fight with Juggernaut (Waid, 1994) and makes intertextual references to media that the real-life audience is usually fully aware of. Since these pieces of media are not usually referenced in most comic media intertextually, at least not for the sake of comedy, this makes the audience feel as if Deadpool's reality and their reality are one and the same. The pieces of media that he experiences are the same as our own. Some of these pieces exist within the comics universe, but since recognition of those pieces of media are so few and far between, we can never really be sure if these references exist within the universe that Deadpool exists in or if he is referencing something beyond his available reach. To complicate this idea, certain characters will even respond to these references and be unaware of what he really is referencing like in *Deadpool: The Gauntlet Infinite Comic Issue 13* (2014) where he quotes Obi-Wan's famous "Strike me down" catchphrase. When the villain questions what he is talking about, he responds with the same confusion saying, "You know, I dunno—it never made sense to me either" (Duggan, p.20). Since this reference is never fully fleshed out, we can never be sure – we are stuck in limbo with Deadpool as well.

2.2.4 Break 4: Referring to the comic.

One of the most interesting aspects about Deadpool's character within the comic book confines is his ability to comment on the various aspects of the comic book itself. Commonly utilized aspects of the comic from such as onomatopoeia, speech bubbles, and more are recognized and commented on by Deadpool. In Issue 2 of his 3rd volume (2012), Deadpool is impaled by an elephant. In usual cases like this, the artist or author would include a slew of seemingly random letters to create the illusion of sound, or onomatopoeia within the confines of the panel. In this case, "sploorp" is representative of the sound that we could infer to hear when it comes to a human body being fully impaled by an elephant's tusks through the mid-section. Since Deadpool has a regenerative healing factor as part of his list of abilities, this is not a life ending injury for him and he can comment on the event as if he is not affected by this injury at all. He says, "Gross. My body's never gone – "sploorp" before" (p.17). Deadpool makes direct reference to a seemingly unknown aspect of the comic book to most comic characters and breaks the fourth wall by again, recognizing the medium and the aspects it includes within it. In this instance, the purpose seems to be for the sake of comedy, trying to incur a laugh from the audience out of such a ridiculous occurrence and commentary.

In another example of Deadpool's recognition of his medium, Deadpool can alter comic panels on his own will, "rip" pages, and use elements of the comic book to seemingly his own personal gain or for the progression of the story. In Issue 885 of *Deadpool Team-up* (2011), he fully realizes that he is living in a comic book and can alter the pages at his

own will. Deadpool does this to warn his past self of impending doom speaking to himself in previous panels from the “future”. Deadpool’s recognition of his situation being within a comic format shows his awareness for his purpose in his reality. He knows that he lives within the confines of the four panels and his awareness of this fact gives him an edge over his opponents. Usually, this break has no progression for the narrative, Issue 2 is rare in that case while Issue 885 sticks to this rule.

He can also comment on the conventions that we expect in a comic book as if he reads them himself. Things like healing factors, superhero landings, and superhero poses are all platitudes we expect from comics and can all be used and commented on by Deadpool for the sake of comedy, parody, or aid in his fights. As a result of such instances, we are reminded of the format that we are viewing by one of the characters within that format, breaking the fourth wall, and bringing me to the final, and most unique aspect of Deadpool’s fourth wall breaks.

2.2.5 Break 5: Recognition of Self as a Character.

The least experienced but most important kind of break that Deadpool can perform is a recognition of himself as nothing more than a character in a comic book. This may seem like the previous break, the recognition of the format he exists within, but this is the most reality bending break not just for Deadpool, but also for us, the spectators. In certain versions of the Deadpool character such as in Issue 34 of his 1st volume, he will outrightly state his place in our universe that his existence is for the enjoyment of the audience and he does not actually exist (1997). He is not real, and he knows it. This

causes plenty of story issues for the character to tackle and challenge the usually upbeat and wacky character into a state of self-reflection where he questions his own mortality or, in his peculiar case, his immortality in a way.

If we accept these moments as Deadpool being fully aware of his place as a character, then this is the biggest break that he can make in the fourth wall, stepping across that line as much as possible into our world. Being fully aware that his actions or thoughts or memories do not have any effect on the real world, is a nihilistic viewpoint that almost places his character in the real world. Since Deadpool is aware of his actual place in the real-world reality, this puts the idea of Deadpool into a very real context. Loki even attempts to cause some form of existential crisis within him in Issue 37 of the same series by repeating his admission of the man with the typewriter to him, but since Deadpool's already privy to the idea, he has no reaction (Priest, 2000). He is correct in the fact that he, as a physical being, does not exist. However, Deadpool the fictional character being aware of his place in our reality or lack of place in our reality, shows that he has an awareness of our reality almost as if he is an active participant in our world. He is a real being, in a sense.

This idea comes to blows in the final page of one of Deadpool's notable graphic novels, *Deadpool Kills the Marvel Universe* (2012). This moment has Deadpool breaking across the fourth wall and into our reality in the most explicit way. This version of Deadpool goes through a portal and lands outside the writer's room of this exact comic. The comic authors and artists are all present and are currently writing the exact moment that

Deadpool is experiencing at the same time. He tells the audience, again by speaking directly to us, that he sees us watching, noting his awareness as a character within a comic book and he will be, ‘done with these jokers...and this universe before you know it. I’ll find you soon enough,” (p.20) substantiating his place in this version of reality as well as our own. He is interacting with his own creators, recognizes their positions, and goes a step further to speak to his real creators – the audience.

