Moving Panels: Translating Comics to Film

by

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Chapter 1: Previously…

Comic books are currently the hot ticket when it comes to new source material for adaptations. Whether it’s long time series featuring characters such as Batman or Spider-Man, new comic properties, or even comics that haven’t been released yet, sequential storytelling offers filmmakers a well of ideas that seem to be ready made for translation to the big screen. The trend doesn’t seem ready to slow down and with the massive success of *The Dark Knight* Hollywood will likely continue scouring the comic world for more material for years to come. Not only is Hollywood taking comic properties and turning them into films, there is also a growing trend of creators crossing from one medium to the other. Noted Iron Man artist Adi Granov helped design the film version of the character while writer/directors like Joss Whedon are crossing over to write comics more frequently. Because of this it becomes important to ask ourselves how closely related the two media are and just how easy it is to move from comics to film and vice versa.

It’s easy, and most certainly correct, to say that comics and film are two distinct media, but this doesn’t get to the root of the issue. Just how much do these two media share, and are comics as natural a fit for translation to the screen as Hollywood seems to believe? My goal is to show just how disparate these two media are, proving that comics are much more than just storyboards for films that would be too expensive to produce. Despite this, it is still impossible to say that the two media are wholly different as they certainly share some aspects of visual storytelling. I intend to demonstrate how the two media possess unique identities in terms of their storytelling capabilities that will still coincide at times. As opposed to films being a
better version of comics or comics being a better version of film the two media are merely different. Neither is better, neither is worse, each simply has certain capabilities and certain rules that any creator must learn. And while creators moving from one of these media to the other might have a slight advantage over creators starting out in either of the two, each will require the artist to learn new and varied techniques so they can tell their stories in the most effective fashion possible. The goal of this thesis is not simply to distinguish these media, but to understand how they can relate to one another when they attempt the act of adaptation.

This raises an important issue, the notion of fidelity. For the purposes of this thesis fidelity will mean creating equivalent rather than identical effects across the media instead of referring to literal translation of images and content. As it stands the current mood in adapting comics tends towards a strikingly superficial approach to adaptations that still claims fidelity. One need only look at the film version of *Watchmen*, one of the most important comics of all time, to see this trend. In the words of the actor portraying The Comedian in the film, “‘It's so true to the book I can't even begin to tell you how. Everything is so true to the book it's insane. You can put anything that has been built for Watchmen next to a panel in the book and it'll trip you out. It's amazing.’” While this may be correct on the most base level, the movie certainly emulates the comic’s look, it misses a crucial aspect of why the original work looked the way it did. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons designed *Watchmen* to evoke classic comic books and their aesthetics, as such their choices for aspects of the

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book’s design, such as color, built upon the visual history of comics, something that most of the readers of the book would have been able to grasp. This creates a subtext for the work, commenting on the story and its relation to other stories that have preceded it. When the film version of *Watchmen* copies this visual style exactly, the subtext breaks down. Viewers of a mainstream film cannot be expected to have knowledge of the history of comic book aesthetics, and because of this the very decision to be “faithful” to the original interferes with the actual intent of the original’s design in the process of adaptation. Perhaps the film could have attempted to replicate aesthetic traditions from previous film adaptations of superhero comics, but this is not the case. *Watchmen* is tied into a long history of art, and more specifically the art of comics. The story relies on a variety of aesthetic and storytelling norms that have been built up over decades and as such it becomes more than just a simple story but a commentary on the medium as a whole. As such adapting the material to a different medium feels essentially pointless. Brian K Vaughan, a writer who works in comics, television, and in the near future film, put it most simply, “it's like making a stage play of Citizen Kane. I guess it could be OK, but why? The medium is the message.” The film ends up failing simply because it is too slavishly faithful to its source and in doing so loses sight of what made the original comic so important and effective. Admittedly *Watchmen* is an extreme example and it is quite rare for any work to be so strongly tied to its medium. On the other hand I believe it is useful to think about because it helps highlight the fact that

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no matter how close the two media may seem, they are inevitably unique in both their storytelling capacities and their aesthetic histories.

It would be easy to go on about how adapting *Watchmen* is an essentially unproductive task due to the fact that the story and its meaning is inherently tied into comics as a medium, but that would be too specific an example. In this thesis I would like to look into the issue of adapting material between media as a way to better understand the differences and similarities of each medium. As such I have selected three successful film adaptations of comic books that are not merely carbon copies of the material they are adapting. Each features a distinct level of involvement from the original comic creators in the adaptation process. This will let us see just how different comics are from film and just how much liberty can, and must, be taken while still remaining faithful to the original work. For my first case study I have selected *Hellboy: Wake the Devil* and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*. These two works do not feature identical stories but they do feature a director who was an immense fan of the comics and desired to bring them to the world of film along with the help of the original writer/artist. This case helps point out some of the current trends in adapting comics and ways that comics and films relate to the conventions of their media. I have selected *Persepolis* as my second case study because its film adaptation features the original writer/artist as a writer/co-director, insuring a very close relationship between the two pieces that will allow for a close look at how the process of adapting specific material can lead to either similar or dissimilar results. For my last case study I have selected the film *Iron Man* and a current ongoing series focused on Iron Man called *The Invincible Iron Man*. This pairing features a reversal of sorts since the
ongoing series was timed to coincide with the film’s release and capitalize on potential new readers. As such it presents a case where film influences the creation of a comic. It also presents the furthest removal between the source material and the adaptation and will provide a unique look into how comics and films work to thrill and excite mainstream audiences of each medium. These case studies can help illuminate the ways these two media are distinct and similar.

As it stands there is a relative lack of useful writing on comic book aesthetics, especially when compared to the large and extensive amount of work dealing with aesthetics in film. By and large, current comic book criticism seems to deal with the content of the works as opposed to the form. While there are obviously many critics who understand how comics function this seems to be of less interest to those writing about comics than interpreting what comics “mean” in a more traditional, literary sense. As such, symbolism and metaphors have come to the front in many critical essays while there is a relatively large hole where a formal discussion of aesthetics should reside. This style of literary comic criticism is not particularly useful for this project and is exemplified by Douglas Wolk’s work in his book Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean. Wolk’s work tackles larger issues that seem to interest him more than they actually engage with how comics work; to say his book is weighted towards the “What They Mean” side of his title is an understatement. Wolk states that, “Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text driven medium with added pictures; they’re not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and
traps and liberties.”³ While I certainly agree with Wolk’s assertion his book doesn’t do much of anything to prove this fact. Most of it deals with his interpretations of his favorite artists’ works or lists of things he loves about comics. There are certainly useful moments here and there where Wolk will break down a page layout and how the reader moves their eye along and comprehends the page, but such analysis is few and far between. Wolk’s work is not particularly useful in developing an understanding of comic book aesthetics and some of the rules that govern them. Also since Wolk is interested only in comics there is a lack of writing on how comics relate to other media, something that Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, author of Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, both talk about even if they do not devote large portions of their work to this comparison.

McCloud’s work on comics is a step in the right direction from Wolk’s but still doesn’t quite align with what would be useful for this undertaking. McCloud takes a big picture view of comics and ends up focusing more on large-scale theories than the small details of comics. He also has a tendency towards very specific labeling of techniques that he describes, breaking down and defining comics in ways that don’t allow for much wiggle room if one is to accept his definitions. Most of the time this isn’t a major problem since McCloud’s ideas are generally sound, but not everything seems particularly useful and some of his ideas even feel a bit restrictive. For instance, McCloud’s definition of “comics” reads: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an

aesthetic response in the viewer." While a seemingly good definition of comics, this leaves out one area that McCloud seems slightly biased against, single panel comics. These comics, such as The Family Circus, simply do not fit McCloud’s definition and this speaks to how McCloud views the medium. This is a bit of a problem because by focusing on the sequential nature of comics and other large scale issues McCloud spends less time with the smaller details of aesthetics and how they function within individual panels on a minor scale. This sort of analysis and understanding will be important if I intend to compare panels and shots between comics and films in a direct fashion. Yet, since McCloud never describes how, for instance, a long angle composition can affect a reader his work falls slightly short of what I need. While many of McCloud’s ideas are indeed strong, his focus tends to be on larger issues relating to comics such as how humans have been trained to read from left to right and then top to bottom, why this has occurred, and how this then in turn guides the norms of comic book storytelling. This is interesting and material that is certainly worth exploring but ultimately it, and McCloud’s intent focus on one aspect of comics that he calls closure, makes it slightly off the mark for the more focused aesthetic study I am undertaking.

McCloud describes closure as what the reader does in between panels or while they read a panel: they create the motion, time, and actions that one does not see but are suggested by the images. As McCloud puts it, “there lies a medium of communication and expression which uses closure like no other. A medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change,

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time and motion.” While I agree with McCloud to an extent, I believe he is slightly in error in this assertion. Certainly comics do not replicate the same subconscious closure that twenty-four frames per second brings, but I would argue that a cut in a film is very similar to a break in panels in a comic. The viewer or reader is asked to take the previous image and meld it to the current one while they attempt to build the relationship between the two spaces they are being presented with. This is a difference of degree, not kind, between the two media. The real change is that there must be more breaks in a comic since motion or a moving panel is not possible. Closure seems to be one of the key points of McCloud’s argument for what makes comics unique from other media and I simply can’t say I agree with him enough to make his work a solid base for my study of aesthetics. Closure and what happens in between panels will of course be an aspect of this study, but it will not be the unifying force in the way that McCloud seems to assume it must be. He makes good points about other areas of comics and how they function, but his work is based upon the concept of closure and as such it eschews a more specific approach of how panel layout functions or the ways in which the printed page can affect the reading of a comic.

This focus seems to build out of McCloud’s fascination with how readers interact with comics. He is very interested in understanding why comic books work and at times will sacrifice understanding how comics work because of this. This approach is easy to observe in the early portion of the book, McCloud talks at length about how different types of pictorial representation will elicit different reactions

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5 Ibid., 65.
from readers. He explains in detail how photorealism can work to distance a reader while abstraction, to a certain degree of course, can help focus a reader through a process he terms, “amplification through simplification.” I have no real qualms with his work in this area, it’s well reasoned, interesting, and provokes a very intriguing discussion on just why comics can look the way they do and why we as a humans respond to comics, but it simply isn’t particularly helpful for my work. McCloud paints comics as a medium that builds itself through its readers, and while I would agree that comics require more input from their intended audience than film does, I do not believe that this is as important, or even the defining separation between the two media. This leads back to McCloud’s decision to exclude single panel pieces from his definition of comics, he sees these as being no different than a simple still from a motion picture, implying that to be comics there must be some level of input from a reader beyond merely looking at a single image. There must be juxtaposition. McCloud’s driving interest is in the human and the ways they interact with symbols and art as a whole. This interest pushes him towards his definition of comics that relies on an important contribution from readers. Ultimately McCloud is less interested in how comics cue readers to understand them and more concerned with why readers understand comics in the way they do. Since my study requires a base that deals more strongly with how aesthetics shape a viewing or reading experience rather than how a reader helps create an experience *Understanding Comics* does not quite fit with the work I am doing.

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6 Ibid., 30.
McCloud’s book pointed me in the proper direction for this topic though. He consistently references Will Eisner as an exception to many statements he makes and one in particular was the most important exception in regards to the fundamentals of comics’ storytelling, “The difficult principles of comics composition and storytelling, the kind they don’t teach in books! * * * Well, okay, one book! Eisner’s again.” This then clearly points to Will Eisner’s books as one of the few ways a non-artist might peer into exactly how storytelling can function in comics on a purely aesthetic level. I read two books by Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* as well as *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*. Both of these books were helpful and contain many useful, if sometimes narrow, points of view for how to “read” comics. This builds out of Eisner’s goal for these projects; the books are based on courses that Eisner taught on comic artwork, and they are intended as instructional pieces. This moves them away from presenting definitions and unifying theories of comics, like McCloud’s, and instead showcases how to craft comics that will help tell stories. Eisner goes into detail about how he created many of his own stories and explains why he drew things in specific ways dealing with topics such as backgrounds, panel layouts, the page as a whole, and how specific drawings affect the story. For instance, this is how Eisner describes the way certain panel sizes can affect the image contained within, “A narrow panel evokes the feeling of being hemmed in—confinement; whereas a wide panel suggests plenty of space in which to move—or escape. These are deep—seated primitive feelings and work when used properly.”

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7 Ibid., 175.
This sort of explanation is a fantastic starting point for an analysis of comic book aesthetics but also highlights one of the weak points of Eisner’s work. Sometimes he tends to simplify, as he does here, and almost states that any one device can only have one effect. This seems untrue to me much in the way that a low angle in film is never guaranteed to mean the same thing but I doubt Eisner meant to imply that a narrow panel can only have one result for the reader. This flaw likely emerges from Eisner’s instructional method, he is attempting to teach neophytes and as such he tends towards simplifying concepts and working to craft a base level of understanding which will later be built on.

Giving a closer look at how Eisner pulls apart one of his own stories to explain how he fuses comic book aesthetics with the story being told works well to highlight his general approach to the form and how he teaches it. He reprints a story featuring his famous character, The Spirit, which relies on a surprise, science fiction oriented ending. Eisner explains his approach to the story in this fashion, “In the following Spirit story, “The Visitor” (February 13, 1949), the requirements of stagecraft demand a firm, head-on perspective throughout. This is for the purpose of increasing the sense of reality in what would otherwise be a fantasy plot.”

This basic level of understanding that at times seems almost too simple is what makes Eisner so important. He lends credit to all sorts of comic stories because he understands that any story will need form to back up the content it contains. More important than this is the fact that Eisner understands that comics will require their own visual language involving manipulation of panels, the style of art, the way characters are presented,

9 Ibid., 93.
and how an entire page of panels will present an image to the reader’s eye. Eisner sees all aspects of comics and has almost a full lifetime of experience working with them and his writings do well to show many of the intricacies of the medium.

Moving forward through Eisner’s description allows us to understand some basics of the medium and ways that we can consider it similar or dissimilar from film. Many of the comments Eisner makes revolve around his decision to stress eye level depictions of events, allowing for realism to become the default tone of the story. Even when he breaks from this style he explains it as a way to further enhance realism, “Here is the sole instance in which a bird’s eye view is undertaken. The intention is an orientation for a normal, everyday, believable setting.”10 Here we see something that could be easily replicated in film, eye level shots that stress realism and a lack of artistic presence can be used to set a viewer at ease and give a sense that everything is normal. Naturally this would require other decisions to be made that comics do not have to deal with, such as what kind of camera movements or if there would even be camera movements. It also presents different comic book storytelling techniques that must be kept in mind, Eisner explains other aspects of style that he deployed to stress the realism, “Every effort is made to keep the plot believable. The babies crawling all over the hero, the steady flat ‘beat’ of even ordinary (conventional) panels are all deliberately restrained.”11 Eisner’s ultimate goal is teaching storytelling and these few examples of how he decided to tell a story show how naturally he is able to both describe and create a story in a visual medium. Most useful about this is that it confirms for me an avenue of approach. Eisner takes what

10 Ibid., 96
11 Ibid., 96.
is essentially a formal approach to comics in the same way that formalists approach films. His work is interested in how the language of comics can reinforce storytelling and most effectively influence readers. Since this thesis is mostly concerned with how films and comics shape their audiences’ experiences with a story in unique fashion a formalist approach seems to be the most effective, and Eisner’s well-regarded and effectively written work confirms this kind of approach as a viable one.

Eisner also displays an interest in the differences between film and comics but doesn’t end up spending too much time dealing with this issue. His ideas present some interesting basics but never really gel into a cohesive or useful whole. For instance, Eisner describes ways in which comics and film differ in how their audiences interact with the two media, “The most important obstacle to surmount is the tendency of the reader’s eye to wander. On any given page, for example, there is absolutely no way in which the artist can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first. The turning of the page does mechanically enforce some control, but hardly as absolutely as in film.” Other small notes prove to be interesting but the reasoning behind them starts to stray from Eisner’s previously aesthetically fueled analyses. A page of panels showing the difficulty “cinematic” shots would present for a reader is drawn by Eisner and is then followed by another page where a more appropriate comic layout is presented to show the difference between the two types of storytelling. Eisner explains why readability breaks down, in his opinion, in the comic that utilizes filmic techniques, “The ‘reading rhythm’ of film rides on a flow of connected close-ups. This satisfies the ‘movie-experienced’ with understood action.

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12 Ibid., 40.
The ‘reading rhythm’ of comics is slower because it involves an intellectual input on a reader’s real experience.”\textsuperscript{13} This is one moment where I’m not particularly convinced by Eisner’s conclusion, especially considering the fact that it deals with social issues more than actual aesthetics. Eisner claims that movies use more close-ups because film viewers are trained to understand movies already. Eisner’s approach here feels flawed; he speaks about film as a series of related close-ups that are legible due to a viewer having seen a large number of films, which helps them understand film’s unique language. This isn’t completely wrong, but when Eisner then claims that comics do not function in this fashion something seems awry. Comics certainly speak their own language and have norms and traditions that help readers along and I’d like to move past this kind of social approach (meaning the assumption that a medium can be defined by outside forces rather than its own internal construction) and apply formal ideas to each medium much like Eisner does when he talks specifically about comics. General storytelling tendencies and basic preferences in relation to specific kinds of stories are more likely to illuminate the ways that the media diverge rather than trying to assign social reasoning to their aesthetic approaches. So while Eisner ultimately understands comics I believe that his comparison of comics and films leaves something to be desired and I hope this thesis is able to fill in that gap.

After delving into these works on comics and their aesthetics I am left with the belief that a formal approach will be the most useful fashion in which to approach this thesis. Neoformalism is a style of film analysis described by Kristin Thompson in

her book *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. It was a reaction to film studies that were largely predicated on psychoanalytic readings of texts that ultimately asked works to conform to a pre-determined methodology of understanding films and how they functioned. Formalism as an approach allows us to come to comics as a medium that interacts with its readers. Formalism begins from the fact that spectators of films are not merely observing but participating. Films have the ability to provoke viewers to make assumptions, engage with the storyline, and to create what the film may not show. This ultimately seems remarkably similar to McCloud’s arguments about closure functioning uniquely in comics. A formalist approach also corrects the literary concepts such as themes that dominate comic criticism. Kieron Gillen, a comic book writer, effectively sums up his frustration with the primarily thematic concerns comics criticism has taken up while talking about a book that deals with Grant Morrison’s comics that entirely avoids discussing aesthetic effects: “The avoidance of doing so fails to engage with comics as comics, rather than just as a vessel which carries ideas.”\(^\text{14}\) This impulse is one that McCloud sidesteps to an extent but ultimately cannot fully extricate himself from because he is interested in creating a large-scale understanding of comics and their history. This leads him to dealing with multiple different levels of ideas, not all of which are appropriate for this thesis. His work with elements of closure and how certain kinds of artistic styles will affect a reader’s emotional state are helpful but his work that attempts to understand differences in aesthetics between East and West in the realm of comics deals with social forces more than it does individual aesthetics. So while McCloud’s work is

strong when he deals with the basics of aesthetics he ultimately skews slightly too far into the social realm in his attempts to define the medium. Eisner on the other hand deals primarily with how to tell stories in the medium of comics and in doing so presents what is essentially a formal analysis of his own comics as a way to teach aspiring comic artists.

Moving forward I will be dealing primarily with how works of art have an effect on their audiences. How readers and viewers will come to understand art and the ways that they will interact with both comics and films. Comparing these interactions is the most important part of this thesis because it provides the most telling look at the ways that the two media separate and converge. I will be moving away from the kind of analysis that critics such as Douglas Wolk do and attempting to take up some of the issues that Scott McCloud brings up and push them further along to a more focused aesthetic study. Ultimately Will Eisner’s work with teaching comics will be a guide towards the style of comics analysis I will practice. This means I will be taking up issues that deal primarily with the way stories depict specific actions and the way these actions are depicted. This is where McCloud’s description of closure comes in handy as well as his more general work on stylistic choices, but Will Eisner’s more aesthetically focused approach that details how panel size, page layouts, and other formal traits work in tandem with content to tell stories are the ultimate guide for my analyses.

Having settled on a formalist approach to analysis I’d like to delve into a primer of sorts for how I will compare comics and films. I agree with Eisner’s belief that style and content must be married if a comic, or any other piece of art for that
matter, is to be successful and to help further illustrate this point I will examine a small portion of two similar scenes from the movie and comic versions of *Wanted*. These two works are both part of the mainstream of their respective media and fit comfortably into the world of action films/comics. Both scenes are successful in their construction and also work to illustrate how adaptations can alter their source material to most effectively take advantage of the new medium that story is taking place in. *Wanted* is a particularly interesting case because the film version of the story throws out almost all but the most basic elements of the comic’s story. It moves from a world where super-villains took over the world to a story about a league of assassins who kill those who will ultimately cause problems for the world. Both stories still focus on the same basic character, Wesley Gibson, and his development into a killer, but the reasons for this are largely changed. The story was likely shifted because the comic deals with a large amount of comic book tropes and satires that likely would have proved to be an unwelcome legal nightmare for a film, (the comic features a variety of characters meant to evoke famous heroes such as Superman and Batman) but a few scenes still remain in tact and it is one of these scenes that I’ll be looking at more closely.

The scene I will look at takes place early in the story and is one of Wesley’s earliest interactions with a group known as The Fraternity. Both versions of the scene feature the group forcing Wesley to shoot the wings off flies to help him understand his innate abilities as a killer. The first noticeable difference comes in the way that Wesley has a gun put to his head. In the comic Professor Seltzer asks Fox to persuade Wesley in one panel and in the next panel we see Fox with a gun pointed at Wesley’s
head. The next panel features a close-up of Wesley with Fox in the background still pointing the gun at Wesley. This three panel sequence nicely gets across the information in a way that is easily legible for a reader and helps to guide them through the beats of the story. The film also accomplishes this situation but handles the reveal of the gun pointed at Wesley’s head in a much different fashion. In the film Wesley tries to convince Sloan, the leader of The Fraternity, that he has him confused with someone else. This occurs in a straight-on close-up of Wesley’s face. While in the middle of a line of dialogue a clunk can be heard and Wesley tenses up while struggling through the end of his sentence. A slight camera move to the right follows this and reveals a man standing behind Wesley. He begins to speak and another cut occurs that showcases the gun pressed against Wesley’s head. The film utilizes sound design and camera movement, two tools that are not available to comics, to surprise in the viewer. The interruption of dialogue and the sudden awareness of off-screen space redefines the action of the scene in a fashion that helps align the viewer with Wesley as well as increase tension. The comic does not surprise the reader and instead plays this portion of scene in a slightly
more humorous fashion, relying on the idiosyncratic Professor’s dialogue to drive the moment along. This is a smart decision because a good comic writer knows that a reader’s eyes will likely wander across a page so retaining surprise in the reveal of the gun would need to be handled very carefully to succeed. It could be placed in the first panel of a page on the left side of the fold to create a surprise, this is because all comics come in two page spreads so any major reveals need to be kept for the left page otherwise a viewer could easily glance to the second of the two pages at any moment and spoil a surprise. Taking this course would define the story’s pacing in an extreme fashion, requiring the exact amount of story to allow this one moment to fall at one precise location. Ultimately, the reveal of a gun to Wesley’s head doesn’t quite seem to deserve such attention. This then leads Mark Millar, the writer, and J.G. Jones, the artist, to de-emphasize the surprise of the moment and focus instead on the characters and their dialogue.

Also worth examining is the lead up to Wesley shooting at the flies. Both the film and the comic intensify this segment but do so in different fashions. The film actually changes its story so it can have a diegetically motivated reason for its aesthetic style. The film uses copious amounts of slow motion during its action sequences and this is explained as the characters having the ability to make their hearts beat faster than normal so as to release extra adrenaline into their bodies and thus slow down their perceptions of the world. This is accompanied by subjective shots that feature a warping view of the world and the pounding of a heart on the soundtrack. The construction of this scene heavily relies on this, focusing primarily on Wesley’s face for his dialogue and then a subjective shot of the trashcan where the
flies reside. This shot of the trashcan becomes progressively more distorted as Wesley’s heart rate speeds up and similarly the soundtrack becomes louder and more focused on the beating of his heart as the tension mounts. This design is well suited towards film as it highlights Wesley’s subjective experience through a distortion effect that is tied into movement and sound design that reflects Wesley’s inner state.

The comic relies on different tools to help alert the reader to the rising tension and Wesley’s experience. Color becomes a major aspect of the scene’s design. The first three panels on the page consist primarily of green hues thanks to the Professor’s bizarre experiments depicted in the background. When Fox begins to count to three the background shifts; all of the actual elements that Jones previously drew disappear and the color changes from green to a mix of gray and red. The next panel carries this color scheme as well but in the third panel that depicts Fox pulling back the hammer of her gun the entire background shifts to red while a yellow sound effect proclaims, “KLIK!” This strategy is particularly well suited to comics because it is normal for the backgrounds of panels to be left vague due to the time constraints placed on artists who are putting out monthly issues. I do not believe this is the reason why Jones stopped depicting the background here, he is too meticulous in his construction to be that haphazard and he does not stop showing it entirely, but it does explain how easy it is to manipulate the background while remaining relatively subtle in a comic. If a film were to entirely obscure the background of a shot and replace it with a color it would be remarkably overt and that would most certainly undercut the tension of a scene such as this. Once more we see two scenes playing with a similar base and altering it to function effectively in different media.
This portion of the scene brings out something worth considering. It would certainly be possible for film to eliminate background detail and replace it with color, but the effect would be different in film than it would be in comics. Certainly filmmakers can utilize color in this fashion, Martin Scorsese frequently bathes scenes in red for instance, but it is not a particularly seamless device. It calls attention to the act of filmmaking while the use of such a device in comics does not call attention to the act of creation. Ultimately the two media can be different even when they can produce an image that is essentially the same. If that is not a strong argument for the difference of the two media I do not know what is. Of course there are moments where the media converge. The comic and the film both focus intensely on Wesley’s face at least once during this sequence. The film racks focus to Wesley’s face while he is shouting that he can’t see the flies and the comic features a shot of the middle of Wesley’s face where he expresses disbelief at what is occurring. Both film and comic focus on Wesley’s experience through close ups that help the reader see what Wesley is feeling. Another moment of convergence comes when Wesley fires his gun. While the film features a portion of these shots in slow motion there is also a shot of Wesley firing rapidly at the flies that is nicely mirrored by a
comic panel featuring a gun in the midst of shooting a bullet with three spent casings hovering just above the gun’s chamber. Both depict essentially identical actions and do so in a way that is simply and readily replicated in a different medium. The relationship of the two media is a complex game of give and take, of similarity and difference. Because of this the adaptation of *Wanted* succeeds in achieving fidelity to the comic because it introduces new storytelling devices and story content that help replicate the effects of the comic in a different medium.

This quick look at *Wanted* illustrates the ways I will compare comics and film. The way that adaptations address source material is one of the most important concepts I will deal with and is particularly enlightening. There are many different ways to approach particular scenes within a specific medium, and when adapting a work across media it becomes even more important that careful attention is paid to the approach being taken. This is vital in the conversion of comics to film where there are techniques that are not inherent to one medium. When one changes the medium a story is being told in a technique’s effect on the audience may change and the entire adaptation may crumble because of this. The ways in which film and comics will be forced to change their approaches to portray similar content is ultimately one of the most important aspects of this thesis. Discovering how often films and comics will coincide on the levels of content and form is key to understanding just how closely related the two media are and will drive my analysis of both direct adaptations of source material like *Persepolis* and movies that primarily draw on characters as source material like *Iron Man*. 
It is also worth keeping in mind how comic pages are constructed. As noted earlier most pages will consist of multiple panels and will have another set of panels on the other side of the page. This is not the only possible construction (Alan Moore created an entire series called *Promethea* that was predicated on designing every layout as a double page spread) but it is the most prevalent and will inform most of my discussions of panels since they are rarely entirely divorced from the page they are a part of. This does not mean that panels cannot be examined on their own, because it is important to look at the basic composition of a single panel and the information it depicts in the same way that it is important to look at a single shot in a movie and the way it depicts its portion of the story. But to truly understand a given shot it is almost always necessary to look at what came before and what came after it just as one must in a comic. I feel this is an even more important aspect of analyzing comics than of film as a comic page will be visible in its entirety at all moments. Page layout and the ways that panels interact is of importance to my analysis of comics and the ways that films can adapt them.

Now that I have detailed how I intend to talk about comics and the main concerns that I intend to address it is time to move into the work of discussing the two media in comparison to one another more fully. I hope that this work will help to show just how different these two media can be and how the same stories can be represented in wildly different, but equally successful, fashions depending on the medium. Ultimately while I do believe that the two media share certain tools and are both primarily visual I do not believe that they are as closely related as some assume them to be. Comics and film may be closer than film and novels, but they are by no
means identical simply because they both contain images, and proving this is the ultimate goal of this thesis.
Chapter 2: Two Versions of Hell

Hellboy is a character created by writer/artist Mike Mignola that has spawned a variety of spin-offs, mini-series, and its own film adaptation. Hellboy is a useful stop on this comparison of comics and films because it provides a first glimpse into the mainstream of both media and how different concerns shape stories and the ways they are told based on the conventions that surround each medium. The two texts I’m taking a look at, Hellboy: Wake the Devil (1996) and Hellboy II: The Golden Army (2008), comprise two unique visions of the same base creation, one is an original creation and the other is the cinematic adaptation undertaken by a writer/director, Guillermo del Toro, who was a long time fan of the original work by Mike Mignola. Guillermo del Toro was such a fan that he brought Mignola onto the films to help design and write them. Del Toro’s visual style still takes precedence but we can also see some similarities between the two works. Ultimately I think this is what really makes the two relate, rather than being two pieces that are heavily interrelated in terms of their content and styles they are two works of art that are defined by their primary creators and their “auteur” status in their respective media. Both bring an audience expecting to experience something that functions within the popular mode of the medium but features a unique stamp of creativity within that mode. This is important with regard to adaptations of comics because it speaks to how a creator such as del Toro essentially disregards much of the storytelling techniques and constructions that made the original a success. The film must deal explicitly with issues of filmic norms rather than comic norms if it is to succeed, placing emphasis on creating a coherent film with the feel of the comic version of Hellboy rather than
copying the original and its storytelling preferences. This means that fidelity to the original comic lies more heavily in crafting a uniquely filmic work with a similar tone rather than bringing panels to life on the screen. Del Toro will leave behind some aspects essential to the comic’s storytelling, such as carefully orchestrated page layouts, in favor of cinematic scene constructions. On the other hand he will pay homage to the comic’s original aesthetics by utilizing color, a key part of the comic, as a strong aspect of the film’s aesthetic construction.

Both versions of Hellboy sit on the conventional side of their medium even if they exist on the edges of the traditional. By conventional I mean works that deal with broadly appealing stories in a relatively traditional fashion in terms of style. (Traditional style here refers to modern storytelling sensibilities as the conventional will naturally change over time.) This will mean different things in terms of actual aesthetics for each medium but ultimately each will primarily focus on telling clear and legible stories in a way that can appeal to the maximum number of potential audience members. Del Toro’s work is certainly of a big budget variety when it comes to Hellboy but box office returns on both the films speak to their generally mid-level appeal. (The first grossed just under sixty million domestically while the second pulled in just over seventy-five million in the US. Both made just slightly less than their reported budgets and were by no means major hits.)\textsuperscript{15} Hellboy: Wake the Devil was the second mini-series (mini-series are comics that run less than twelve issues and tell a complete story) to feature the character and was released by Dark Horse Comics, a publishing company that is on the second tier of large comic

\textsuperscript{15} Data from http://boxofficemojo.com/.
publishers. It is well behind the leaders, DC and Marvel comics, but roughly even
with Image Comics. Dark Horse and Image are both fairly well established beyond
the nearest competing publishers but cannot compete with the sales of the Big Two of
the comic world. This means that both the film and comic are evenly situated in terms
of overall appeal, Hellboy sells fine but is not a blockbuster of the comics world and
the same can clearly be said of the films. (*Hellboy Wake The Devil’s* fourth issue,
released in September 1996, was ranked as the 116th most pre-ordered comic of the
month.)

It is of course important to note that the stories themselves vary heavily
between the comic and the film. The comic deals with Hellboy being manipulated by
Rasputin, an evil character determined to use Hellboy to bring about the apocalypse
and reshape the world. He uses a variety of other demons and characters to try and
accomplish this goal and in this mini-series they include harpies who are known as
the Witches of Thessaly and a demon goddess called Hecate, to name a few. The film
on the other hand deals primarily with the exiled prince of an ancient race of elves
returning to the world in the hopes of destroying the humans who he believes have
corrupted it. Hellboy stands in his way but must also work out his complex relations
to human beings since he himself is a demon who, like in the comic, may be fated to
destroy the world. Both deal with similar themes but couch these ideas in a different
story, unlike the first film that was a fairly straight adaptation of the first comic book
mini-series.

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This relationship to conventions is important to the analysis I’d like to conduct for these two pieces. I’ll be focusing on how aesthetics are shaped by popular norms of the two media and then focusing on how these medium specific conventions end up guiding storytelling. This means many of the conclusions I reach will speak less to general differences between the two media and their capabilities but rather to differences between a dominant mode of storytelling that exists within the media. Later chapters will deal more explicitly with divisions between the two media and their capabilities, but for now a more basic examination of conventional aesthetics should prove useful. Since both Guillermo del Toro and Mike Mignola are expert creators, the ways that the two works ultimately distinguish themselves will be in how they interact with the mainstream. This means we will see two works that feature two different sets of conventions to work with and against. This showcases just how unique the traditions of storytelling are in these two media are and how creators with singular artistic visions can function within these traditions.

I’d like to begin this analysis by focusing on one of the most important aspects of mainstream action stories, the action scene. I’ll be taking a look at two fairly typical fight scenes that allow for some comparisons due to their similar scale. For the film I’ll be examining Hellboy’s encounter with The Golden Army of the title. In it Hellboy and one of his compatriots battle the swelling ranks of the mechanical army that have awakened from their slumber thanks to prince Nuada. For the comic I’ll be looking at the sequence where Hellboy fights Hecate, an evil goddess seeking to convince Hellboy to join her or to exact retribution for Hellboy’s attack on her son. Both sequences feature an enemy that is larger than Hellboy; the individual members
of The Golden Army are about twice as tall as the hero and Hecate is a large snake woman whose top portion is similar to Hellboy’s size. Both scenes are also fights that have relevance to the plot but are not the climax of the story: the fight with Hecate is important because it touches on Hellboy’s potential for evil and the bout with The Golden Army clearly establishes their potential destructive force if Hellboy cannot stop Prince Nuada.

I’d like to begin with the film since it happens to be a slightly more mainstream affair in terms of its presentation while the comic trends a little bit more towards the edges of the comic book mainstream. Guillermo del Toro infuses the film with his very clear stylistic mark, orchestrating a very tightly controlled and elegant fight sequence that still recalls less ornately constructed action scenes. One of del Toro’s true skills lies in his ability to draw out and connect potentially disparate shots. Mainstream action cinema tends towards heavily edited set pieces that present a flurry of shots to the viewer that can obfuscate what is actually occurring. This style of rapid editing tends to be defended as presenting the emotion or impact of the fight sequence to the viewer by forcing them into an uncomfortable film going experience. Critiquing this school of thought isn’t particularly relevant though so it is only worth noting in that del Toro’s tendencies as a director of action do not head in this direction. Instead del Toro fashions a fairly seamless action sequence, hiding cuts behind members of The Golden Army, racking focus from one character to another, and generally attempting to disguise editing through zooms and bountiful camera movements that help obscure the existence of cuts. This creates an action sequence where the editing becomes only one of a variety of formal elements and thus is much
less noticeable to the viewer. Overall the sequence simply plays in a much more fluid way than most modern action films and has the mark of a skilled director with a clear plan for filming rather than a director who shoots for the editing room.