2.3 The Merc-with-a-mouth’s Metafiction

By receiving similar expectations no matter what form Deadpool appears in, he consistently breaks the fourth wall. In film he talks to the audience, in video games he talks to the players, and even in fan created content Deadpool’s identity can provide a metacommentary on the situation at hand (Death Battle!, 2014). He has a unique aura to his character that perpetuates across all his appearances and, when this identity is not sustained in other media, this feels like a betrayal to the character. For example, *X-Men: Origins* (2009) and their portrayal of the Wade Wilson character caused major uproar from the audience as this character felt like a disservice to the entire aura of what is Deadpool. He did not break the fourth wall, he did not have the same happy go lucky attitude his comic counterpart sustains, and he barely made any jokes whereas the comic book version nearly cannot take a breath without making a joke. As a result of his fourth wall breaks, recognition of purpose, and the audience centered focus of comics, the concept of Deadpool has implanted himself within our culture across multiple lines, creating a very real, not necessarily tangible, being that has impact and works within the

realm of the audience's reality. In non-fiction works such as *The Things They Carried* (1990) by Tim O'Brien for example, the idea behind truth and reality is a sticky one. What an author puts forth as being the truth may not have been exactly what happened, but to the author it is still truth. On a similar level, when an author writes themselves in their writing, it may not be the exact replica of the author's person onto the page, but rather our perceived identity of the author, something else entirely, creating a new identity for the author's name (Foucault, 1969). Deadpool does the inverse here. At the end of the day, we can boil this entire argument down to the fact that we know Deadpool really is not a real tangible being and therefore, has no place physical place in our reality. But his fourth wall breaks make that assumption a little less concrete.

As I mentioned, breaking the fourth wall is not something that an audience is meant to expect from entertainment in general. Except for the recent spike in fourth wall breaks in sitcoms, we generally approach different forms of media with a certain degree of separation from the characters, plot, and environment of the medium we are spectating. To break this expectation and instill a sense of discomfort in viewers, the horror film genre uses the unsettling technique of characters staring straight into the camera during a moment of intense distress to offput the audience. We are not supposed to be looked at by the characters in media and when they do, it instills senses of dread, anxiety, discomfort and all the feelings a horror film aims to displace in a viewer (McAndrews, 2019). This technique shows the capacity for the audience member to feel as if they are directly involved or affected by what they are viewing.

But a spectator is what we usually remain as in the enjoyment of entertainment, not participants (Burke, 2015). But as we have previously seen, comics require us to be a bit more than just spectators. Comics require participation from their audience, and this is precisely what separates the use of fourth wall breaks in comics from the use of fourth wall breaks in film and television as well as what separates Deadpool from most every other comic book character. Even when film breaks the fourth wall to include the audience, the narrative still plays on as it is supposed to, putting audiences back in the spectator role since we have no real agency within the confines of the film. But with comics, when we are already in a more participant-designated role and we have a degree of agency in the narrative, we become more engrained in the comic at hand.

This concept allows for Deadpool to become a character, like the author in non-fiction writing, that is perpetuated across all mediums and audience members as inherently Deadpool. Deadpool turns the panel into a window in which he can constantly reach across, put his arm arounds us, and interact with us in a way that no other comic book character really can. He has an awareness of his own reality, our reality, and can skirt that line with such ease that his presence in culture is easily felt. In a way, Deadpool does not really break the fourth wall, he just opens it so he and the audience can communicate better. Since comics are already a very reader intensive format, Deadpool makes it easier for us by including us in his life too. The character displays the awareness of limitations for his reality, and thus, in a way, feels as if he is reading this comic alongside us. He is also a spectator, like us, while also remaining an active participant in the comic itself putting him in a similar role with us.

3 Adapting the Panel

Walking into a comic shop for the uninitiated may seem intimidating for most. Where would you begin? There are too many issues, characters, volumes, and collections for most anyone to make sense of even for a single character like Deadpool. To make classifying the nearly infinite number of variances in the comic book community, comic readers, collectors, and scholars alike classically categorize American comic books into four eras or ages: the bronze, silver, golden, and modern age. This classification is generally accepted, though plenty of comic lovers have their own structure in mind. I will refer to this general grouping of ages as the Classic Ages given their historical and traditional connotation, but recently, a new structure has begun to give rise for comic lovers and aficionados. This structure is what I will refer to as the Grand Ages, named after the creator of this structure: Alex Grand of Comic Book Historians.

Citing the Classic Age structure as original inspiration, this structure doubles the number of ages from four to eight citing these ages as the platinum age (1897-1937), the golden age (1938-1947), the atomic age (1948-1955), the silver age (1956-1969), the bronze age (1970-1984), the dark or copper age (1985-1991), the extreme age (1992-1998), and most importantly for this chapter – the movie age (1998-2016) (Grand, 2016). While I find both structures appropriate and well-developed, the categorization of eight ages begins to include aspects of comic books outside of the physical page which as we have seen has been happening for quite some time. This will prove necessary to encompass all that can

be possibly classified within comic book history as the impact of comics tends to increasingly widen outside of its initial place in culture.