One shot in particular is indicative of del Toro’s preference for extended and ornately orchestrated shots. The shot begins with one of Hellboy’s allies, Johann Krauss who has currently taken over a member of The Golden Army, stabbing another warrior with the blade in his arm. The camera swings to the left during this motion and once the stab is completed another warrior appears at frame left, Krauss spins to meet this foe and blocks three blows. On the final strike he grabs the warrior’s arm and rears back for a punch, as he does this the camera zooms in, tightly framing the action. Krauss lands a pair of punches and then twists the machine’s arm until he wrenches it free. This causes the warrior to fall out of frame while the camera changes locations to reveal a new enemy at frame right and then follows Krauss’s movements as he uses the machine’s arm to stab this new foe. This shot lasts roughly thirteen seconds, a rather long time for a mainstream film. David Bordwell notes that by the end of the 20th century, “the [average shot length] of a typical film in any genre would run 3 to 6 seconds.”17 This is even more important to note when recognizing that other action films such as Pirates of The Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl may even dip below two seconds in terms of their average shot length.18 This sort of flowing shot is a good way to think about the scene as a whole. This single take moves from long shot, to close up, and back out to long shot while

18 Ibid., 122.
presenting Krauss defeating three separate enemies. Del Toro manages to choreograph the action quite well and in doing so creates a cohesive whole that deemphasizes cutting. Rack focuses are a particularly strong tool during this sequence for combining shots that many other directors would have broken up. As mentioned before this focus on carefully bringing shots together unites the action in a way that is uncommon for mainstream action cinema.

While many of this scene’s basic elements are reminiscent of action movie clichés or at least the basics of mainstream action films, del Toro invests them with a fluidity that makes them feel unique. For instance, Hellboy leaping from the back of one machine to another isn’t a particularly new concept for heroes who are fighting large villains but del Toro makes it feel fresh by pausing when Hellboy is atop each machine. He reaches into the “mouth” of one and pulls back it while the machine’s various parts flail about. This focuses the viewer as much on the pure visual aspect of the frame as the actual progression of the scene which culminates in an upward camera movement just before Hellboy fires into the warrior’s head, showering gears and parts upwards into the frame. Del Toro simply holds on this action a bit more than seems traditional, he could very easily cut on the firing of the gun or on Hellboy pulling at the machine but instead decides on viewing the action through a camera that reframes around the characters and allows the moving aspects of the frame to cause excitement. Del Toro doesn’t rely on fast paced editing as the only way of “energizing” his action, he will use it at times but just as often a quick reframing of the camera or a zoom will be just as effective and in doing so I believe this lends even more power to the moments when quick editing is employed. By allowing the
quickness to be contrasted with slower, longer takes, the faster editing becomes more powerful than it would be if it were the sole method of energizing the fight scene. David Bordwell notes that the four main strategies of camerawork and editing that most mainstream filmmaking relies upon are, “rapid editing, bipolar extremes of lens lengths, reliance on close shots, and wide ranging camera movements.”¹⁹ As this analysis has shown del Toro’s action does not quite subscribe to these techniques. He will utilize these concepts at moments but they are not the entirety of his aesthetic style and are juggled with a focus on other stylistic tools including carefully orchestrated staging and depth of field that do not appear in many other modern action films. This means that del Toro’s overall resistance of conventional techniques actually makes his deployment of certain mainstream stylistic tendencies more effective than in traditional films. I believe a similar result occurs when one looks at Mignola’s approach to action in relation to the conventional tendencies of comics.

Hellboy’s story is of course important to its success, it wouldn’t be popular if the basic content didn’t have merit, but I think that Mignola’s artwork is one of the main appeals of the series. This is comparable in some respects to del Toro’s ability to craft an elegant action scene that helps revitalize certain tropes of mainstream film aesthetics, but I’d argue that it means something unique for the comic book world. The simple fact that comics are a primarily hand drawn art form presents a wildly varying array of art styles that can veer from the hyper realistic to the abstract. Naturally the more conventional comics tend towards a realistic style with a few artists existing on the fringes. Mignola’s artwork most certainly skews towards the

¹⁹ Ibid., 121.
abstract, favoring blocky depictions of characters with a bevy of sharp angles. This is of course contrary to the real world and something that comics can manage without seeming overly artificial. Mainstream, live action films certainly possess a large variety of aesthetic styles but are largely grounded in the way that the world looks, focusing their unique aspects in the basic designs of otherworldly creations that still must function in the real world. Comics have the opportunity to break these basics of human anatomy if they desire and while Mignola clearly could draw normal humans he instead utilizes his own coherent style that presents a complete worldview of unrealistic looking characters. Mignola’s art style is like few others and while many of his layouts are not overly adventurous (some are) his unique style of drawing lies outside the traditional. This untraditional artistic style coupled with Mignola’s just outside of conventional storytelling and the more traditional story combine to make Hellboy a unique version of mainstream comics.

Looking closely at how Mignola structures the fight between Hellboy and Hecate presents a well-designed sequence with a few unique aspects and Mignola’s heavily stylized artwork. The fight begins with a page consisting of three panels, each focusing on a blow from either Hellboy or Hecate. Mignola
completely excises the background of these panels, instead utilizing a reddish brown color to fill in for the room. This is a consistent tactic Mignola relies on during fight scenes, he pulls away the background to help focus the reader on the action being presented and to allow for a faster reading fight scene with less visual distraction. During more dialogue oriented scenes backgrounds present themselves and allow the reader to examine them at their own pace, presenting visual detail that may slow the eye at a moment where the story has already slowed for exposition. Removing the background also helps to focus the reader on Hecate’s body that twists in and out of panel. By deciding to place this against a simplified background the tail becomes the only detail for the reader to look at and thus the tail and the characters become the natural focus of the eye, further noting the massive beast Hellboy is dealing with. Not depicting background details is a fairly standard aspect of mainstream storytelling, but the way Mignola eliminates backgrounds is not conventional. Most comics that eschew backgrounds will do so to save an artist work, drawing extensive backgrounds most certainly eats up an artist’s time, and this means backgrounds will disappear from time to time when the basic image is enough to carry the story forward or when motion blurs or some other tactic can be substituted for the background in a way that represents the action taking place in the panel. Mignola’s deployments are more mannered and focused, as previously noted the backgrounds drop out during fights but are focused on during dialogue, where other artists are a bit more haphazard with their backgrounds and depict them when necessary but omit them when it will be less noticeable. This speaks to Mignola’s ability as an artist and his forethought, he takes time saving techniques of the
mainstream and turns them to his own devices, helping propel his action sequences forward in a natural fashion that fits in nicely with mainstream comic book reading conventions.

The fight itself is fairly standard stylistically for the first page. It is well-told and solid storytelling without a doubt, but it holds firmly to conventional aesthetics. Mignola presents three blows and in the same panel as each blow shows the effects it has on the character on the receiving end. The first shows Hellboy having just landed a punch as signified by the sound effect and combines this with Hecate’s wild movement in the frame as evidence of the force Hellboy punched her with. The second and third panels feature similar presentations of a punch or scratch that causes harm to one of the characters and is accompanied with some form of sound effect on the page. This is all fairly typical and speaks to how comic artists working in the mainstream tend to focus on the most important moments of the action so as to most efficiently get across what is occurring between characters. There is very little connective tissue between punches, we see neither Hecate or Hellboy coiling up or preparing to strike and instead see only the actual punches and damage they do, boiling the storytelling down to only its most essential components to provide a clear and exciting sequence. Del Toro’s fight sequence focused on creating an elegant aesthetic that felt seamless and this resulted in a similarly effortless seeming experience for the viewer. The reader quickly grasps what the panels present in the comic much in the same way that del Toro’s long takes and effective camerawork built a scene that helped deemphasize editing to more effectively create a unified whole. Mignola does not stay wholly within norms of conventional storytelling
though, he is a more daring artist and as such he will break from the traditional just like del Toro breaks convention to present his own take on action.

This is the third page of the six-page fight sequence and showcases some changes in the storytelling that are not particularly normal for mainstream comics. Panels two and three present extremely slim images that are a shift in the panel size the reader is used to for this sequence and they note an important turning point in the fight where Hellboy grabs a spear that he will use to kill Hecate. This break in panel sizes alerts the reader to a change in the action, the scene is moving from punches to its climax and Mignola mirrors this shift with a new panel size. This is fairly equivalent to, for example, a close up in a film that cues the viewer in to one of the characters having some sort of tool that will end a fight, and while this is a natural part of action storytelling Mignola’s construction is more focused than many other comic artists might be in this scene. He plays everything prior to these two panels in large panels so he truly alerts the viewer when he shifts to this slim panel size. Much like how del Toro makes more effective use of rapid editing by restricting it Mignola makes more effective use of
manipulating panel size by carefully controlling the rest of his panels. What we see in both pieces is a careful interaction with the conventional of both media, del Toro and Mignola make specific choices that land both within and without conventions and in doing so lend traditional storytelling techniques more force than they might have otherwise.

Another unique aspect of this page are the fifth and six panels, two small square boxes presenting Hecate’s face and a skull likely representing a character from earlier in the story. These panels feature largely emotional beats, the one featuring Hecate focuses the reader in on her pain and the second recalls a character Hellboy killed earlier in the story. This second panel is striking for its ambiguity, the motivation for its placement within this fight scene is vague. It certainly brings to mind death since it is a skull, and this is nicely juxtaposed with the previous panel of Hecate and because of this it feels like an almost non-diegetic commentary on the progression of the action. It’s almost unnecessary to point out that this kind of panel is not a traditional appearance in most comic fight scenes. The two panels strike out from the conventional style of storytelling in a way that is consistent throughout Mignola’s work. He largely sticks with conventional storytelling but showcases some unique traits, such as these small square boxes that subtly comment on the action, on a regular basis. It is also worth noting that each of these scenes plays heavily with strikingly different storytelling conventions. The film deals primarily with crafting a relatively seamless sequence by combining shots through advanced planning that relies less on editing after the fact and more on elegant camera movements and zooms. The comic decides on how much to depict in the panels themselves and what
moments maximize the legibility and speed with which the panels will be read while also establishing a rhythm and panel size to allow for breaks in this rhythm to more effectively punctuate information.

Both Mignola and del Toro understand their medium and the trends of the mainstream creators they are working alongside, because of this they can construct their sequences around these conventions, which are clearly two quite different sets of storytelling norms. Beyond this is the fact that del Toro simply isn’t adapting the small quirks of Mignola’s style. There are not quick inserts with little relation to the actual development of the fight and the background tends to be densely populated with visual detail that is impossible to notice on a first viewing. On the other hand there are moments that recall the comic, but they do so in a way that feels more coincidental than intentionally referential. The shift in panel size when Hellboy discovers the spear is echoed in moments where del Toro cuts into a close up of Hellboy ejecting and reloading bullets into his gun. Because del Toro does not rely entirely on close ups to create his sequence he can use them for added effect to note specific actions. This is much like how Mignola controls his panel size carefully so when he cuts it down it alerts the viewer to a specific moment and lends it an added emphasis. This speaks more to the ability of del Toro and Mignola than it does an outright influence of one creator on the other. Hellboy is a successful adaptation because of this fact; del Toro understands that transplanting the feeling of the comic does not necessarily imply copying the style of the comic. Because of this the two works are stylistically disparate while still creating a new work that retains fidelity to the original.
Now that we’ve looked a bit at how the two versions of Hellboy function alongside the conventions of their own media and what that means for their relationship I’d like to deal a little bit closer with them in comparison and that ways that adaptation across media can create problems for creators. In *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* Hellboy and two other elven main characters have yellow eyes, yellow as a color is heavily coded to symbolize the mystical world in the film, and this eye color is a key design decision. Before discussing how this is important it is worth describing the general color scheme of del Toro’s film. The three main colors of the movie are red, blue, and yellow, and two of these color choices were forced by the source material since Hellboy is red and Abe Sapien, Hellboy’s best friend, is blue. Del Toro chooses gold, a version of yellow, as the third color the film will trade upon heavily and in doing so sets his primary color palette as the color triad of red, yellow, and blue, an effective set of colors that combine well on screen. I believe that the decision to use gold as the third color emerged from the fact that the first film changed Hellboy’s eye color to yellow from the comic’s more orangey reddish eye color. The reason Hellboy’s eyes were probably changed is that by making them yellow the eyes are much more distinct from the rest of Hellboy’s body on screen. On film, the comic’s orange hue would have blended with the rest of Hellboy’s face. Film moves much quicker than a comics panel, so a subtle play of orange and red can be dwelled upon by a reader whereas a subtle shift in eye color would cause definition to be lost in all but the closest of shots of Hellboy on film. Viewers would not have time to properly view the eyes and spot the subtle distinction. This would be an especially big loss for a film because much of modern acting deals with faces and
eye movements so losing definition in the eyes would become a major problem. This becomes an even more important consideration when your lead actor’s entire face is covered in elaborate prosthetics and makeup.

The design of the comics was clearly important to del Toro since he brought Mike Mignola onto the films to do design work and help write the story; this means it is safe to say that the comic likely has some visual influence over the design of the film. Hellboy’s eyes are a marked changed from the original design of the comic, so it becomes important to consider why del Toro made changes like this. Also of note is that one of the film’s main themes is Hellboy’s inability to fit in the human world, a world characterized by blues, while his heritage lies in the mystical world, a place characterized by reds and yellows. This overall color design builds Hellboy’s basic color appearance into the way themes are presented visually. Since the first film presented Hellboy as a red character with yellow eyes del Toro then builds Hellboy’s alienation into the color scheme by having him attempt to fit into a world of blues even though he comes from a world of reds and yellows, a place where his color scheme matches. This shows how a seemingly minor decision during the process of adaptation, such as shifting a character’s eye color from orange to yellow, can have a profound effect on the final product. By changing Hellboy’s eyes del Toro essentially picks his final color for the film as a whole. This speaks to how the process of adaptation can affect the film that is ultimately created even if the issue revolves around altering something simply because it will work better in a film on a visual level. It is difficult to say that del Toro is particularly faithful to the color design of the Hellboy comics because, aside from simple facts, such as Hellboy is red and Abe
Sapien is blue, his film is fairly removed from the stories that are being used in the comics. The film also uses its story and content to help motivate its color design and how it evolves. *Hellboy II* certainly utilizes the groundwork that Mike Mignola laid out in his comics but del Toro tweaks and twists the overall aesthetic into a unique beast that owes aspects of its design to Mignola but strikes its own notes.

The color design of *Hellboy: Wake the Devil* is rather striking, featuring bold choices that help to accentuate Mignola’s unique art style by highlighting its angular design. This is not color’s only purpose in the comic; it also serves as a storytelling agent and effectively guides the reader through the book. As such a comparison of color should help us to understand that a tool the two media share can still be deployed in different ways due to the storytelling requirements of each medium. The film and comic put forth color design in very different ways and the kind of deployment favored by the media might be the reverse of expectations. The film relies heavily on long-range motifs regarding color; as previously mentioned del Toro codes Hellboy’s world so that reds and golds are tied to the mystic and drab blues are tied to the world of humans. Del Toro uses this to reflect the content of his film, mirroring internal character drama and overarching themes through colors present in the film. The comic on the other hand trades more heavily on short-term deployments of color. Mignola and his colorist, James Sinclair, use color in a looser fashion, focusing heavily on punctuating the story and using color to direct viewer attention rather than drawing large-scale meanings for specific colors. Both will break from their preferred patterns when it is important. Del Toro will color mystical characters blue if it better suits the overall mise-en-scene while Mignola and Sinclair do code
yellow as a symbol of evil or danger across the mini-series, but ultimately the film deals with large scale color design while the comic works with more local and immediate manipulations of color.

This is surprising because one might expect this to be the exact opposite of the strategies for color. Comics can be more readily controlled than live action films, or at least one might think, but tools such as digital intermediate have greatly opened up the possibilities for filmmakers to control the appearance of color in their cinematic worlds. This then makes us turn to other explanations for why a comic, which could obviously readily control its color with almost complete freedom does not favor long term color deployment while a film, which has a tougher process to go through to effectively control color, does. I believe it comes down to the fact that the comic is produced as a monthly mini-series, which means that it is both created and consumed in parts. An artist cannot be assured that a reader of the mini-series will sit down and read every issue back to back, and because of this subtle color associations may be lost over the month between new issues. On the other hand del Toro can reasonably assume that a viewer will sit down and watch his film as a whole, allowing for thematic color to be pressed on the viewer repeatedly and thus more effectively established and understood by the viewer. The issue then becomes one that is less related to the media than the mainstream of the media. A mainstream comic is most commonly a twenty-two page issue that features only so much story and comes out on a roughly monthly basis while a mainstream movie contains a complete story that is meant to be experienced as a whole. Comics creators could most certainly plan for later collections to allow their works to be fully understood, but ultimately this might
hinder the effect of the single issues. If comprehensibility was sacrificed in the present for a later, fuller picture it might be difficult to retain a large audience and if the initial sales were hurt because of this a later collection might not even occur. As such the color design of *Wake the Devil* is more focused on moments within each individual issue instead of over the course of the mini-series. These divergent styles of color deployment and what it means in terms of fidelity and adaptation is what I would like to examine further.

I’d like to move into a closer analysis of color in these two works by examining the beginning of the film. Because del Toro wants to build two separate worlds defined by unique color palettes it will be useful to examine the start of the movie because it begins to establish these two worlds and showcases many of del Toro’s stylistic preferences. The opening titles are intriguing in that they establish an awareness of color in a subtle way. The film opens on a paragraph describing Hellboy’s origins and how a military unit found him during World War Two. The text itself is important to the plot and this takes the majority of a viewer’s attention, but what is interesting is that the letters and words vacillate between several different levels of brightness and even move between a more pure gold and golden red at times, immediately establishing the two most important colors for the world of the occult and Hellboy. As the text continues, a black and white picture appears that shows a young Hellboy alongside the military unit. The text slowly fades and as it does this Hellboy actually begins to turn red while all the other soldiers remain in black and white. This highlights his color as well as color in the movie, and works to separate Hellboy from the world of humans as he is separated from the rest of the unit.
that found him due to their lack of color. This disconnect from the world of the military emerges again in the following scene set at a military base. The opening shot shows Hellboy and his makeshift father Professor Broom’s home surrounded by a variety of military personnel, vehicles, and houses shaded almost entirely in blue with a few accents being provided by Christmas lights. We see yellow red and greenish lights in the background completing either primary triad you prefer to see, (either red, yellow, and blue or red, green, and blue). Nonetheless the eye cannot help but be drawn to the lower left of this frame since Broom and Hellboy’s house is bathed in a warm, orange light that seems to emerge from the windows. This naturally recalls the classic image of a warm home on a cold Christmas Eve through the contrast between the warm oranges and cold blues, but it also begins establishing the contrast between the red and golds of the mystical world against the blues of the human world. Another important detail is the tree in front of Hellboy’s house that is decked in Christmas lights. These lights are distinct from the other lights in the frame since they are two specific colors, red and yellow, the two colors that would combine to make the orange that lies just outside the home’s windows and the colors that will come to represent the mystical world. These colors are also Hellboy’s, the red of his skin along with the yellow of his eyes. Here we see del Toro immediately establishing the disconnect between Hellboy and the world of humans, but we also see del Toro using color to guide the eye through the image. As noted previously it is impossible to look anywhere but the house since it looks so warm and pleasant compared to the rest of the drab, cold frame. Color provides added thematic subtext over the course of the film but is also carefully deployed within the frame to direct the eye to the proper area.
of the screen at any given moment and this shot exemplifies these two simultaneous deployments of color. We will see color used during the comic to direct a reader’s eye, a bright red Hellboy against a drab gray backdrop pulls the reader’s eye straight to him for example, but most always it will lack the added thematic context that this composition builds.

As the scene moves into Hellboy’s home the palette of warm orange and cool blue greens persists, and we see it carried insistently through to the interior. There are of course the windows that look out into the night and hold the exceedingly unnatural blue green color but inside the home we also see a black and white television that plays a strong counterpoint to the warmth that resides in almost all other portions of the frame. Similarly, the Howdy Doody doll that Hellboy clings to is a cool blue that replicates the black and white Howdy Doody’s coolness once the TV has been shut off and thus eliminated as a source of contrast. This insistence on continuing to carry the warm/cool contrast through the scene at all times manifests itself quite uniquely as Bloom begins to read to Hellboy. The book that contains the story of The Golden Army features an exceedingly cool blue that matches the color of the cold night outside, this is worth noting because the film so clearly sets up an opposition between that which is human and blue and that which is mystical and red and gold. Here these thematic color assignments shut down to an extent and this seems to come from a desire to preserve the visual pleasure that results from seeing warm and cool colors play on the screen. As the camera tilts down and eliminates the windows from the shot color would switch to a monochrome if the large scale rules of color design were adhered to strictly, no blues would be left whatsoever and as such del Toro decides to
place a blue highlight in the frame through a new piece of the mise en scene, the book. This violation of the color’s thematic role could perhaps be retroactively read as a way to make the text distinct from the actual world of mysticism, but this seems to be too subtle and far too complicated an explanation for why del Toro would choose to color the majority of the text blue when it is very clearly a representation of the mystical world. As such it seems much more likely that at this moment del Toro felt a more dynamic image was preferable to perfect adherence to a color scheme. As the scene transitions into a visualization of the book’s contents the color scheme shifts to solely red and gold, heavily reinforcing the world of mysticism’s alignment with these colors. So while del Toro will disregard his larger color scheme when it suits him he still focuses on building it even at this early stage of the film. This fits naturally with most films where color schemes will be more loosely structured. Del Toro’s coloring is slightly more composed and rigid than other mainstream films but doesn’t slavishly adhere to its color scheme and this is a good example of how he will deviate from his overarching plan for color.

This heavy focus on color can be seen as a likely influence of the original comic. Del Toro’s appreciation
for Mignola’s work and his bold color design would make color a natural decision to move over to the film version of the story. Now that we’ve seen how del Toro begins to build color in his film it will be useful to move over to the comic and examine how color is used to guide the reader through the story. Since Mignola and Sinclair are more focused on utilizing color to tell their story from moment to moment it isn’t necessary to start at the beginning of the comic. Instead I’ve picked a few scenes where color is deployed in an interesting fashion that exemplifies the overall design of the book. It is very easy to note how *Hellboy: Wake the Devil* utilizes color to help punctuate its action, allowing color to flow upon the page and punctuate important moments in the book. The beginning of issue three has an excellent example of this when Hellboy is fighting the Women of Thessaly and is having difficulties with his gun. Almost the entirety of the page is coated in a dull gray background; the bird women also conform to this gray scheme save for their yellow eyes while Hellboy stands out nicely thanks to his red coloration. As the gun fails to shoot and eventually explodes in Hellboy’s hand we see a noted change in the panel’s background color, yellow flows in and overtakes the entire right side of the panel, sharply contrasting with the previous panels and letting the reader know that this is a turning point on the page even before they take in any of the text. The panel before this also features another use of color change to highlight these shifts in the plot, when a cut in occurs on the gun, and Hellboy continues to pull the trigger as denoted by the sound effect “click,” which occurred in multiple previous panels but in a purely black text, the reader will easily note that this click sound effect is a dull orange, not anywhere near the brilliance of the yellow explosion that is about to occur
but clearly brighter than the dull gray background the reader is used to. This subtle shift builds towards the explosion that is about to occur and acts much like a burning fuse that prefaces an explosion in a film. The page slowly builds thanks to color, and other techniques such as scale and panel size, and creates a cohesive and satisfying unit of this fight.

This play with coloration of specific objects in the frame may not be unique to comics, it doesn’t seem like it would be that difficult to sneak some extra color into a close up if a director wanted to, but it is handled in a way that is unique to comics. Here we see sound and color merging together in a way that film could not truly hope to replicate in the most literal sense. By building the sound effects cues to incorporate color Mignola and his colorist James Sinclair charge the sound effects with import to the plot. The dull black of previous sound effects disappears and the sudden shift is noticeable since the seemingly dull sound effects of the page suddenly burst into color. Sound effects are not particularly known for being presented only as black and white but here we see a careful restraint on their use so that when they do change the effect of alerting the reader to a narrative shift is quite effective. Similarly the change in background color is effective at accentuating both the explosion and the unique change that is occurring in this specific panel as opposed to the rest of the page because it contrasts a bright yellow against a dull gray.

This brings up another interesting point; this panel works so well because the rest of the page is controlled so meticulously. When a reader looks at the page as a whole it is very easy to note how distinct the final panel is and this makes the relationship between the two color areas readily apparent. This presents an important
difference between comics and film in that one of the reasons that this punctuation of a narrative beat is so effective is that it co-exists on the same page as that which it is contrasted against. Film can contrast color across shots, for instance by taking a shot of a cool area and then contrasting it in the next shot with a warmer area, but the effect feels different here because the narrative shift can be glimpsed simply by looking at the larger page layout. Mignola and Sinclair do not require the reader to notice this and if a reader does not the gray giving way to yellow will certainly give them a bit of a jolt, but by allowing the yellow to co-exist on the same page as the gray it creates a sort of forewarning of what is to occur. Most readers will get a glimpse of the coloring change that is coming while they move down the page and because of this observant readers will likely be able to guess that something important will occur when they reach the bottom panel. This decision gives up some control to the reader in comparison to film’s rigid linearity but it does not undercut the storytelling unless a reader jumps all over the page rather than following the traditional reading order. Instead it adds to the effect by creating a sense of foreboding for alert readers while still functioning to mark a turning point in the action being presented. This kind of construction could perhaps be replicated in film by ominous sound design, but it is not quite the same effect. This effect is much more subtly located because it relies purely on the way a reader interacts with the page and how they may end up focusing their eye. It certainly gives up a measure of control, but Mignola understands the way readers can and will interact with the layouts and structures his storytelling to take advantage of this.
The next scene I’d like to look at takes place just before the fight between Hellboy and Hecate, it features the pair talking and showcases a moment where Mignola and Sinclair forefront a slightly more nuanced deployment of color that deals with mirroring story content and thematic details instead of merely punctuating drama. This page features Hecate attempting to lure Hellboy into staying with her since he is a demon and belongs to the world of mysticism. This theme is familiar since the film plays with it so heavily, it is used less often in the comic but here we see how it can emerge in a similar fashion. Interestingly the way color is deployed is also slightly reminiscent of the film. Looking at the first panel of this page showcases a variety of faces, masks, and skulls that are some sort of hallucination or manifestation of Hecate’s. The dialogue itself helps to give this indication but doesn’t explicitly explain the background, the figures are most definitely not behind Hecate in the “real” world of the comic but since they are green the reader can assume that they are somehow related to Hecate and her words. Here we see the contrast of two opposing characters played in a similar fashion to how it is played in *Hellboy II*. One set of colors characterizes Hellboy and the other characterizes Hecate and all that she
carries with her, this contrast is not charged in the same way that it is in *Hellboy II* though. Here the contrast plays more heavily into the witch Hecate’s attempts to bring Hellboy over to her side, thus by bathing the background in her color Mignola and Sinclair bring the conflict of the dialogue into the comic’s color design since this entire scene is about Hecate attempting to take control of Hellboy and bring him to the side of evil. Ultimately this still shows how Mignola and Sinclair work on a smaller scale than del Toro does. The green of Hecate is not established prior to her appearance and doesn’t represent anything else than her character at this moment. Because of this the meaning of the background’s green becomes easily associated with Hecate’s green at this precise moment but doesn’t carry lasting ramifications into the rest of the comic. While Mignola and Sinclair certainly play with thematic issues involving Hellboy’s past and the world he comes from similarly to del Toro the way it is handled does not carry lasting ramifications for certain colors and is more reliant on the specific scene that is being presented to the reader rather than the story as a whole.

This once more speaks to how the two works are built as a whole and how many of the decisions that shape them and their aesthetic strategies are related to the mainstream of the media they exist within and how it exerts pressures on storytellers. Guillermo del Toro’s *Hellboy* utilizes a cinematic style that both features and denies certain aspects of conventional action cinema. Beyond this, though, it takes color, an important if sometimes overlooked aspect of filmmaking, and codes it so that it works in tandem with the film’s story to mirror the thematic content being presented. This approach effectively situates the film as an expertly crafted version of mainstream
film that boasts a mastery of many cinematic techniques other directors may not have control over. This makes *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* a film that exists within the conventional while still carving out its own identity. *Hellboy: Wake the Devil* follows a similar path, carving out a spot within the conventional while utilizing a unique and bold art style to help draw in potential readers.

One of the threads that truly unites these two works is the way that they react and respond to the conventional by both emulating and innovating it. They each sit in a relatively similar location in their respective media and the ways that they accomplish this speak to their mastery of their media and their ability to navigate the potential pitfalls of the mainstream. One need only look at some of the very positive critical responses to the two works to notice their similar receptions. In A.O. Scott’s review of the film he noted that, “There are moments in *Hellboy 2: The Golden Army*, Guillermo del Toro’s profligate sequel to *Hellboy*, capable of delighting even the most jaded, comic-book-weary summer-blockbuster conscript.”²⁰ Alan Moore’s praise for the comic is even more positive, “*Hellboy* is a gem, one of considerable size and a surprising luster. While it is obviously a gem that has been mined from that immeasurably rich seam first excavated by the late Jack Kirby, it is in the skillful cutting and the setting of the stone that we can see Mignola’s sharp contemporary sensibilities at work.”²¹ Both are clearly noted as being contemporary works with high levels of craftsmanship as well as artistic merit. This speaks to how the two

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works interact with their media and the disparate conventions that the two creators work with and against. Each medium features unique challenges and norms that a creator must understand and come to terms with if they are to work in this mode of storytelling. More important to this thesis though is how this relates to the concepts of adaptation and fidelity. *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* has almost nothing to do with *Hellboy: Wake the Devil* in terms of its story or its larger aesthetic plan and this is important because the first Hellboy film was largely related to the first Hellboy mini-series. The first film is not as broadly imaginative or as exciting as the second and I believe this emerges largely out of the constrictive nature of the adaptation process. Del Toro was hampered due to his decision to remain faithful to a pre-existing story and because of this the first film feels slightly lifeless in comparison to the second. So while the second film strays more from the source material, both in terms of its story and stylistic traits such as color design, it actually better captures the feel of Hellboy. This is because del Toro and Mignola have similar visions for Hellboy and his universe, which means to achieve fidelity to the original, del Toro decided against absolute faithfulness, further signaling the divide between the two media.
Chapter 3:
A Moving Persepolis

*Persepolis* was originally a series of two graphic novels; this means the book was released in longer, bound editions rather than a traditional thirty-two page comic book that is held together with staples. While this did of course affect aspects of the story such as narrative construction and some stylistic traits it is worth noting that separating comics into two wholly removed categories such as graphic novels and comic books is essentially unnecessary. Both styles of publishing still end with a final product that is decidedly comics and is more akin to the difference between features and short films as opposed to distinct media. *Persepolis* itself is a memoir of sorts; in it Marjane Satrapi details the trials and daily happenings of her life while growing up in Iran during a revolution, war, and an oppressive regime. *Persepolis* was originally published by a division of Random House called Pantheon. This is interesting because it is a comic that was published by a traditional book publisher. The first of the two volumes was released in 2003 and it speaks volumes about the legitimacy that comics had accrued by this point in time. *Persepolis* was clearly meant to be a work of art that could stand in comparison to traditional novels and its release by a respected book publisher attests that comics have indeed become a respected art form. The comic was released to notable acclaim, landing an extremely favorable review from *Time Magazine* and ending up on its list of Top 10 best comics of the year.

The film traveled a similar path in its targeted audience and in the acclaim it would

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receive. It was made and released in France and then moved abroad, again receiving positive reviews, one of course from Time Magazine,\textsuperscript{24} winding up on Time’s list for Top 10 movies of the year.\textsuperscript{25} The comic was adapted into an animated feature and still received critical acclaim, bypassing old notions that believed animated films were more childish than live action films. The film and the comic are clearly intended for similar audiences and aim for similar intents. More interesting is that they both were created in a style that had previously been dismissed as less artistic and less important culturally and still managed to succeed from a critical standpoint. The works are not identical though, and the fact that there are plenty of changes made to the material in the process of adaptation is what lends the two works to further analysis.

Marjane Satrapi’s comic \emph{Persepolis} and the film adaptation of the same name are an ideal location to begin examining how comics and film can tell stories in ways that converge and diverge. What is most useful is that Satrapi was a co-director of the film version of \emph{Persepolis} so it is safe to assume that Satrapi’s goals and storytelling sensibilities affected the creation of both works in similar ways. Satrapi of course had less control over the film than she had over the comic due to the nature of creating films, which almost necessitates collaborators. Most telling though is that Satrapi did not wish to take the job of director for herself, she understood that creating a film was not analogous to creating a comic and she brought on a more seasoned creator of

\textsuperscript{24} Richard and Mary Corliss, \emph{Persepolis Finds Love in the Afternoon}, http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1624714,00.html, (accessed February 24, 2009).

animated works to help her avoid the pitfalls of a new medium. In moving

Persepolis from the page to the screen new artistic hurdles would be encountered and new storytelling possibilities emerged, as Satrapi herself put it, “People generally assume that a graphic novel is like a movie storyboard, which of course is not the case. With graphic novels, the relationship between the writer and reader is participatory. In film, the audience is passive. It involves motion, sound, music, so therefore the narrative's design and content is very different.”

Satrapi has a base point here and it seems to hold true for her work in adapting a comic into a film. It’s hard to say that comics will always be more participatory than film but as a baseline for modern, mainstream feature film making versus modern mainstream comic book creation this statement seems to ring true. Ultimately the translation to film utilized all these new tools Satrapi mentioned to help tell the story, but the most important addition was that of movement. Satrapi, her co-director Vincent Paronnaud, and all of their collaborators expertly configure the story of Persepolis to take advantage of the tool of motion, one that the comic version of Persepolis was without.

Satrapi’s comic and Paronnaud and Satrapi’s film are two different versions of a single story that take unique advantage of two different media. This is not to say that the media are wholly distinct, there are moments where the two pieces coincide and utilize similar techniques to get across the same emotions or to affect the viewer in a comparable fashion. But one must only look at how many changes, large and minute, emerged during the adaptation of the comic to film to see the gulf that

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separates the two media. Clearly films and comics speak distinct, thought not entirely dissimilar, languages, and the two unique and successful versions of *Persepolis* speak to this separation. Ultimately though it comes down to choices; in many of the examples I take up scenes are changed when a direct translation could occur. Why then would this occur in an adaptation that was created by the same person? I believe this speaks to the nature of any adaptation, but more importantly speaks to how the media work in different ways. Choices must be made to most effectively present a scene and depending on the medium different storytelling conventions and necessities influence these choices. We see a variety of changes being made by Satrapi and because of this two distinct versions of *Persepolis* emerge. These choices are what I intend to examine, and I believe that motion becomes a key aspect of this adaptation. My sample scenes will further explore the addition of motion to *Persepolis*, a work that originated in a static medium, as well as a variety of choices that were made in the processes of adaptation. Rather than examining the entirety of the movie and its aesthetic plan I will look at a few select scenes in the hopes of proving that a creator will drastically alter their basic methods of storytelling to best preserve the original intent of their work.