As a result of the recent fascination Hollywood has with comic book adaptation and the change that they force comics into, we are currently living in what would be considered the Movie Age of comics (1998-2016). This categorization was created in 2016, limiting its scope up to that year, but comic book films continued to gain popularity and impact into 2021 and with the projected slate of announced projects from both DC and Marvel (Chitwood, 2021), this age will most likely continue for plenty of years to come. The transition into the film world for comic books did not only have an impact for film, but inversely affected the comics culture as well.

These films create general interest for the comic book market, they create synergy between mediums for a company's reach to extend, and previously underappreciated characters have seen upward spikes in audience following. This has even inspired comic book writers to adapt inaugural solo series for these characters. Specifically, the character of Nebula recently received a limited series as of February 2020. In the years before, actress Karen Gillan brought life to the character of Nebula in live action adaptations in a fashion unexpected by comic fans. Her performance gave Nebula a more sympathetic side to a lesser-known character to create a following for the luphomoid (her alien race). To take advantage of such a rise, Marvel Comics expounded on the opportunity to widen the fan base of this character and bring as many of the film fans into the comic world.

As a result of this development and plenty of other elements, it is becoming harder and harder to draw the line between certain aspects of comic books and their adaptations and how they interact (Cohn, 2020). With how often one influences the other and vice versa, the comic book film adaptation obsession approaches a convergence between the usually separate mediums (comic books, television, film, and more) to operate within their own multi-medium based form of entertainment. This incorporation of multiple formats to achieve one singular vision has crossed into new territory with the singularity of the previously mentioned MCU's fanbase expanding outside of just comic book fans and into the zeitgeist. This requires a closer look on the developed conventions of comic book adaptation filmmaking.

Comparing comic book film adaptations and their comic book counterparts is often difficult since there are so many factors to consider. Loose to strict adaptation aside, this chapter is focused on the reformatting of visual aspects in comic books directly to the movie screen - a one to one translation, a copy and paste from a comic book panel to a movie frame in a way. It is a common practice to the point where it is expected of modern adaptations to have some direct reference, narratively, stylistically, or visually, to the source material's inspiration in some fashion. Naturally, story elements are the primary focus in this regard as the source material narratives, events, and characters are the main source for adaptation to film, but my focus here lies solely within the visual aspect of adaptation of the panel. In this case, the conventions of the comic panel get broken and put back together onto the film to frame their visual elements to the initiated film audience.

3.1 Panel Recreation

The impetus for this chapter arose very naturally for me from an adaptation staple that makes the hearts of comic nerds flutter (again, like myself for instance). In the community, the instances of this staple are referred to as a few names: an easter egg, a reference, an homage for some. In each of these cases, the film directors and directors of photography recreate the presence of the panel in the most exact way possible by replicating colors, poses, and visual framing from the original comic into the film's language every so often. There are plenty of these examples available in varying degrees from exact to similar recreations and they accomplish different tasks for the comic book film viewing community. These tasks vary between their use for the narrative process or their use for visual iconicity. All of which are tailored to the initiated fans that have read or interacted with the original comic page that gets mirrored onto the film screen, framing the comic panel to amplify these imperative moments.

For this example, Spider-man is no stranger to this important aspect of comic related media with plenty of visual referencing in the character's entire aura even across different mediums and most promotional material for the web head. Classic spider-poses, the common poses that Spider-man is drawn into from the comics, are perpetuated across every medium the character is included in. One of these mediums even extends to the video game world such as the recent iteration in *Marvel's Spider-man* (2018), the PlayStation title that worked those well-known spider-poses into the mechanics, movements, and web-swinging of the game frequently. The movement and positioning of the character is just as important as the poignant stories that the character Peter

Parker/Spider-man encounters. Since the visual aspect of the character is nearly as important as the narrative aspects, connecting the two creates a new and impactful response from the audience, or players in this case, that draws them deeper into the medium to amplify a moment without the need for further elaboration on the adaptive medium's part (Burke, 2015). This same idea is also perpetuated across the film adaptation realm as well.

3.1.1 Narrative Progress

Sam Raimi's *Spider-man 2* (2004) takes great inspiration from the comic storyline known as *Spider-man: No More!* One of the most important parts of this story in the comics is visually exemplified in *The Amazing Spider-man Issue 50* (1967) of the inaugural Spider-man comic series. In this story, Peter Parker leaves his spider suit as well as the responsibilities that came with it in a trash can after turmoil that challenges his tenacity for the web slinger identity and all the trouble it brings. The visual imagery of this panel is recreated in *Spider-man 2* (2004) at a similar point as the character's mental health takes a toll in the film. The positioning of the trash can, the suit, and the character are equivalent to each other even down to the placement of how the mask spills out of the trash can.

In a second instance, *Spider-man: Homecoming* (2017) performs a similar task. Another classic moment in Spider-man's history took place in *The Amazing Spider-man issue 33* (1966) of the same volume. Spider-man, assumedly crushed under the weight of heavy debris, pushes himself physically and mentally to free himself from the predicament. This

comes early on in Spider-man's legacy and exemplified a defining feature of the character: persistence. This exact panel as well as similar story beats were recreated in *Spider-man: Homecoming* (2017) when, in similar circumstances mentally and physically, the framing of the shot and composition of the panel become synonymous as the character reaches a developmental milestone in his identity.