As the film version of *Persepolis* begins it is easy to see how motion has been injected into the piece. Credits open the film and the images presented look almost like paper cutouts from a comic book that are being slowly pushed left and right. Waves move up and down in rows in a way that could be duplicated with some bits of cardboard on a stage. Motion here is presented as almost artificial, this is not necessarily realistic motion but it is also not necessarily overtly artificial. Here I
believe we see what is essentially the equivalent of a comic coming to life, motion
here is light in comparison to much of the rest of the film, but one aspect of the credit
sequence does carry a heightened level of motion akin to later scenes in the film.
Flower petals flow across many of the relatively static (in composition) frames. The
petals even flow across credits at times, prompting a reading order, a task that is often
accomplished in comics through page layouts. These flowers that drift around the
scene eventually become a motif, we see them occur again when Marjane repeats the
story about how her grandmother places flower petals in her bra as a kind of perfume.
They also return at the end of the film when we are told that Marjane’s grandmother
is dead. This combination of two styles of design through different types of motion
neatly encompasses both the origins of the story and where the film will diverge from
its source material. The wavering cardboard cut out portions of the scene evoke an
unnatural two dimensional image that clearly recalls comic book aesthetics but does
so through the tool of motion, a tool comics do not have access to. On the other hand
the flower petals violate this artificial motion and flow through the compositions in a
much more elegant fashion, signaling the motif that the flowers will represent as well
as presenting a distinctly non-comic style of motion which will be picked up and
utilized for the rest of the film. The film strives for fidelity by evoking the stasis of
comics while transitioning into the full motion of cinema.

It is also useful to compare this opening to the comic’s opening. The book’s
first page establishes a pattern of vignettes, the overwhelming structure of the comic.
The story is separated into a compilation of shorter stories, each with its own title that
is comprised of a black rectangle with the title of the chapter on the right and a
drawing of the chapter title to the left. The comic does not concern itself with a lyrical opening as the film does, it dives right into the story. There is a level of orientation of course; the first panel is a portrait of Satrapi as a ten year old with accompanying text to explain the year and what exactly is going on. Satrapi doesn’t spend time establishing a general mood as the credits of the film do; instead she dives right in and starts delivering information about herself, her country, and the general history of the timeframe the story is set in. I believe this speaks to the overall design of the two works. The comic is a larger, more sprawling piece that works as a mosaic of stories rather than a single narrative while the film collects these stories and reworks them into a single unified piece. The opening of the comic is less concerned with setting a general tone for the book as a whole and focuses instead on informing the reader and contextualizing the world of the comic. Naturally then the film takes a different approach that sets the emotional mood as opposed to establishing an intellectual frame of mind. This does not mean that the film is more emotional than the comic, merely that the types of stories being told require differing openings and each has a unique feel that is appropriate to the piece.

The film version is notable because it immediately establishes itself in a fashion that at first seems to evoke a comic but then quickly transforms itself through a tool denied to comic books, motion. The film’s opening pays tribute to its origins but does so in a way that is uniquely filmic, bending motion to both evoke a medium
that cannot utilize movement while also presenting a distinctly filmic style of movement, the flower petals, at the same time. This decision speaks both to the shift in media and the fact that the film is not an original piece of work, so while it is telling the story in a way that the comic does not, it is still clearly thinking about the way a comic looks and how this can be represented and paid homage to in a film. The comic establishes itself through a more realistic, almost anthropological approach, so much so that the second panel is explained as a photo of Satrapi’s class, one in which only a sliver of Marjane’s veil is visible. As discussed earlier the comic is a more sprawling story, aiming to present a better picture of Iran and the world at this time while also telling Marjane’s story. This pushes Satrapi towards a style of storytelling that favors context and slight diversions rather than a tightly woven story that fits into an hour and a half. A film could of course present a sprawling epic, but a mainstream feature film, the type of movies this thesis is concerned with, does not have the luxury of spilling out into long winded digressions in the same way that the original comic does. This construction also fits well for the way that comics can be read in either one sitting or over a period of time. A grouping of short stories is very conducive to a comic while it is not as effective for a feature film. As such we can see two different styles of storytelling on display in the two works and while each will tell the same story we can already see how they diverge almost immediately.

While the comic and movie versions of *Persepolis* diverge in some aspects the basis of the story being told is very similar. Many scenes from the comic are carried over to the film with very few changes to the base content, but the ways that these scenes do diverge is essential to understanding the differing pressures that each
medium exerts on basics of storytelling. As such it will be useful to examine a few select scenes that are similar in content and determine how and why they were changed in the move between media. The first scene I have selected features the story of how the English intervened and helped create the Iranian dictatorship that is led by the Shah. Each version of the scene features Marjane’s father telling her about Iran’s past. The comic weaves in and out of time frames, jumping back and forth between the present and the past. The film on the other hand focuses the story, shifting to the past and telling the entirety of the history in a single compressed sequence. This focusing also occurs in the stylistic aspects of the scenes. The comic features both a wide range of visual modifications to the comic’s base style, documentary like panels, more overt “lighting” and changes in the presentation of speech balloons while the film features a single, more overt stylistic change. The film returns to an aesthetic that is reminiscent of the opening credits, presenting a clear shift in time frames but also a marked shift in tone. The film plays the story for comedic effect and focuses the entire tone on the absurdity of the scene where the comic plays a broader range of emotions. This focusing of the scene seems to arise out of the move to the realm of the feature film, only so much can be presented in an hour and a half and as such allowing for a less concise, less precise telling of Iran’s history would break the narrative flow the film has developed whereas the comic’s entire structure is built in short blocks so a digressive historical sequence that has a few separate styles is much more in keeping with the overall tone of the work. Here we see the story moving from a comic to a feature film and the story being altered to most effectively take
advantage of the medium and the structure that the medium has helped establish for
the work as a whole.

In the comic the initial movement from the present to the past is marked by a change in lighting, the soon to be Shah and his inner circle are sitting around a fire and this causes a sharp shadow to be cast on the side of two of the character’s faces. This brand of chiaroscuro facial lighting appears very rarely in the comic and here it seems to be deployed to help mark the transition between the two spaces that are co-existing on the same page since the move from present to past takes place in roughly the bottom third of a page. This lighting is not consistent in every panel during the flashback, it is merely established as a characteristic of the space the Shah is in. This is seen in the next two panels that feature two historical figures, Ghandi and Ataturk, speaking about their feelings on republics. These panels return to a flatter facial lighting scheme that features no obscuring shadows and place their figures in a documentary style “talking head” composition of a medium shot against a black background. After this the book shifts back to the present where Marjane’s father is still telling Marjane about the past. This is handled in a series of three panels that are all roughly the same size and fit in a single row across the page. Here the
focus is on Marjane’s father and we see the lighting helping to draw the reader’s attention to his face. An arc across the background of the panel separates an area of light from dark, the dark always on top with the light on bottom. This arc always intersects the father’s neck, placing his white head in a dark area, ensuring contrast. Marjane appears in two of the three panels but she is always in the lower half of the image, and her white head always plays against a white background. She blends more effectively with her surroundings and is slightly less noticeable than her father. This lends itself to a natural reading order that consists of the reader taking in the words the father is speaking, then looking at the father, and finally looking at Marjane. This works in tandem with the composition as well. This order also describes the construction of each panel from top to bottom, with words on top, the father below the words, and Marjane at the bottom of the panel, if she happens to be in the panel at all. Satrapi constructs the image so that natural contrasts, the white of the word balloon against the dark background is essentially the same as the whiteness of the father’s head against this same background, are linked with the information that is traditionally read first. This panel construction utilizes contrasts to draw the eye through the panel in a way that replicates the conventional reading order of left to right and then top to bottom.
As the comic moves back into the past in the next panel we see a panel that looks like a photo of Reza, the soon to be Shah, in a frame due to the panel’s oval outline of white that is surrounded by black. Here we see another example of a panel becoming similar to a historical document, just like the second panel of the book that featured a picture of Marjane’s class. This “document” is a break from the traditional story panels the reader is used to and is used to help mark a shift in timeframe. Satrapi deftly uses an unconventional panel to signal the reader’s attention to a narrative shift that has occurred. Even more impressive is the fact that the break in panels is one that represents a historical document, Satrapi thus molds this panel to both alert the reader to a shift in the story while giving them an image that rapidly brings to mind the concept of the past. The Shah is presented in a full body portrait in a fashion that most will associate with a photo, something that represents the past. We have not yet seen a consistent method for noting this shift from past to present, but we have seen some kind of demarcation of this shift both times we have entered the past in this sequence. The next panel features two British aristocrats sitting while drinking, smoking, and speaking of Reza and his rebellion. Their entire conversation is encompassed in this panel, in a series of five separate word balloons, one on top of the other. All of these word balloons are individual units and are unconnected to any of the other ones unlike most comics where all the word balloons that contain one character’s dialogue in a panel will be connected. Here Satrapi decides to make the two characters speak in short, staccato bursts and represents this through the unconnected dialogue balloons. This is a rarity for Persepolis since it is usually typified by characters speaking in a single bubble regardless of how much text will have to fit within it. This decision
seems to rise out of the fact that Satrapi is playing these bits of dialogue with a mocking tone, so by splitting them into small bursts it breaks the natural flow of the dialogue that the comic traditionally uses and delineates a style of reading which helps insure the comedic effect that Satrapi intends.

After this panel we shift to a page where one of the aristocrats seduces Reza into abandoning the concept of a republic in favor of becoming an emperor. The first four panels are roughly similar in size and each feature the aristocrat moving around Reza while telling him of how it is a better idea to become an emperor than to allow a republic to form. The first two panels feature a reemergence of the strong facial lighting that marked the first panel and help to reestablish the space. The first real change on this page comes with the fourth panel; it is noticeably smaller and more vertically oriented than any of the previous panels on the page. The panel itself depicts the aristocrat’s face at the top right looking down at Reza’s face in the bottom left. The panel clearly highlights how the aristocrat is seducing Reza and uses his height to help emphasize his power over Reza. This portion of the seduction being represented with a panel that breaks the flow of previous panels highlights an emotional shift in the page, letting the reader know that Reza is beginning to believe
the aristocrat. By altering the panel size Satrapi mimics the shift in Reza’s thinking in the very form of the text.

The seventh and eighth panels have a horizontal orientation, and feature the aristocrat explaining exactly what Reza needs to do to become an emperor. In the first panel the aristocrat tells Reza that he will have to do nothing, but the second panel, which features the aristocrat with his arm around Reza, has the aristocrat telling him that he needs to make sure that he gives the English the oil and they will take care of everything. These two similar panels easily highlight the duplicity of the aristocrat since they are of identical size, placed one on top of the other, and feature a nearly identical landscape. The aristocrat is being duplicitous, as the reader already knows, but Satrapi hammers home the point with the parallel construction of these panels. These horizontal panels serve one more purpose and to understand what it is we must look at the third panel on the page. A roughly square panel that returns to Marjane’s home, here we see another break in panel type that coincides with some sort of shift in the story. It is not an emotional beat like the previous break in panel size we examined, instead it is merely a shifting of locations, out of the past and into the present. Since Satrapi is using a consistent art style to depict the past and the present she deploys a variety of stylistic techniques to help mark moments when the story is shifting timeframes. In this case a shift in panel shape allows Satrapi to highlight one of these changes for the reader.

The version of this scene in the film has a few striking differences and features a variety of techniques that would be impossible in comic book form. This version of the story is told in its entirety without breaking away from the “historical
world” that is being presented. The comic fractures the story in multiple ways, telling it in two chunks in two consecutive chapters while also moving between the past and the present during the father’s telling of the past. The film version eschews this idea in favor of a more accelerated, focused telling of the tale. The transition to the past begins as Marjane’s father begins to tell the story to her. The shot where this occurs features Marjane and her father sitting on a sofa in their house, as he begins to talk the two separate and slowly slide towards their respective sides of the frame while they begin to dissolve away. As this occurs a stage begins to emerge out of the darkness of the background that used to be the family’s house. The transition from present to past is marked much more clearly here than it is in the comic, especially when curtains open up over the stage where the past will unfold. Motion is one of the key aspects of this change, Marjane and her father’s unnatural slide out of frame as well as the dramatic flourish of the curtains being pulled back cue the viewer to notice the shift in the story’s location clearly establishing the break between the two time frames in the film.

Also important to note is that once the curtains have been pulled back and the location established the façade of the stage slides off-screen, leaving an ornately decorated background that features an art style reminiscent of the opening credits. Hills slowly shift in the background as the camera pushes in, creating an unrealistic feel that is a marked shift from the more realistic animation style that accompanies the majority of the film’s story. When Reza glides into the frame though, his motion is immediately striking and recognizable as a break from what we have seen before. His character’s arms and body flails about from the inertia of his motion, replicating
the movement of a cardboard cutout of a character who is glued to a stick and rocked around. Similarly when he turns around his character becomes two-dimensional for a moment, once more highlighting the unreality of the character. Satrapi and her co-director completely alter their aesthetic for this sequence, overhauling the general design, the movement of characters, and even the tone (this sequence takes on a heavily comic air). All of this seems to build out of the shifts made in the general structure of the sequence, since it now exists as a single unbroken unit Satrapi is able to push aspects of it to a more intense level. We do not hop back and forth between the more morose present and the oddly comic past, and because of this there isn’t a strange contrast between the two decidedly different locations.

Similarly the odd motions of the characters and the aesthetic of the sequence come into existence slowly, through a slow dissolve and an opening of curtains, clearly signaling the shift from one space to another in a way that a cut from one location to the other could not hope to mimic. Satrapi and Paronnaud use filmic techniques such as dissolves to help guide the viewer through the more tonally dissonant sequence in the film. By minimizing contrast through inherently cinematic techniques such as dissolves the creators successfully shift the scene into the medium of film.

As I have noted, motion is one of the defining aspects of this version of the sequence. The comic tone results largely from the absurd way that the characters move. The aristocrat literally pops into frame in a puff of smoke and slides around Reza, at one point entering from the top right of a frame with his head facing towards the ground and at other times sliding down towards the ground as if he were on some sort of off screen elevator. It is easy to see how this sequence builds itself around a
property that comics have no access to, and how the decision to build it around comical movement necessitates that it isolate itself from other portions of the film so that the contrast is slightly less striking. While movement is one of the major aspects of this sequence it is also worth noting how it deploys yet another aspect of cinema that is impossible in comics, sound design. The very way that characters deliver their lines during this sequence is comical, especially one moment where Marjane notes that Reza was a “moron” and suddenly he and all his followers look directly at the camera and exclaim “ooooohhhhhhh,” shocked at Marjane’s accusations. I was able to notice the more comic style of line delivery even as a non-French speaker, which speaks to just how drastic a change this sequence is from the generally realistic tone of the film. This version of the sequence makes a dramatic shift from the general style of the film, and it utilizes filmic techniques to clearly mark this shift. Unlike the comic’s version of the past that is much more intertwined with the present and the rest of the story due to a less centralized location in the narrative, the film’s version is boiled down and focused into one minute and twenty-three seconds of screen time. This more unified approach then leads to a more intense focus on a single aspect of the sequence, the comedy, which in turn leads to more pronounced stylistic changes from the rest of the film. The comic version could most certainly attain a more comic tone, a shift in art style or a change in the font of the lettering could easily provoke a lighter tone, but if the same construction of interwoven interludes remained it would cause a clash between the mingling time periods. The adaptation of the scene into a portion of a feature film, a style of filmmaking that cannot afford the longer, more leisurely pace of the original piece, necessitated this switch to a more focused
sequence, and this in turn allowed a complete shift in the way in which the scene was constructed even if the same information was relayed to the audience.

The two scenes provide unique looks into the same basic material. In the comic we see a more digressive and complex story structure while the film features a much tighter and focused telling of Iran’s history as well as a more focused tone. These observations could easily be extrapolated to the works as a whole, showing how the story is constructed in unique ways so as to fit most effectively within the overall work. We can also see ways in which the two pieces alter their stylistic traits to take advantage of their particular medium. The comic shifts back and forth between time frames but makes sure to signal these shifts clearly with unique panel types and subtle aesthetic alterations. The film also alters its aesthetics to mark shifts in time but it also utilizes movements and dissolves to help the viewer realize that a change in setting is about to occur. It is rather easy to see that certain similarities between the media exist, aesthetic shifts such as changes in lighting or general design help to provoke a reader or viewer’s attention, but it is also easy to see how a medium can utilize a tool the other might not have access to such as a more overt use of motion or a shift to a unique panel size that does not fit the traditional square design. Both changes are not particularly foreign to fans of either medium but each is just enough of an outlier to provoke attention from the intended audience and to elicit an awareness of a change in timeframe. It is this consciousness of the medium and its norms that helps define the storytelling choices made for each version of the story.

The next scene I’ve selected is a bit less of a departure from the source material. Where the telling of Iran’s history yielded two drastically different
presentations of the same material a sequence that features Marjane being stopped by two “Guardians of the Revolution” after purchasing an outlawed cassette remains similar in structure and even in some aesthetic choices. Deviations become more noticeable because other portions of the sequence are similar. Both versions of the sequence begin with Marjane walking down Gandhi Avenue amidst a crowd of street vendors surreptitiously hawking their music. The comic features a long horizontal panel comprised of seven vendors each with a speech balloon containing what they are selling. Marjane is depicted walking towards the right side of the panel and is placed just to the left of the page’s midpoint. The film utilizes a long shot with five vendors, two on the left of the frame and three on the right, with Marjane walking towards the right of the frame through the gap between them. As she walks the five vendors all say what they are selling. These two compositions compare rather favorably even if they are each subtly different to allow for how each is experienced. The comic’s construction is built along how a reader will read the page, Marjane walks from left to right, the natural flow of reading, and the vendors are in a straight line along the page. The film complicates the image slightly by placing vendors on either side of Marjane, this kind of composition is possible in film because Marjane’s
movement is not left up to the viewer and her character can easily move towards the camera, in a comic this kind of composition would likely have a tougher time getting across the information of Marjane’s movement even though her general direction is still from left to right. Comics lack the pure power of cinema to subject the viewer to the exact movement that is intended and the subtle differences in composition that can be seen here speak to how comics must be constructed in a way that is visually coherent for readers if they desire to successfully guide a reader through the story.