3.1.2 Visual Iconicity

Similarly, with less narrative purpose, other comic book films have recreated panels too, but off the basis of their general visual iconicity. This aspect feels most like homage in film than it does to most other instances of panel recreation in the way that it serves no narrative purpose but for aesthetic and/or stylistic purposes. Within the MCU alone, there are plenty of moments like this. In fact, if the criteria for this concept would be incredibly wide, there is little in a comic book film adaptation that we could not attribute to the visual iconicity of the source material. We could attribute most costumes, casting choices, prop design, and location scouting to the concept of visual iconicity since filmmakers often strive to replicate the comic book as much as possible visually as a rule of thumb. Filmmakers design similar costumes and cast similar looking actors to the characters, then they place in them familiar settings all to show the relationship between the comic and its adaptation.

Some of the most explicit examples of this technique appear in both the Captain America franchise and the Iron Man franchise within the MCU. Starting with Iron Man, the superhero's staple landing, more commonly known as the "superhero landing", is found

everywhere in popular culture these days even outside of superhero media. This three-point landing, where the character places one knee and one fist down on the ground after dropping from a large height, oozes strength, courage, and intensity – all the things we want a superhero to embody. Originally based in Japanese mech anime and manga, this pose first made its way into American comics on the cover of *The Invincible Iron Man* #76 (1998). While not considered groundbreaking in the realm of American comic books at the time - even by the pose's artist Adi Granov (Rahan, 2017), this pose has perpetuated across characters and titles to even become the brunt of a constant Deadpool joke in his 2016 film. It has even been acknowledged as such a platitude in the superhero world that it has been deemed a superhero landing. When this landing is recreated in other films, we think nothing much of it. But in the instance of the Iron Man film franchise, this pose is a nod to the creator himself. Recreating the panel in this way serves no distinct narrative purpose for the story, but it does instill a familiar sense visually and stylistically to expand on the moment at hand.

Also, within the MCU, *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) achieves a similar response from its audience through the same technique. The penultimate moment of the film is also a nod to the comic inspiration of this film, the *Civil War* comic event from Marvel. In the comics, the civil war connotation of the title is suggestive of a war within the Avengers team, not the setting in which this event takes place. Our heroes are pitted against each other over massive themes within the comics universe – security, privacy, politics, etc. The two heroes that lead each side are Tony Stark/Iron Man and Steve Rogers/Captain America as their formative ideologies begin to clash. At the end of both

comic and film stories, the end of the final fight leaves Tony and Steve at each other's throats in the iconic pose found on the cover of the 7th issue and toward the end of the issue (2007).

Both heroes give it their all while locked in a physical stalemate representative of their corresponding moral clash where Steve Rogers, with his vibranium circular shield, is pushing against Tony's two handed repulsor blast. The film adaptation of this comic event leaves a ton of story out and primarily uses the overall narrative for inspiration to provide for a looser adaptation. The general trend of the narrative is followed, but with much less time to do so. As a result, multiple characters are left entirely out of the film wherein their comic counterparts are integral to the comic event. Regardless, the film includes a specific moment that recreates the penultimate panel from the comic event. The pinnacle of the film is synonymous with the comic event, and to signify this, the duo of brotherly directors, the Russo brothers, decided to recreate the imagery of the comic's narrative height in the film in a nearly identical fashion that is less reflective of the story impact and more as what is known as fan service in the community.

3.1.3 Fan Service

It should be noted that 13 years later, in terms of Spider-man alone, that with a different actor for the character of Peter Parker/Spider-man and completely different production company and crew, this similar technique of panel recreation is sustained. This shows that the technique has valuable use for impact that works exceptionally well from one visual medium to another and proves its worth to remain alongside those plentiful and

lovely Stan Lee cameos (Oswald & Acuna, 2019). Each of these instances have a sense of iconicity that is born out the contexts surrounding these recreations. Filmmakers can refer to these assumed previously experienced moments visually for the audience members that have read the comics to connect the two. They almost act as a reference point to direct the audience's reception of the moment. Burke (2015) refers to these connections as, "graphic narrative base units that have a measure of autonomy, and which are organized by punctuation-like transitions" (p.181). We already understand the context, emotion, and story of the initial appearance of such visual imagery so that when we experience it again, the message becomes more effective and expands on the capabilities of the comic panel and film screen. It says more about the moment than a film can say by relying on the audience's assumed prior knowledge to expand on the moment at hand (Walker, 1994). The panel is reframed to instill similar responses from the audience in both instances and becoming more impactful for the film.

For a more iconic-driven reason with less regard to narrative development, panel recreation for the sake of style does something a bit different. This practice is more of a conversation between filmmakers and audience members. Production companies and film studios can visually show that they are aware of the impact these stories and their fans have on their reception and provide moments where they serve the fans the aspects that they want to see from specific adaptations. These days, as I mentioned, an objective view on a comic book film is nearly impossible to have if it seems like the filmmakers completely ignore the elements that made the source material so great and decide to not 'serve their fans' (Wucher, 2016). Where *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009) could have

been a forgettable action movie without Hugh Jackman's Wolverine or *Green Lantern* (2011) could have just acted as a more comedic superhero film without Ryan Reynolds' Hal Jordan, the decision to include the adaptation aspect into the film inherently changes how the film is received. As opposed to original creations, filmmakers must step into a new world with new rules when they approach adaptation of such an integral character and moments like this or risk the reception of the film being less than acceptable. For these films, inaccuracy of a character or complete revision of the elements of the adaptation can ruin an objectively good film. Moments like this show the audience that the filmmakers participate in that conversation regarding adaptation by recognizing the importance that the source material has on the audience.

3.2 Panel Representation

For some films, the need to present comic elements in a more accurate fashion creates a stricter form of adaptation for comic books; a form in which the entire film bases its aesthetic and narrative value off the source material by recreating imagery, revisiting plot points, replicating transitions in a new form, and basically working as the most representative example of a comic source as possible as to be as faithful as possible. One of the main purveyors of such technique is the popular film director Zack Snyder. Snyder, who has a slew of film properties under his belt and has recently received such admiration that his vision for *Justice League* (2017) after complications during the film's initial filming caused an uproar in the comic book community, received a special rework and release on HBO Max titled *Zack Snyder's Justice League* (2021). One of the most

important titles in comic history, DC's *Watchmen* (1984) from Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons was previously adopted by Snyder in 2006 as a full-length feature film with the same title. As *Watchmen* is one of DC's most popular properties, it was bound to cause intense discussion amongst the fans especially after the work's original creator, Alan Moore, has proven to be less than supportive for adaptations of his work in general (Grater, 2020). No wonder Snyder attempted to recreate the graphic novel as closely as possible if he was already under scrutiny from the original work's author. The adaptation follows similar narrative points as well as action, but the seemingly small changes that are made to the story divided the audience as such an impactful graphic novel would. As for the visual elements of the film, panels, moments, and even transitions were pulled straight from the comic as inspiration, copy and pasting to the highest degree in terms of adaptation (Van Ness, 2010).

Zack Snyder has created his own distinct style for film that is at the highest degree in his *Watchmen* (2006) film. He utilizes dramatic coloring, intense action, and plenty of slow motion in his films and this film is no exception. Even acknowledging the shortcomings this adaptation has, I would argue that his unique style in filmmaking is the closest thing we can get to a live action recreation of a comic book. His style encompasses similar aspects of the comic reading process into his adaptation to amplify the reaction from the audience in the film, transferring similar results to the screen. For example, Snyder's slow motion is like multiple panels depicting quick transitions of a singular action to extend the comic's moment. On top of his style retaining similar responses, the narrative of his film is nearly identical to the graphic novel with very little plot points or scenes

being left out. The concept of panel recreation happens in nearly every frame of the film. Most every panel's positioning, color, and design is recreated with such regularity that the film frames are nearly identical to the panels they attempt to replicate. Even most of the dialogue is replicated in this form. In this case, we can see one of the multiple examples of the replication between comic panel and camera shot in this film.

While striving to replicate the magic of the graphic novel into a new format, virtually nothing new was achieved even when replicating transitions as closely as possible. This example is where panel recreation goes a bit too far in its reach. The purpose behind adaptation at its core is up to discussion with plenty of audiences requiring adaptations to stay as close to the original as possible or as distinct from the original as possible. In this case, the attempt to replicate the comic form into a film form was much less successful in terms of its reception. For this instance, barely anything new was added. There was not much that could separate the two pieces of media from each other and as a result, reception fell generally flat. The audience had seen this all done before, and as I will touch more on in Chapter 4, the gaps between panels were filled when they did not need to be. While Snyder may have created a film that was extremely respectful of the source material, changing the format for the story had little effect on the audience. And especially in this case, content is inherently linked to form and audience reception will adjust as such. As much as Snyder tried to replicate the comic in his film, similar results cannot be expected of transitioning the entirety of the graphic novel onto the film screen as exactly as possible (Benjamin, 1969).

3.2.1 Style Representation

In an instance where the comic book is successfully translated onto the film screen *Spider-man: Into the Spider-verse* (2018) is an anomaly in the world of comic book adaptations. Heralded as the greatest Spider-man film by many, this animated film follows the lesser-known Spider-man: Miles Morales. Introduced in 2010 by Brian Michael Bendis, Miles is half black and half Puerto Rican separating himself from the classic white male superhero known as the original Spider-man: Peter Parker. This film follows similar narrative beats to Miles' origin story (and plenty of other comic narratives) while interacting with a version of Peter Parker that feels familiar because of intertextual references to previous incarnations of the web head. This film, instead of taking comic panels and introducing them in a foreign format, holds the comic aesthetic as its main inspiration behind the film's animation by utilizing classic comic style elements such as onomatopoeia, thought bubbles, Kirby crackle, Ben Day dots, and other elements of comic books. This film basically acts as a moving comic book to appease the comic loving audience members while introducing a fresh and innovative take on comic adaptation.

Instead of attempting to translate the imagery of comic books using film techniques and similar positioning, this film utilizes common comic book elements and unique animation techniques to achieve an entirely new approach to comic book adaptation. Granted, this film does have a slight advantage over live action adaptations as animated features do not have to be as grounded as live action does and the availability for style adaptation of the comic can be more abundant in an animated genre (Lefevre, 2007). For this film, animators

can use Ben Day dots to establish focus, Kirby crackle for visual effects, and even utilizing separation between film frames as a narrative purpose on top of a stylistic element. For live action, these elements are not as readily available for a fully live action adaptation and thus, translation of the comics medium and animated medium can yield more similar results.