There is a slight deviation in the next portion of the scene. Following the long horizontal panel Marjane tells the reader that she purchased two tapes in a narration box that is accompanied by a panel showing the street vendor she buys from. In this panel the street vendor is depicted as having two faces, one looking left and the other right. This is picked up in the next panel where Marjane has just received the tapes and now has two heads of her own looking in each direction. Satrapi is representing the caution of the two as they conduct their illegal transaction through physically impossible abstraction. This decision seems to naturally arise from the inability to portray real motion, so in its place Satrapi draws some “movement lines,” two dashes that would follow the head if it were actually moving, and puts two versions of a character’s head in one panel, suggesting the motion that cannot be portrayed. The film actually inserts a portion of the story here, Marjane walks past the first set of street vendors, a
cut occurs and she walks by another, before off-screen sound alerts her to a new vendor who is selling just the tape she wants. She hears the cue, turns, and changes direction. This is followed by a cut and in the next shot Marjane is now seen walking from right to left. This addition seems perfectly suited to the cinematic world. It would be easy for Marjane to simply walk up to a vendor after walking by a long row of other vendors and stop when she heard the name of the band she was looking for, but ultimately it would be boring. As such Satrapi and Paronnaud decide to create some sort of surprise in her discovery, utilizing off-screen space, off-screen sound, and a change in movement. The key difference here is the use of right to left movement, in the comic the entire page features Marjane moving left to right, and this is a natural decision because a reader takes in the page from left to right. It would hardly be impossible for Satrapi to add right to left movement, but it would be an odd decision and counter to the type of simplistic, stripped down storytelling she is utilizing. It would bring unnecessary attention to the act of storytelling and that is rarely the goal of the book. On the other hand the shift in motion barely registers for a viewer of the film, the change is of course notable since it signals Marjane’s discovery of the music she wants, but it doesn’t appear as a drastic change in how the story is being told and is certainly not a surprise when it occurs. Both sequences make sure to mark moments like this, but they each do it in a way that does not overtly call attention to the artifice of their storytelling. Here two wildly different storytelling techniques accomplish the same goal in the story, interestingly though each technique utilized is not necessarily unique to the medium it is deployed in. Comics can utilize left to right movement and an animated, or live action, film could most certainly
present a character’s rapid movement as creating multiple heads. The important thing to note is that these storytelling techniques would be fundamentally altered if they shifted to a different medium. Right to left movement would likely be jarring for a reader and would upset the natural flow of a page that is built around left to right movement in every other panel while a character suddenly shaking their head so rapidly it produces a second one would likely be at least mildly surprising in film. The two techniques are not specific to either comics or film but the two techniques must be deployed carefully in each medium and are ultimately linked to the conventions of the story’s formal construction. This in turn pressures the creators to deploy the techniques in specific ways that will be most effective and can limit the choices available to a creator based solely on the medium they are working in.

The next portion of the scene also allows us to see how the film reconfigures the presentation of the story to focus on the motion of the characters. After Marjane drives down the price of the tape in a series of seven rapidly shifting medium close ups of her and the vendor (a sequence which plays much more swiftly and effectively on the screen than a series of seven panels could hope to play on the page) the movie cuts to the lower half of two black figures sliding across the street from right to left. These are the Guardians of the Revolution and in the comic they are introduced in a car in the back of a panel that contains Marjane walking down the street while thinking about the tapes she has just purchased. If this filmic composition of two black shapes against a street’s background were transformed into a comic
panel it would likely make little sense. It would merely be two black figures on a street with little context and would be missing the ominous slithering sound effect that accompanies their entrance in the film. It is not out of the question that some readers would be able to infer that these are actually people clad in burkas so it is not unreasonable to assume that this type of panel could be used, but then the creator would also have to contend with how to imply motion. Again there is a potential solution, motion lines could be used and the general idea of movement would be inferred. Then another problem arises, how would the reader know that these black shapes are coming after Marjane? The film utilizes the right to left movement to tip the viewer to the fact that the shapes are headed in Marjane’s direction, remember that Marjane herself ended walking this way, whereas this version of Persepolis, and most other comics, would have trouble making this right to left movement work without being slightly confusing because it violates the traditional left to right reading order. Again, we could say that then Satrapi could simply feature the black shapes moving from left to right and all would be fine, but this does not necessarily convince me. The power of these shapes in the film comes not from their depiction, they are not particularly terrifying, but from their slow and unnatural motion and the sliding hiss sound effect that accompanies them. These choices play to the abilities of cinema while the comic makes a decision to present the Guardians in a car that is bearing down on Marjane, quickly and easily representing their character and intentions. This doesn’t mean that the comic is inferior because the film plays a more subtle game with the Guardians’ appearance, but only that the comic understands what it must do to effectively tell the story for an audience that must infer much more about the story
than viewers of a film. Both versions of *Persepolis* strive for clarity of story and the choices made in each version of this scene speak to how clarity can be achieved and how different choices must be made to achieve that clarity.

The next to last portion of the sequence features a wide array of changes and similarities between the two versions. The Guardians of the Revolution question Marjane and decide to bring her in until she tells a story of dread and woe, attempting to convince them to have mercy. The largest change between the two sequences comes down to the depiction of the two Guardians. In the comic they tend to be depicted as tall monoliths who make Marjane look small in the panel, but in the film they are absurdly inhuman, with necks that stretch and move as if the pair were actually giraffes or some sort of eels. Once more we see the film utilizing the fact that it can move, highlighting the sudden and bizarre motions of the pair to foreground their cruelty. The comic manages this same feat, but it does it by highlighting the oppressive nature of the pair, it focuses more specifically on one of the Guardians, placing her exclusively on the left side of the panel and at one point leaving her face and placement in the panel unchanged for four consecutive images. This works well because it features a unique kind of panel transition that is largely eschewed in American comics; McCloud labels it a moment-to-moment transition and this kind of transition cues the reader to understand that only a small fraction of time passes in between panels. This kind of panel is an oddity for most American comics simply because utilizing it eats up a lot of page space, the less time that elapses between panels means more panels must be utilized to show small movements. As such in a standard comic book, which features a limited twenty two pages of story, moment-to-
moment transitions are dangerous simply because they use a lot of page space for very little action. *Persepolis* is a longer form story so a moment-to-moment transition is not out of the question but it is largely left unused. By utilizing this static composition for the Guardian Satrapi emphasizes her stubbornness with a technique that rapidly eats up space on the printed page while barely moving forward in the story. Each depiction works well to represent the power and cruelty that these women possess but each makes unique choices about how to represent the story and these choices seem to be heavily influenced by the medium the story is being told in.

There are similarities between the two scenes, two panels and two cuts in particular recall one another and seem to serve roughly the same purpose, but most interesting is a panel that contains a depiction of motion and a filmic action that seem to function the same way. First the two cuts; as the Guardians examine Marjane they call out two specific features of her outfit that worry them, her shoes and her Michael Jackson button. Each time they point to one of these aspects of her outfit the film cuts in to give a closer look at the offending item. The comic handles these moments in an identical fashion, the Guardians point out an item in one panel, and the next panel is
composed to give a more specific view of said item. The final similarity is the moment when one of the Guardians pulls Marjane’s scarf down, both the film and the comic feature this moment and both are relatively similar. The only real difference is that the film’s motion is more restrained in how forceful the Guardian is. The comic features the Guardian pulling Marjane’s scarf in a fashion that covers her entire face, motion lines are of course provided to help highlight the action. Here we see that motion is not solely the purview of film, the action shown in both versions is essentially identical, the comic must be a bit more forceful to effectively get across the action since it isn’t moving, but ultimately the effect is the same even if the exact depiction is altered ever so slightly. This is one of the moments in the film where we can clearly see an aesthetic choice that doesn’t need to be altered in any major way to achieve an identical effect and one of the moments where film and comics seem to be roughly equivalent. Different levels of intensity must be utilized, since comics do not have actual motion exaggeration becomes a useful substitute, but in the end the motion is represented whether it is through suggestion or actual movement.
The scenes diverge once more to showcase two entirely different versions of the same moment. Marjane must convince the Guardians not to take her in and she does this through the same method in each version, telling a sob story about her cruel stepmother. In the comic this is shown through four panels where the Guardian and Marjane’s positions remain constant while Marjane’s facial expression moves from normal, to the verge of crying, to shedding a single tear, and finally to an outright abstraction of what a human face looks like. This version of the scene utilizes panels that represent small portions of time to simulate minute changes in Marjane’s facial expressions and this highlights her acting. The final panel of an overwrought Marjane putting on a face that looks absolutely bizarre is extremely effective at getting this notion across. The film also highlights Marjane’s acting but does so in an entirely different fashion. As the pair grab Marjane and tell her she’s coming with them we see only Marjane against a wall of black fabric. Marjane begins to tell her story and the camera stays with her for a few moments, until overwrought music begins to swell in the background and the camera slowly tilts up, leaving Marjane behind. After a few moments of blackness we reach the Guardians’ faces as Marjane’s story continues. The scene culminates in the pair
looking at each other and each changing their facial expressions to something resembling a lack of interest. At this moment the two look to the left side of the frame and walk off, causing the phony music to warble out, calling attention to Marjane’s acting much in the same way her unrealistic face did in the comic. Here we see the comic focusing on very specific depictions of Marjane over a series of moments, while the film plays more heavily with the tool of sound, featuring sound effects that would be impossible to effectively replicate in the purely visual realm of comics.

This scene also plays heavily with the norms of each medium and the work itself, building up rules and storytelling techniques and then altering them to produce a similar effect. The film relies heavily upon its musical score to indicate Marjane’s lies while the comic utilizes an abstract style of drawing. Both of these stylistic decisions stand in stark contrast to the choices made in the rest of the work as a whole. Satrapi’s comic is certainly not overwhelmingly realistic in its depictions of humans but it has a set style that is rarely altered and does clearly resemble human beings. Thus when she decides to make Marjane’s face distort as it does in this panel it violates the norms that have been established so far in the work, at the same time though this facial distortion is not entirely out of place in comics. It is not a jarring transition to see a drawn figure distort in this fashion and it does a good job of highlighting the falseness of Marjane’s plea to the Guardian. On the other hand this facial distortion could most assuredly be used in the animated film since facial distortions in an animated world are not particularly different than facial distortions in a comic world. Interestingly though Satrapi and Paronnaud go a different way in this scene, relying on music to break the internal norms of the film. The soundtrack swells
and plays dramatic music that feels out of place. This sends the scene into the realm of melodrama and the music is clearly meant to signal the viewer to Marjane’s lies and how she is attempting to evoke pity through a story that feels right out of a bad movie that would use this kind of scoring. So while the comic utilizes a technique that the film could replicate the film decides not to and goes in a separate direction, utilizing a technique that became available when the story was shifted from the world of comics to the world of film. This doesn’t imply that film has more tools at its disposal and that its version of the scene is better for it, just that in this instance the directors felt the use of soundtrack would help sell this version of the scene, either version of the scene could have worked but each scene feels effectively designed in a way that fits well with its medium. The comic artist and the film artists have made separate choices that help their stories thrive within their respective media, even if they could have achieved a more faithful translation if they so desired.

The final moment of the sequence is worth noting for one small detail that brings motion back to the film and changes something from the comic. Just before this sequence in the comic we see Marjane in her room in a panel featuring a poster of iron maiden and Marjane head banging. Satrapi depicts this by featuring three different heads emerging from Marjane’s body, which itself is slightly distorted as if it were in two separate positions. To fully sell the effect Satrapi also adds in motion lines. The film also features Marjane head banging to Iron Maiden, but changes its location to the end of this scene while the comic uses a panel that features Marjane dancing to the music of Kim Wilde at the end of this sequence. A small change certainly, but the film places the head banging as the finale of this entire scene. It
becomes a release for what has just occurred while in the comic this release is carried through Marjane’s narration, “To each his own way of calming down.”27 There is no narration or dialogue featured over Marjane’s head banging in the movie, and as such we focus wholly on her motion and the loud heavy metal music. We can see here that while the action of head banging is successfully portrayed in both media, film is able to extract more visceral emotion from it, likely due to its actual movement on the screen and the exuberant music played along with it. This then causes the action to be placed in a location that is more significant to the overall narrative and focuses the scene more sharply on this action. The comic on the other hand takes a more general action, dancing, and combines it with a jagged word balloon to indicate the volume of the music and narration. This does highlight the emotional significance of the action just like the film, but does so in a way that doesn’t rely as heavily on the actual motion of the action or the volume of the music. The ultimate difference comes in the fact that the film manages to finish a scene with Marjane head banging in her room along to the furious music of Iron Maiden and is able to successfully climax the dramatic build of the scene with this action. The comic on the other hand must rely on tools outside of motion and sound, a panel or even a few panels showing Marjane head banging simply wouldn’t be enough to close off this sequence because it and the jagged balloon would have a hard time of accurately expressing Marjane’s need to vent, so instead narration is added. Here we see the film’s ability to present both motion and sound fluidly help to eliminate the need for narration; the two carry emotion effectively and without dialogue from the characters.

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The final comparison I’d like to make comes from moments in the comic when Satrapi devotes large portions of a page to a single panel. These large panels themselves have a vast amount of flexibility, featuring many different depictions of time, motion, and story events. Some of these large panels were brought over into the film version of the story and these moments are worth looking at because the large panels themselves are rather striking images that can arrest the viewer and invite them to pause for a moment so that they can fully take in the image they are being presented with. A larger panel cannot help but break from the traditional flow of the story unless the entire comic is told in this fashion; since this is not the case these larger panels immediately cause a reader to view the panels as an important moment in the story thus inviting more contemplation. Satrapi takes advantage of this by reserving large panels almost exclusively for moments that feature intensely emotional portions of the story. One instance of this sort of panel emerges when Marjane recalls how younger boys were told that if they died for Iran as martyrs they would go to Heaven, to represent this they were given a “key to paradise” to wear around their necks. Satrapi features a panel that accounts for roughly two thirds of the entire page and shows a group of young boys with keys around their necks being killed by a violent
explosion. The reason that this is not full page spread is that Satrapi wishes to show how her young life was so different than that of many other young Iranians. To do this the bottom third of the page features Marjane attending her first party in a “punk” outfit that her mother made. This contrast becomes visually represented on the page by featuring both versions of Iranian childhood at one time allowing the reader to visually see the contrast by merely shifting their glance up or down.

The equivalent of this image occurs in the film just after the sequence where Marjane buys outlawed music. While Marjane head bangs the image fades out and the music continues. A battlefield appears and we see portions of a conflict played out to the sounds of Iron Maiden. This music eventually disappears too, and a somber pause occurs before a group of unarmed men charge onto the field and are slowly blown up until only one remains. Finally he too is killed and at this moment the background fades to black and leaves only a small remnant of a jagged white explosion over the man’s silhouetted body. This too begins to fade and when all is black a key is thrown across the darkness. Here we see the subtlety of the comic’s composition, which contrasts two versions of Iranian childhood, eschewed for a more visceral, emotional, and extended battle sequence, whereas the revolution and war between Iraq and Iran are rarely given more than a single large panel in the comic at any one time. Most interesting is the pause on the dying soldier, his death being held for moments after an extremely visceral battle sequence. Here, lack of motion invites contemplation in a similar way to the comic’s use of a large panel to break the flow of the storytelling and invite further investigation of the panel. The depiction of time is also important to this contemplation, by stretching time to a standstill the film focuses the viewer on a
single aspect of the movie much in the same way that the break in panel size focuses the viewer on the entirety of the page and invites contemplation. The manipulation of time and how the viewer or reader experiences it helps to control the experience, allowing a more complex interaction with the material. Different outcomes are desired from this manipulation of time; the comic prefers a slightly more intellectual comparison of the two panels on the page while the film uses this image to emotionally prime the viewer for the scene that will follow. The images are fairly similar and easily comparable even if they are not identical, and while their ultimate purpose is unique to each version of the story they still function similarly on some levels. It is hard to look at either image and remain cold to the fact that young children are being sacrificed in a conflict that is ultimately meaningless. In the end the reason each image succeeds in causing this contemplation is that they understand how their respective media tell stories. The comic understands that panels and their construction create a basic flow that can be interrupted through manipulating the size, or other aspects, of the panel’s overall shape. Similarly the film understands that motion is a defining aspect of its medium and that by removing it, even for only a few moments, it will alert the viewer to a change in the story, invite them to ask themselves why this change has occurred, and then to allow them to further engage with what they are seeing.

Both versions of *Persepolis* showcase a mastery of the medium they are working within. An understanding of storytelling norms in both media is what I believe creates the numerous alterations during the process of adaptation. While both media are indeed visual arts and share many storytelling abilities these coinciding
tools are rarely deployed at the same time or in the same way. Satrapi and her collaborator for the film, Paronnaud, shift and mold the original *Persepolis* into a story that fits perfectly within the world of film and do it by reinventing much of the way that the story is told from an aesthetic standpoint. There is certainly a large resemblance between the two works, the general visual design remains constant and the story is left largely untouched even if it is abridged. In the end the changes speak louder than the similarities and it is hard to see the two works as identical pieces rather than two unique and excellent versions of a single story.
Chapter 4:  
The Cinematic Comic

The past comparisons of comics and their film adaptations have all focused on the movement of stories from the printed page to the silver screen, I’d like to focus my last comparison on the reverse of this process. There is a growing trend in comics towards a “cinematic” style. This term is something of a buzzword of late and I’ve yet to run into an actual definition of it beyond an implication that it features realistic art and “widescreen” style panels. The trade paperback for Wanted features a blurb on the back cover that sums up the use of the word nicely, “With rollicking non-stop action, colorful characters and the sharpest dialogue around, Wanted comes as close to a cinematic comic as you’re likely to find.”\(^28\) It doesn’t really say anything, none of the traits listed scream out as being cinematic, and the term is poorly defined most of the times it is used. This movement towards cinematic comics intrigues me because it speaks to how the glut of comic book films has begun to influence their source material. More and more comics seem to be featuring this style even to the point where Marvel Comics’ big summer event of 2006, Civil War, was drawn in this style. As a case study, I will examine 2008’s Iron Man alongside the 2008 comic The Invincible Iron Man, an ongoing series that was timed to coincide with the release of the film. This series was positioned to capitalize on the potential influx of new readers the film would provide and likely used this style as another way to ease new readers into comics. This does not imply that comics and cinema are naturally entwined because new readers become interested in comics after films inspired by

\(^{28}\) Mark Millar and J.G. Jones, Wanted (Berkeley, CA: Top Cow, 2008), Back Cover.
them are released. Rather what becomes worth noting is how comics attempt to capitalize on the aesthetics of film to sell themselves, showcasing the mutability and variety of aesthetic options available to comics. In doing so, the question then becomes whether or not it is possible for a comic to become truly cinematic, and if so, will it leave behind traditional comic storytelling conventions when it does?