The best, and most interesting aspect about the last point, is the concept of animating Miles' character "on 1's and 2's". This is common animation terminology that dictates whether something is animated every single frame (on 1's) or every other frame (on 2's) to achieve different movements and effects for the character. In the beginning of the film, Miles is very clumsy as Spider-man; he has no idea what he is doing and fumbles in his movements often. To show this visually in a deeper layer, the creators would animate Miles on 2's to achieve a choppier, less fluid form of motion from the character.

Meanwhile, more experienced characters like Peter Parker or Spider-Gwen are always animated on 1's to show how fluid and natural their movements are. After Miles encounters a bit of development, the animators change his animation to be animated every single frame, on 1's, as a visual sign of development for the character (Insider, 2019). In this sense, the film reworks and reframes the concept of the gutter into a more representational way that may not seem obvious at first but has purposeful intent to change the reception of a character by visually utilizing a similar technique to the gutter in comics and letting the space between the panels (or film frames) create meaning as well. Instead of using the comic itself for inspiration, comic concepts are applied to a

new format in this form of adaptation to adapt the most respectful parts of the comic form and frame similar techniques between film and comics.

3.3 Framing Panels

Comic book film adaptations are a difficult field to maneuver; there are plenty of aspects to consider in how the director wants to reframe the comic panel in a new format either for the purpose of plot or style. Comics provide an abundance of elements to adapt onto the silver screen, even down to gutter-like concepts in the film's creation and shot framing in filming a movie, the aspects that are available from the comic panel receive similar treatment. A director must choose which elements of the panel they wish to include within the confines of the silver screen and then they must use those elements in a specific fashion to frame the exact style or narrative at play for their adaptation. As Liam Burke argues that comics and film, "occupy the same aesthetic genera, if not quite the same species, only being distinct as ballet from boxing" (2015, p. 170). This relationship between the two mediums provides for a break in the comic panel, by disassembling its properties and rebuilding them to provide for deeply impactful moments throughout the adaptation that operate through showing instead of telling in a sense.

Like I said, I am more focused on the visual availability of such elements and how they relate back to the intended audience. I also recognize that these elements are only most effective for informed audience members, the ones who may already be familiar with these elements where seeing them replicated on the film screen acts as a sort of confirmation and connection between readers and their comic books. In the same way

that Deadpool makes readers feel connected to his comic, these film techniques illicit a response in the viewers that feels like a similar situation. Fans are just as integral to the comic book adaptation process as the comics themselves based out of our already complex relationship with comics. These moments listed serve as a nod toward the comic loving audience to make the film a more community-based experience.

4 Reading the Panel

As I mentioned in the introduction, Marvel Comics and DC have nearly a full century of work under both of their utility belts. To make categorization of these works a bit easier for collectors and comic nerds alike (myself included), comics have been classically sectioned into four main eras or ages as they are commonly known: the golden age (1938 to 1956), the silver age (1956 to 1970), the bronze age (1970 to 1985), and the modern age (1985-Present day). These are what I refer to as the Classic Ages for categorization. Each of these ages usually has a specific comic or culture related reason for transitioning into the next age.

For example, in the Classic Age categorization, the silver age is filled with controversy surrounding violence and rebellion among young readers. These issues sparked the Comics Code Authority and for Spider-man's inaugural comic series, *The Amazing Spider-man*, this caused a few problems. In *The Amazing Spider-man Issue #121* (1973), Gwen Stacy, a prominent female character in the Marvel comics universe as well as Spider-man's first major love interest, dies because of an altercation with the villain Green Goblin. This issue was one of the first few comics to disregard the CCA seal in their publication and as a result, this issue is noted as one of the many events that lead to the transition from silver to the bronze age (Blumberg, 2003).

There also exists a similar categorization of comic book ages, but into eight different eras. This categorization cites major themes and content changes as well as social and cultural impact on comics production and how the audience reacted to such changes in

the comic world. In this categorization, what is the Dark or Copper age lasted from 1985 to 1991. Disregarding the CCA approval Marvel and DC especially began to produce more complex and dark superhero tales. The major standouts from this era include *Watchmen* (1986) and *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) which took the conventions of the superhero story and reinvigorated it giving rise to incredibly emotional, impactful, and compelling stories previously unexpected from the comic form.

All this to say, that comics have an incredibly evolutionary history that ebbs and flows with the times that they are produced within. With major cultural and societal issues driving comic production, it is no question that the content of the comic changes as well. This provides for a more difficult process to translate comics into the digital age. Some properties that are created for the digital outlet do it well, but when it comes to the transition of previously physically printed comics into the digital space, the translation ends up breaking the original intent of the comic to a less investing experience for the reader. As a result, the once participant readers become more like spectators.

4.1 Digital Transition of Comics

Comics have even begun to extend outside of the traditional print medium as of late. Film adaptations aside, innovation in the form of the comic book have been accelerated with the introduction of webcomics starting as early as the 1990s. One of the more prominent productions within the webcomics realm is the title of *Homestuck* (2007) by Andrew Hussie. This webcomic pushes the definition of what we can define a comic to be by including mini games, chat logs, videos, and more within the confines of this webcomic

in a fresh digital format for readers. This format for the digital aspect of comics breaks the conventions of the panel to provide for a fully immersive outlet through the digital screen in the best way possible.

By trailblazing into this format, this comic had a mountainous challenge to approach in terms of maintaining the integrity of what a comic is while also challenging the conventions of comics to provide for innovative ways to interact and affect their readers. In this sense, the concept of a panel or a gutter is challenged to the highest degree. We are expectant of a static medium, with separation between the images or panels, and defined borders for the story to be included within as dictated by well-known comics creator Will Eisner - more on that later. However, here nearly every convention expected of comics is broken in a fantastic fashion. And I would argue, the right way for comics to step into the digital world.

4.1.1 Digital Translation of Comics

Transitioning into the digital format for comics was, as I said, a massive one and it has not been taken lightly as per webcomics changing the field of comics entirely. When entering his chapter surrounding the digital change of comics in *Reinventing Comics* (2000), McCloud cites the ultimate goal of comics, as well as most any art form, is to “find a durable mutation that will continue to strive and thrive well into the new century” (207). As we can see from the distinctions in the various ages of comics, authors and artists strive to keep up with the times and push past previous ages in new ways. Recently with digital reading making an impact on the reading community, comics have also taken

a dip into the kindle like reading format on a digital outlet that causes another break in panel reception. Major comic publishing companies as well as Amazon have taken strides to translate comics into the digital format in a new way that is specific to comics. As a result, the concept of reading comics in a ‘smart reading’ function has been made in a way to read comics in a more seamless and streamlined fashion with advertisements for this outlet touting a more cinematic experience. But for comics, it might not be the best way to do so.

At first glance, this seems like nothing but a good thing for the community; allowing comics to become more accessible to the general population can only breed for more comic fans to be made and my main argument here is not strictly against this function; it obviously has its positive outcomes for comics at large. My argument surrounds the minute details and processes that make comics so individual – specifically about the concept of the panel, the gutter, and reading the two. The main distinction I draw here between webcomics and the influence of smart reading functions is that webcomics are created and presented to the audience in the way that the author intended they be presented without any exterior pressure or changes. In smart reading functions, a new layer of authorship is added by fixing the reading process into a rigid one as well as additions to the form that are counterintuitive. Through translation of traditionally print comics into the digital format, the panel (or screen in this case) is broken in a negative way.

The function of smart reading in comic reading apps such as Marvel Unlimited and Comixology from Amazon adapts comics into a smaller view for mobile phones and focuses on various aspects of the comic page to provide the most streamlined process to read and enjoy comics. On large splash pages in comic books, the view of a smart reading function will zoom in and transition from various aspects of the large image, transition from text box to text box as well as panel to panel and zoom out after a page is finished to provide a fully realized image of the narrative being created. For standard rectangular panels, this can work just fine. But the idea of a panel has broken out of the box and incorporated plenty of other uses for readers to create meaning from. McCloud even recognized the limitations of his previous work in *Understanding Comics* (1993) to encompass what comics has developed into in *Reinventing Comics* (2000), breaking away from traditional conventions toward new ones with traditional inspiration (p.216-217).

4.2 Panel Evolution and Intent

Comics during their infancy generally stuck to the comic panel remaining as a rectangular shape. As most mobile phones retained a similar shape in their screens, transitioning from print to digital should remain relatively simple, basically just a copy and paste translation. And for the most part, the same message intended by the author is the same message retained. However, changes in the way the view transitions from panel to panel can color the process of reading the panel and meaning making in the gutter which has a diminished presence in this outlet. Furthermore, comics have evolved past a point of simplicity in the panel presence to provide for changes in the panels appearance

and thus, changing its reception by the reader. Comic panels today can be nearly any shape the author wants them to be as well as be undefined and abstract which can have intended effects for the reader to guide their reading and interpretation a certain way. This is one of the caveats McCloud mentions before diving into the third title in his seminal series: *Making Comics* (2006). It all depends on the author and artists intended meaning and how the audience perceives those intentions – that is what is most at stake here. These changes, while small, show how the ‘smart reading’ function of digital comic-reading apps take away from the individual aspect of the comic panel by directing the reader’s eye and misplacing authorial intent within this confined outlet. Relating back to semiotics, this function is acting as the object of the comic’s original intent, in this case the sign and object of the original creation of a panel. By increasing the presence of the object through this function, the availability for possible interpretants is less than what it would be in its original presentation. What makes comics so unique is the personal interpretation of the individual reader so forcing a reader to observe the comic in a specific fashion begins to remove this unique function of comics, the individuality that comics strive to achieve.

4.3 Flexibility in Comic Reading

With the variance of interpretants allowed from the comic form, the amount of personal context needed in comic reading allows for multiple literacies even within the subfield of comic reading. Gee (2003) writes, “there are different ways to read and write different things connected to different social practices so, in that sense, there are multiple

literacies” (18-19). If the availability for multiple literacies exists even on a more micro level, then changing the function of comic reading in a fashion that takes less audience participation does create a new literacy, but one that only requires a basic understanding or surface level reading of a comic to impact a reader. This is problematic for the goal of comics. If all this function does is provide a surface level reading of a comic, then the comic reading experience is much less unique and therefore, less effective. This does create a new literacy for comic reading, but one that negates all previous work from the comic artists and authors, one that requires less work in the gutter. Comics are also nearly fluid in their reception, as Cohn states in his book *Who Understands Comics?* (2020), “visual narrative processing is not uniform, and involves several interacting mechanisms” (55). There is no standardized process for reading comics. Those processes are being challenged and changed with every new issue and page that gets printed and making this process uniform would reduce the capabilities comics can have on readers. In the same vein, our reception of comics is evolving and changing in pace with the comics themselves.