*The Invincible Iron Man* does depart from some traditional comic aesthetics to achieve a more cinematic tone; it completely eschews typical sound cues and also organizes itself around widescreen panels for the majority of the book’s pages. But does this aesthetic shift really make comics more like cinema? Ultimately the assumption of a “cinematic comic” is reductive. As I’ve detailed in previous chapters, replicating stories in a different medium requires care and an understanding of how each media tells stories. In *Persepolis* we saw how film evoked comics during the introduction through visual design and restrained motion, something that cannot actually occur in comics, and this is what I would like to keep in mind while looking at how comics replicate film aesthetics. *The Invincible Iron Man* most certainly attempts to look cinematic but it does not do so in a way that forgets its identity as a comic. Matt Fraction, the writer, and Salvador Larroca, the artist, carefully structure their work to evoke cinema but are careful not to neglect the conventions of comic book storytelling while they do so. This helps them produce a unique aesthetic that resembles cinema in some ways but is still a comprehensible comic in its own right.

The film and the comic were developed at the same time but were not directly tied to one another. Matt Fraction had little knowledge of the actual workings of the film even though he was tasked with creating a new-reader friendly piece. He
described his thought process as such, “‘I made a lot of guesses based on the film [that] I hoped the talent involved would make, and ended up being pretty simpatico,’”\textsuperscript{29} For only guessing he did a remarkable job of capturing both the tone and character relations that the movie focused on. Both the film and the comic feature an almost identical cast, the major exception is the film’s villain Obadiah Stane being replaced by his son, who was a new creation in the comic world, Ezekiel Stane. Similarly the tone strikes a middle ground between hero Tony Stark’s playboy nature and his ultimate drive to make the world a better place. Of course the actual stories themselves diverge, but the feel of each piece is remarkably similar. The director of the film, Jon Favreau, has also openly professed his appreciation for Fraction’s work in the build up to \textit{Iron Man 2}, “‘I’ll tell you which [comic books] we’re looking at very closely, not so much for story but for tone: the Matt Fraction [ones].’”\textsuperscript{30} The interconnected nature of the works only grew from this point as Fraction was brought to LA to meet with Favreau and \textit{Iron Man 2}’s co-writer Justin Theroux.\textsuperscript{31} Clearly we can see that each work is influencing the other to some degree, but ultimately I will be focusing on the cinematic aesthetic that \textit{The Invincible Iron Man} utilizes and how it compares to the aesthetic design of \textit{Iron Man}, a solid representation of mainstream, big budget, comic inspired film making.


\textsuperscript{31} Rick Marshall, 2008, ‘\textit{Invincible Iron Man’ Writer Matt Fraction Talks…
I’d like to start this comparison with the respective openings of both the film and the comic. For the film this means a humvee ride in the Afghanistan desert as well as an attack on the convoy. In the comic the opening deals with a village in Tanzania and features some light exposition as well as a terrorist attack. Once more we can see parallels swiftly emerging between the works, both involve third world violence in their spectacular openings, but these parallels are of less interest than the design choices that the film and the comic make. The film opens on a vista of the desert with some mountains in the background. This is handled with an extreme long shot and in the lower right hand side of the frame some movement is visible. The actual objects that are moving are hard to make out but dust is being kicked into the air and they are moving with the speed of motor vehicles. The camera begins to pan to the left to follow the cars while wind blows on the soundtrack, the only audible noise. During this shot some studio credits are overlaid on the image, the only credits that will appear until the end of the film. This works well in the extreme long shot because the line of vehicles is not yet a strong visual so the eye is free to wander the frame but is consistently pulled back to the credits that
are popping up due to the overall lack of interesting visual detail or compositional center for the frame. A cut in to the convoy soon occurs, placing the viewer just in front of the lead vehicle while a title appears that places the humvees in “Kunar Province, Afghanistan.” Accompanying this cut is a guitar riff as AC/DC’s “Back in Black” begins to play. The noise of the vehicles themselves also joins the soundtrack creating a stark contrast from the prior sound design that featured only the ambient wind noise. Here the film does an excellent job of crafting a general tone for the opening scene using both shot scale and sound design. By utilizing a rather sedate first shot Favreau emphasizes the cut in to the more energetic second shot that features the humvees driving straight at the camera. He mirrors this increase in energy in the soundtrack as well, adding in rock and roll music along with the roar of the humvees themselves. Favreau contrasts the two spaces both through shot scale and sound design as well as through his editing, utilizing a somber, prolonged first shot and then accelerating the pace of the editing as the scene shifts into the lighter tone of the humvee ride. This quick change in tone and pace also highlights the fact that the viewer is in an action film, instantly setting the stage for all that is to follow. This is just the first few moments of the opening scene of the film but it works nicely as a comparison for the first page of the comic.

The comic opens similarly, with an extreme long shot. This extreme long shot is at ground level though and places the reader in the center of a town that is denoted as “Tabora, Tanzania. Africa.” by the title on the panel. This establishing shot is smaller in scale than the film’s, but interestingly features no visual center. It consists of a large number of pedestrians and houses but has no focal point. This seems tied in
to the story’s need to establish the village as a populated place that will soon be decimated by terrorists. The problem then arises that it can be difficult to focus a reader in on a specific character in such a populated frame. A film could use motion or camera movement to bring out an important character, like the vehicles driving across the desert in the film, but comics do not have the luxury of these tools so this establishing shot forgoes centering the characters that will carry this scene and instead focuses on Tony Stark’s narration and the general idea of a populated village. It is also important to note that, in the comic, this panel helps to establish the dominant panel type for the entire issue, which emphasizes a horizontally oriented, rectangular view of the story, similar to widescreen compositions in film. This panel is larger than any of the others on this page in terms of height but it is still wider than it is tall and conforms to the “widescreen” aesthetic that is being established. The two establishing shots (to borrow film terminology) do a good job of constructing the basis for what is to come. The film sets a tonal mood that is quickly undercut to heighten the enjoyment of the raucous and humorous scene that is to come while the comic details important information that will help the reader comprehend what is to come.

The compositions themselves do not seem particularly linked to either medium, but the ultimate design does feel subtly different. The film highlights the motion of the humvees through the desert in the opening shot; drawing the eye to them both through the dust the cars kick up but also through the barren nature of the frame itself. The comic populates its frame but knows it will be difficult to strongly draw the reader’s eye through such a densely populated panel and thus decides to leave it blank rather than squeeze important characters into frame since they might be
missed. Clearly the two establishing shots could be replicated in either medium, but the exact way they are handled here feels suited to the media they are represented in. The film highlights motion and sound design to further emphasize a tonal shift that is coming while the comic focuses on getting across story information in a clear fashion that will not confuse readers. This is important for any single issue of a comic because it is so much shorter in length than a film and clearly establishing a location and characters is essential to maximizing the story contained in the twenty-two pages provided. This speaks to how similar shots can be subtly tweaked to be more effective in one medium or another. These two establishing shots could work in either medium, but each plays more effectively in the medium it is placed in. This makes these shots compositions that are more effectively keyed in to the needs and pressures of their respective media rather than functional equivalents.

From here both the comic and the film continue to establish their dominant tones. The film features a comedic sequence where Tony Stark jokes around with the occupants of his humvee. Dialogue largely carries this sequence forward so it isn’t particularly necessary to delve into on an aesthetic level but it does have one important feature worth noting. There are plenty of reaction shots that feature all three of the occupants of the vehicle who are not Tony Stark. This becomes important because this scene’s jocular tone will soon be undercut by a vicious assault that will feature all three of the escorts being killed. Favreau wants to establish a link between the viewer and these minor characters and he does this through both the humorous dialogue and a visual connection to the characters. Thus when we see them die we have characters that may not have names but do have distinct faces and personalities,
and thus we are more likely to care about their deaths. By finding out more about these characters and understanding their human qualities the viewer sees them as good people, so when they are killed it quickly establishes a moral divide between good and bad that further involves the viewer in the action on an emotional level. Individually these reaction shots would not be difficult to replicate in a comic, but the sheer number of them is worth noting. There are a total of thirty-six shots in one minute and twenty-three seconds of screen time for an average shot length of 2.31 seconds. This is fairly fast for a simple dialogue scene, and for the rest of this movie as most of the other dialogue scenes I clocked come in at over three seconds per shot. Part of this disparity can be explained away by the fact that the scene is shot inside a humvee, but the scene itself suggests this is not the only reason for the speedy cutting. Favreau hits multiple reaction shots and even stays on the soldiers while Stark is talking off-screen, suggesting the importance of seeing these characters’ faces. So while the cutting is likely influenced by the film’s need to shoot within a car it also seems that the speed of the editing is a result of giving all of the soldiers as much face time as possible.

In comparing the media, the issue then becomes whether or not a single panel holds the same level of importance as multiple shots in a movie. I believe that they would not and that the sheer repetition of the soldiers’ faces grants them a stronger place in the viewer’s mind than a single panel in a comic could manage. This doesn’t mean that a comic would be unable to import empathy for characters that are only ancillary to the story, but that it might be harder to do so in the presence of the main characters who are likely to get the most face time in the more limited space that a
mainstream comic book provides during its twenty-two pages of story. The introduction of *The Invincible Iron Man* seems to support this claim because it features an ancillary character that the audience is asked to care for and does so by focusing on her visually while Tony Stark remains off frame, narrating in captions on the page.

After the establishing panel the comic moves to a second panel that shifts towards the focus of this page, three girls who have just purchased a cell phone. The most important of these three is Adimu who is dressed in bright green with a red bandanna. This outfit quickly holds the reader’s attention even though she is flanked by her two friends, this is thanks to their softer shades of purple that do not catch the eye as effectively. This panel is accompanied by narration from Tony Stark that helps to establish Adimu’s world as well as the impact that a cell phone will have on her young life. The next panel shifts behind the girls to highlight the cell phone itself. A high angle shot is used and since the characters’ backs are presented to the reader the focus is primarily on the cell phone, which helps to highlight the technological theme of this issue. The comic is about to tread the same path that the film will, a terrorist attack that will kill these minor characters who the reader will hopefully care about. In *Iron Man* this results in a scene with quicker than usual editing for a dialogue sequence while in *The Invincible Iron Man* it results in an opening that features only the narration of the main character rather than his physical
appearance. Both succeed in making the reader empathize with the characters but
do so in subtly divergent fashions. The film maximizes the appearance of these
characters even though the main character is present, but the comic decides to excise
the main character from the scene on a visual level because featuring both him and
the minor characters equally would require a larger amount of panels and thus would
eat up valuable space.

The differences presented in these sequences are interesting in that each
medium is attempting the same thing, to create empathy for characters who do not
receive much presence in the story. Also of note is the fact that each accomplishes
this in roughly the same fashion, by giving them more face time. The important
distinction though is that this manifests in slightly different ways. Both deemphasize
Tony Stark but the film is still able to retain his presence within the scene through
tools such as off-screen sound and rapid editing which keeps him as a visual presence
for the viewer while allowing the other characters ample time on screen. The comic
instead completely excises Tony Stark’s visual appearance, instead focusing on Tony
Stark’s off panel voice, characterized by the yellow text boxes with red outlines.
These colors bring to mind the Iron Man armor since the majority of readers would
know what Iron Man looks like prior to starting the issue. This is essentially a
functional equivalent for the sound of a character’s voice, by color-coding narration
panels a reader can quickly associate characters with certain words even when they
are not visually linked to the panels in any other way. So ultimately we see two
scenes that strive to balance their main characters with ancillary characters but utilize
a different set of tools to retain this balance, once more noting how films and
comics are able to accomplish similar tasks but must do so in divergent fashions.

Now that the minor characters have been established it will be useful to move
on to the moment in both the comic and the film when the scenes shift tonally. Both
accomplish this in rather deft fashions that feel remarkably well suited to their media.
The film features a shot of a soldier preparing to take a picture of another soldier with
Tony Stark. The soldier taking the picture is in the front seat of the humvee so while
the viewer watches him with the camera they are able to see the next humvee further
up the road. The shot is established before cutting back to Tony and the soldier and is
then returned to for a moment before the humvee further up the road explodes. The
film creates a stasis of sorts with the initial shot, the viewer sees the humvee ahead
and the soldier fiddling with the camera and all seems fine. We cut away from that
shot and watch the other soldier try and instruct the first one in the use of the camera
before cutting back. When the film cuts back to the soldier in the front seat the viewer
expects more of the playful banter and lighthearted tone that has been carrying on so
far in the scene. This expectation is quickly undermined after two seconds by the
violent explosion further up the road. This explosion in the background of the shot
destroyed the stasis that had previously been established in the shot/reverse shot pattern
and to further hammer this point home the music on the soundtrack cuts out,
distancing the viewer from the previously comedic tone even more. Favreau wants to
emphasize the abrupt and frightening nature of the attack and does so by creating a
scene that starts as a comedy but quickly shifts gears. He does this by establishing
both a visual and aural world that is clearly defined and then redefined by the start of
the assault. He relies on the tools at his disposal to put the viewer in a specific frame of mind and then uses those same tools once more to surprise the viewer and signal a new tone that is about to take over the scene.

The comic is also able to highlight such a shift in tone and the end of the first page features just such a shift. The first page features Tony Stark talking about Adimu buying a cell phone with her friends and how cell phones are easier for many people in third world nations to own than a landline. This establishes an informative tone since the reader is learning about these characters and their world. The more informative tone gives way to a more personal one as the page progresses and by the final panel the narration even features a joke, echoing the comic foundation of the film’s opening scene. In the end though the page turns tragic as Tony Stark laments Adimu’s death in a narration box overlaid on the final panel. To highlight this emotional moment the comic utilizes a strategy that film would be hard pressed to recreate. The final panel on the page breaks the established panel size by overlaying an almost square close up of Adimu over another panel that would have conformed to the rest of the “widescreen” compositions. The tonal and emotional shift that occurs between these two panels is highlighted by the juxtaposition of one panel over the other. The narrative shift and the panel in which this occurs literally breaks the established aesthetic of the page’s layout to help highlight the change. Again we see an important change in the tone of a story being marked stylistically through interrupting the established method of
storytelling. The film does so through depth staging, sound design, and moment-to-moment development of shots; three techniques that are well suited to a medium that has the ability to showcase actual movement and sound. The comic on the other hand utilizes the fact that its “shots” co-exist on the same page and establishes a traditional type of panel that will then be interrupted when the tone of the story is interrupted. Each accomplishes the same goal of changing the tone and each does so in a way that is suited to the medium the story is being told in. This once more highlights how each medium has a rhythm that can be both established and interrupted in unique ways. Further showcasing just how difficult it can be to achieve fidelity in an adaptation if a creator decides to merely copy the compositions held within panels rather than adapting the material in a way that translates the overall effect to a different medium.

Now that we’ve examined the two openings and the ways that they utilize divergent approaches to similar material I’d like to focus on something that would seem a tad simpler, dialogue. Both film and comics present a unique challenge in this arena. For film breaking down into shot/reverse shot patterns can be the norm for dialogue scenes, but it isn’t a particularly dynamic shooting style either. Favreau does attempt to avoid shot/reverse shot construction at times through staging and character movement but ultimately most of the dialogue scenes adhere to this pattern for at least some part of their running time. For instance, a scene that features Tony Stark and Obadiah Stane talking in the movie starts with Tony climbing to the top of a flight of stairs to enter a room, he crosses to the right of the frame and sits down on a couch near Pepper Potts while some close up shots of Obadiah playing the piano are inserted
to both build the space and get in closer on Jeff Bridges, the actor playing Obadiah Stane. This then leads to a long shot where Obadiah stands up while talking, walks down to Tony’s location, and sits down next to him; placing Obadiah on the left of the frame, Tony in the middle, and Pepper on the right side of the image. This shot lasts fifteen seconds but it quickly gives way to a shot/reverse shot setup consisting of a medium close-up of Obadiah over Tony’s shoulder and another medium close-up of Tony over Obadiah’s shoulder. This continues for a while but will be broken by a line of dialogue from Pepper in her own medium close-up divorced from the shot/reverse shot pattern. This then causes a cut to the shot that focuses on Obadiah, in this shot Tony turns his head around to look at Pepper, repurposing his portion of the shot/reverse shot to connect the new space that has entered into the dialogue. Obadiah takes back the dialogue though and Tony turns to him once more, re-establishing the prior shot/reverse shot pattern. The shot/reverse shot breaks down as Tony begins to leave the room in a tracking shot, but Obadiah re-engages him in a conversation setting up a new shot/reverse shot pattern which is then broken as Tony leaves the room for good. Overall what we can see here is Favreau making the most of small portions of a dialogue scene that break the shot/reverse shot pattern in an effort to keep the film interesting while also working to support the dramatic development of the scene. On the other hand the film still falls back into the shot/reverse shot setup every so often because it is a quick and effective way to shoot a dialogue scene. What this scene effectively demonstrates is the concerns that Favreau dealt with as a filmmaker and the pressures the medium of film exerted on him. He could have very easily fallen into a simple shot/reverse shot pattern that was
never broken or tried for a long unbroken take of the entire scene but each would have presented problems. More shot/reverse shot would simply be a boring choice visually and would also be less effective in marking turning points within the scene. Longer takes would have created difficulties in staging and setup that breaking down into shot/reverse shot helps avoid, not to mention the help that shot/reverse shot provides in the post production and the editing room. Favreau strikes a middle ground that both relies on shot/reverse shot patterns but violates them at times. And it is this understanding of filmmaking norms and practices that helps this scene function effectively.