Since we have no standard language or standard method for communicating a sign for comics in their creation or object, just general rules, we also have no standard reception for comics or their interpretants, just general rules as well. Attempting to enforce a precise and designated path for comic readers stands in opposition to the magic of comics. Standardization of the process would lead the reader toward a comic reading experience that does not feel like a preferred and traditional experience that usually requires readers to participate in a sense rather than just observe. Smart reading functions

remediate the panel to act as more of a screen disallowing for much interaction between comic and reader that McCloud imports on the practice of reading a comic. This screen restricts our view and our interaction with what is at play in a comic panel. We need that sense of individuality that McCloud constantly harps on between the panels to achieve the exact purpose of comics. Authors provide us with their intention through general suggestions in terms of the mechanics of comics, but ultimately, it should be up to the reader. Without this function, we become less participants in the comic and more of a spectator.

It is even found that comics are usually not read in the way that the author and artist may have intended further complicating the idea of a standard language of comics. Generally, the trend to follow in American comics is the typical Z pattern: left panel to right panel to the row underneath's left panel, rinse, and repeat. That trend is also constantly being changed in various comic pages. However, it is expected of comic readers to break that trend while reading several comics in varying panel formations and shapes. Using eye tracking technology, Foulsham, Wybrow, and Cohn conducted a study that tracked the eye movements of subjects while they read a comic. Their results found that, "although participants often followed the sequence of the panels, they also made fairly common movements backwards to previously inspected panels" (573). I must note that in these smart reading functions, it is possible to return to previously inspected panels, but having a suggested reading process diminishes the necessity or accessibility to do so.

This research also shows that comics should not become a universally streamlined process to allow for flexibility in the comic reading process. If breaking the typical or suggested panel organization is commonplace, then restricting that process to make it more difficult for readers to break the common convention is counteractive to the general rules of comic reading. Since the comic form requires a sense of variance in its reception, restricting that variance will ask less of the comic audience. As I mentioned previously, comics need active participation from the audience to be as effective as possible. We make them work. If that participation is not required as frequently in these functions, it removes that individualistic aspect that makes comics unique creating a process that is more representative of reading a novel than working within a comic.

4.3.1 Flat Reading

Especially in a comics format, the reading experience should be as free as possible. In *Unflattening* (2015), Nick Sousanis argues that standardized thought or understanding leads to “flatness”, an inability to see things from various perspectives and forms. He metaphorically warns the reader of flatness, writing, “what had first opened its eyes wide - darting, dancing, animated with teeming possibilities - has now become shuttered, its vision narrowed. The potential energy in this dynamic creature curtailed, never set-in motion leaving only flatness” (16-17). If we are to standardize the teeming possibilities in comic reading to a more restrictive one, the comic reading process becomes “flat”, as Sousanis would label and continues to explain, is more restrictive and narrowed.

When writing about the technological change made in comic books today, popular cartoonist Will Eisner (2008) addresses the possibilities of Webcomics and the easily foreseen change in the comic form as a result. Naturally, this is to change the definition of a comic and Eisner provides the boundary for which they fit in. He argues, “As long as comics remains a medium which does not have motion, sound or three-dimensionality, the narrative process is the same” (170). Here, I believe Eisner is being a bit too restrictive in his definition and I must disagree with him as McCloud proves to do in his work as well. Given the relationship that readers are shown to have with the comic reading process, I believe that the narrative process in comics requires a bit of freedom and personalization to reach the full potential of the comic. If that process is unchanged and there remains a sense of individuality in reading a comic, then webcomics do just that as well. The success of a comic is reliant upon reader experience, influence, and participation in and out of the comic panels. If we force a reader to observe the comic in a specific fashion by ‘smart reading’ functions, this removes the unique function of comics and changes the interpretation. If we expand the digital outlet that comics fall within rather than restrict it, we can continue to evolve comics into decades to come.

5 Conclusion

Comics and their corresponding media are nothing without the fans. Without our interaction, they have no value at their core. We have a symbiotic relationship where one influences the other and vice versa. Even when comics extend outside of their original media, the presence of the audience is felt and recognized. Comics have started to standardize the recognition of the audience and the necessity for such recognition, whether that recognition lies just outside of the comic panel window for Deadpool to communicate with, within the film screen frame to present familiar artifacts to a previously informed audience, or to attempt to make comics accessible to a wider audience by screening a pseudo translation into comic reading applications. While the last attempt may have fallen flat, pun intended once again, the translation shows a need for audience reception of comics that is distinct from other forms of media in a massive way.

As I have said plenty of times, comics continue to adapt to the challenges that they face with fresh conventional breaks in their presentation to create an immersive format that is unmatched in its reach. The audience meets it halfway with enthusiasm to support these creators and characters that continually challenge the form to carry us into the next era of comics. As McCloud began the conversation and Cohn takes the field into uncharted territory, there is still a plethora of research to be done regarding the form. As I continue my research, I plan to extend outside the boundaries of American comic books as well as the superhero genre as there are plenty, some would even say more, opportunities to

break new ground in the world of comics and subsequent research. I also plan to delve deeper into the relationship that those easter eggs and how that relationship evolves with the audience. But even as I venture deeper and deeper into those uncharted waters that Cohn wades in currently, I will continually find value in the heroes and pages that brought me to this research in the first place.

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