A dialogue scene in The Invincible Iron Man presents a whole different array of challenges for the creators and these differing challenges speak to the disparities of the two media. In dialogue heavy scenes the established aesthetic of “widescreen” panels begins to break down in favor of a larger number of square panels arranged to space out the dialogue so as not to overwhelm any one image with a clutter of text. This speaks to a concern that is unique to comics, in film dialogue can exist unobtrusively within a shot since it is merely sound, but since comics must represent sound visually these sounds take up space in panels. Because of this too much “sound” in any one panel will cause a loss of visual legibility. This in turn then forces the writer and artist to think of ways to retain legibility while adhering to the style of storytelling they are attempting to structure their story around. I would not argue that the first issue of The Invincible Iron Man is entirely successful in this regard since the “widescreen” aesthetic does disappear to an extent when dialogue takes precedence
but there seems to be an attempt to retain the look that the comic has established for itself.

These two pages from the first issue do a good job of summarizing the contrasts in *The Invincible Iron Man*’s visual design. The second page features five widescreen panels. The first page features six panels and is decidedly different in appearance than the second page. Why does this occur and could it have been avoided? The answer lies in the action that is being depicted. The first page features three shots of Ezekiel by himself while he talks to the people in the boardroom, this can be readily compared to the second page that features only one shot of Ezekiel on his own. The one shot of Ezekiel by himself is, frankly, rather boring. Ezekiel stands before a monotonous gray background and points at himself while a shadow can be
seen at the bottom left of the panel. If the first page were to construct itself around widescreen panels there would be a minimum of three full panels of this kind and the page would be dull to look at. To combat this the panels instead become squarer and more focused on Ezekiel’s face while allowing the word balloons to cover up the majority of the dull gray in the background. There were ways to retain the widescreen aesthetic of panels on this page, but they were not taken and it is worth noting why they were not used. The same information on the first page could be conveyed by merging, for instance, the last two panels into one widescreen composition and then placing the two sets of word balloons on both side of Ezekiel’s head to cover up most of the gray. This solution would lead to a remarkably wordy panel that would likely be visually displeasing and weighted too heavily towards text rather than the combination of words and images that is so important to comics. So, in an effort to keep the page visually stimulating, the page is broken down into more panels that do not individually conform to the widescreen aesthetic that so much of this issue relies on. When one looks at the page as a whole a different image begins to emerge. It is possible to view the six panels as three widescreen strips on the page; the first panel conforms on its own, the next three create the second strip, and the last two create a final strip along the page. This construction of like sized panels constructed in a uniform fashion gives an impression of a widescreen design. Helping this impression is the small amount of blank white space that is left between each panel. This minimizes the break between panels when the page is viewed as a whole and helps the mind think of the panels as widescreen strips more readily. Also worth noting is the fact that each strip features a unique number and size of panel that remains
constant for the strip. This creates a unity for each widescreen strip that helps
differentiate them at a glance when one views the page as a whole. So ultimately
while the widescreen aesthetic is broken down on a base level it still remains in some
fashion. This page is one of the most successful in the issue but there are dialogue
pages that do not succeed in the same way. In one instance the page breaks down into
a two by four grid of identical square panels and it is hard to say that it replicates the
widescreen aesthetic that the rest of the issue largely succeeds in presenting to the
reader. These design choices all speak to the concerns that the comic’s creators faced
when scripting and drawing a dialogue scene. Also worth noting is how far divorced
the analysis of the film’s dialogue sequence is from the analysis of the comic’s. Both
grapple with radically different problems and must deal with completely unique sets
of norms and pressures. Most striking is that when a comic attempts to replicate
cinematic aesthetic it presents problems of a comic book nature rather than cinematic
problems. Once more we see that the cinematic comic is primarily cinematic for the
reader, but not for the creators.

Of course it is worth noting again how the comic and the film both deal with
varying and conforming to conventions. The film utilizes shot/reverse shot setups to
help guide and structure the scene but breaks from them to comment on turning points
of the scene and to present a varied image that will keep a viewer from becoming
bored by repetitive visuals. The comic structures its panel choices and layouts around
similar concerns, dealing with how the dialogue will lay out on the page and then how
this dialogue will contribute to the visual design and whether it will bore or excite the
reader. Fraction and Larroca strike a similar balance to Favreau in that they vacillate
between the traditional aesthetic they have established and breaking this aesthetic
to present a more exciting image. Both understand that this break cannot come in a
way that clashes with the rest of the work or makes the image difficult to understand.
The storytelling reflects this, allowing for two dialogue scenes that effectively get
across the information intended while presenting a varied image in two strikingly
different fashions. We see the film dealing primarily with issues such as shot length
and the kinds of shots to be utilized while the comic deals with how to parcel out the
dialogue while also considering how to frame the panels as a complete unit on the
page.

Now that we’ve examined how the film and comic open and handle their
dialogue there remains one important aspect of such works to discuss, an action
scene. These sorts of scenes are clearly important to both mainstream comics and
films and no evaluation of cinematic
comics would be complete without some
examination of how an action scene is
handled. I’ll be taking a look at two action
scenes involving Iron Man himself; for
the film’s scene I will analyze Iron Man
striking back at the group that captured
him and for the comic I will look at Iron
Man’s raid on A.G.M. (That stands for
Advanced Genocide Mechanics if you
happened to be wondering.) As opposed
to the previous comparisons I have made I will be jumping around a little bit more
to most effectively draw comparisons between specific shots and panels since we
have already examined overarching patterns of construction in the last two examples.

Both of the scenes begin with Iron Man flying down into the action. The film
starts by watching Iron Man rocket to the
ground in an almost subjective shot that is
never claimed by any member of the scene
as the camera is placed in a location where a
terrorist or civilian might reside but this
potential character is never visualized. This
places the viewer in a position that evokes
the feeling of “being in” the action. This is
very similar to panels 1, 4, and 5 of the two
pages shown above. Iron Man reaches his
destination, hovers above the ground for a
short period of time and then lands on the
ground in a crouching position. The comic adds in a punch on the landing but by and
large the base content is the same. The almost subjective location of the “camera” is
also utilized here, once more placing the reader in a location that could very easily be
occupied by a character within the scene but is never claimed by anyone. This action
causes some problems for the comic’s cinematic aesthetic though; as can be seen in
the fourth panel of the first page. The action of hovering above the enemies can only
be effectively represented with a vertical panel and this causes a breakdown in the
widescreen aesthetic. Three of the four panels on this page could have easily worked as “widescreen” panels but the content of the fourth panel stops this from being possible due to its need for a vertical panel. This consideration then shapes panels two and three into a vertical configuration that clearly does not abide by the widescreen styled compositions we are used to from this issue. The first panel of the page still uses this widescreen setup but none of the other panels can be massaged into this design while the content of the panels remains as is. Another interesting trait of this layout is that vertical reading takes precedence over right to left reading due to the final image of Iron Man descending. To help emphasize this reading pattern a portion of the narrative is placed between two panels so that the reader will follow the action down instead of the traditional reading flow of left to right. One could argue that film is forced into constraints that are similar to this since there are editing conventions such as the 180-degree rule or the axis of action, but I would argue that the comics are also concerned with these issues. Legibility of story and choice of image affects a comic in a similar way to a film but comics must also wrestle with how the images will look when a reader can simply glance from one to another at any point they desire. Because of this page layouts become a concern that is unique to comics and must be dealt with while constructing a scene.

One technique that we see utilized in the film’s action sequence that we do not see in the comic is a certain kind of editing. After Iron Man lands he punches one foe and then turns to shoot another who is off-screen. When the beam is fired a cut occurs and we see the beam striking the soldier. Iron Man then swings just slightly to the right towards another foe and the camera re-centers on this enemy with him.
charges up a beam and fires and just as the beam slams into the enemy a cut to a new angle that shows the enemy being thrown back occurs. This final kind of cut is a match on action and feels like a filmic technique that a comic would be hard pressed to replicate. The cut reinforces the impact of the beam by jarring the viewer ever so slightly at the exact moment that the blast would land. The cut doesn’t violate the 180-degree rule or any other editing constraint but it does break an action in a way that mirrors the effect of the blast itself. A comic that attempted to split an action such as this between two panels would be odd to say the least. Two differing angles of the same beam blast would likely be read as Iron Man firing off two separate blasts since comics deal in static images and readers understand that they are being asked to fill in the blanks between panels. As such it would be incredibly difficult, and most likely pointless, to elaborate on a single action in this fashion during a comic book action sequence. Instead the comic features panels where Iron Man shoots a beam from each hand into a large crowd of bad guys or a panel where he releases bombs from the armor in the direction of the viewer. These panels do a solid job of presenting clear images that require only a small amount of reader input. This helps create a concise and easily understandable action sequence that then allows the reader to focus on the excitement of the action rather than trying to decipher what is occurring in the first place. It also maximizes the amount of action that can be presented. If the story were to dwell on what happened before and after each and every punch it would eat up valuable page space that a twenty two page issue cannot afford to toss aside. Fraction and Larroca boil the sequence down to its essentials and this does not include a
formal technique that is reminiscent of the match on action utilized so frequently in modern action cinema.

Finally we should examine how excitement is generated in the first place; we’ve touched on it slightly with the film’s use of editing to reinforce the action but it will be useful to look at a few shots and a few panels to pull out some other ways that the film and the comic attempt to create dynamic images that will involve their audiences. One way that both the film and the comic accomplish this task is by focusing the action towards the viewer. In the film this means that when Iron Man flies it is almost always directly at the viewer. Iron man flies down towards the ground and the camera tilts down with him, when he takes off to the next location he flies in a graceful arc but ends facing the camera and moving quickly in the direction of the viewer. Similarly many of his beams are shot towards the viewer in one way or another. This scene, and the film as a whole, likes to use this combative aesthetic and clearly the film feels that having the action moving towards the viewer is effective.

The comic also likes to use this kind of “forward” movement. One panel features Iron Man speeding away from an explosion in the background of a panel directly towards the reader (this is mirrored in the film when Iron Man blows up a tank and walks towards the viewer as it blows up in the background) and another features Iron Man shooting bombs towards the reader. All in all there are seven panels featuring Iron Man on these two pages and five of them feature Iron Man moving towards or facing the reader. While the effectiveness of confronting the viewer with the action in this way may be up for debate it is a tactic that has certainly been adopted by both comics and the films, particularly in regards to action sequences.
Once more we see that while there are certain areas of comics and films that collide there are also areas that remain separate. Whether it is a dialogue scene, the opening of a story, or an all out action sequence, comics and films are constantly grappling with pressures from their respective media’s storytelling norms, and the content of their stories. All of these issues shape the ways that the stories are being told and while some of these concerns will undoubtedly be similar it will be just as easy to pick out a variety of issues that are unique to one medium or the other. In comparing Iron Man and The Invincible Iron Man it becomes readily apparent that the most basic of concerns work to shape the two pieces. For the comic the existence of panels upon a page structures a majority of the layouts and how the story is told. The film instead focuses on tools such as editing and motion to effectively get its points across. While Fraction and Larroca must deal with the overt juxtaposition of images on a page, Favreau pays attention to the fact that film can sharply contrast moments through tools such as editing and sound design because of the strictly linear nature of the medium. Showcasing just how much the basics of the media work into the construction of each piece. Naturally this doesn’t explain all the complexities but it points towards the fact that the media have some fundamental differences that must be paid attention to when working within and across them. These two works are also a particularly useful set of comparisons because they present a film and a comic that are both aspiring towards cinematic storytelling. While that isn’t particularly surprising for the film, it does raise quite a few questions about the comic. In the end it seems that while the comic does manage to replicate an aesthetic that is reminiscent of cinema it does so in a way that is due to an understanding of comics as a medium.
This understanding of comics and the willingness to mold them into a cinematic shape then results in a work that may seem cinematic on an outward level but is still a comic in terms of its core aesthetic construction. Proving that even when the two media converge, they are still very different vehicles for storytelling.
Chapter 5:
To Be Continued…

Now that we’ve examined a variety of case studies it is time to bring this thesis to a close. This was not, and could not be, an all-encompassing look at how comics and films converge and diverge aesthetically, but it has hopefully been an enlightening venture nonetheless. I’d like to briefly return to each of the examples I focused on to coax out a final assessment of what this thesis has shown and what questions it has both created and left unanswered. The brief look at *Watchmen* and *Wanted* provided basic examples of how the concept of fidelity does not relate completely to faithfulness when it comes to adapting materials across media. This concept then in turn became one of the driving forces behind this thesis as a whole. One of the most important questions dealt with in the first chapter was how films could translate a comic into the medium of film and if it was possible to do so while remaining completely faithful in an aesthetic sense. The preliminary finding was that since the media are separate entities a completely faithful adaptation would cause problems in terms of storytelling and what any given story meant in terms of how it was visually presented. *Watchmen* was an admittedly extreme case, and because of this it fell to the next three chapters to further deal with issues of fidelity and how films and comics could find functional equivalents that would allow for adaptations to remain true to the original work while still functioning within a new medium.

The analysis of *Hellboy: Wake the Devil* and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* moved away from the concept of fidelity and instead brought to bear issues regarding the mainstream of both media and how their aesthetics shape works that reside within them. Both pieces are two highly stylized works that still manage to create a final
product that is at least moderately successful and palatable to a wide audience while retaining a distinct authorial style. With the comic we saw a very abstract style of art that clearly placed the book on the fringes of popular comic aesthetics but we also noticed how Mike Mignola’s constructions of pages and layouts led to a book that was still readily comprehensible and did not play with the basics of the medium in too overt a fashion. Similarly we saw Guillermo del Toro push the boundaries of mainstream action filmmaking by utilizing superior craftsmanship to create action sequences that thrill and excite the viewer while bucking some traditional aesthetic traits of the mainstream such as rapid editing and shaky camerawork. These salient traits led me to conclude that the reason these two works succeed is not that they are functioning in similar fashions, but that they are the work of two effective creators who understand their respective media. They know how to create a piece of art that stakes out its own territory within the mainstream of their respective media. The last portion of the analysis of the two versions of Hellboy dealt with color. This arose out of the fact that the film was not a direct adaptation of the comic and color was a dominant aesthetic trait in each version. This led to a dissection of the ways that film and comics can utilize an aesthetic trait that should seemingly remain constant between the pair. Surprisingly the comic and the film deployed color in two unique fashions, a decision that seemed to emerge partially out of the way that mainstream comics and films are distributed to audiences. This then naturally points to the next chapter’s topic, one that dealt with how a film that was concerned solely with adapting a story across the two media would do so.
The two versions of *Persepolis* showcased just how dissimilar the same story can be when it shifts between media. Examining a variety of scenes and how they were presented in both comics and film was useful to point out how the same creator can drastically alter the same basic story to most effectively present it in a different medium. Marjane Satrapi was the original writer and artist of the comic and she was also the co-director of the animated version, so it was safe to say that the two pieces were intended to have similar effects on the viewer and would feature a shared artistic sensibility. As such discovering just how disparate the comic and the film were on an aesthetic level made a strong case for the fact that the two media have two distinct sets of pressures that they exert on storytellers. Seeing how Satrapi told the same story in two different ways clearly illustrated this point and also showcased how a creator will drastically alter the presentation of content to preserve the effect the content will have. This showed once more that fidelity is an issue of functional equivalency between media rather than blindly copying the original work.

Finally we looked at a comic series, *The Invincible Iron Man* that seemed to be inspired by its filmic counterpart, *Iron Man*. Here we once more saw how even when a comic or a film attempted to evoke another medium it was still beholden to the pressures and requirements of its own medium. Most notable is that *The Invincible Iron Man* is a “cinematic” comic that seems primarily concerned with replicating “widescreen” aesthetics. There is very little else that implies a cinematic approach though, prompting the conclusion that while *The Invincible Iron Man* is certainly not a traditional comic in terms of its overt aesthetics, it is still a comic in terms of its fundamentals. The book presents a façade that recalls film but never truly
replicates the way that film tells stories, and the fact that this is how one medium evokes the other speaks to the fact that even the “cinematic” comic is still a comic, through and through.

Where do all these findings leave us? I hope that this thesis has proven that the adaptation of material from comics to film, and the reverse of this process, is no simple task and one that is not to be taken lightly. Beyond this I hope to have presented an enlightening look at comics and how they can be just as formally complex as any film might be. The most important issues have arisen around the ways that the audience interacts with comics and film. Film is a much more linear experience since it is able to effectively convey motion and sound which structures film in a rigid fashion in relation to time and how the viewer experiences it. Comics on the other hand must deal more heavily with guiding the reader to create a desired experience since they cannot strictly control how the reader moves through the story. They must evoke emotions and feelings with their content while also considering how they will focus a viewer’s attention in terms of the page and how panels relate to one another. Because of this separation some of the most glaring divisions between comics and film emerged in regards to the fact that comics are a purely visual and static medium. Many of the key issues that this thesis returned to, such as page layouts and how the juxtaposition of panels on a page craft a reading experience, relate to this concept and ultimately the fact that comics are visual and static while film can use both motion and sound as tools. Even though comics and film are both visual media, this didn’t end up meaning that a successful adaptation could simply animate a panel and achieve fidelity. Comics are built around the fact that they are
visually static, developing an entire language and array of tools to function within a realm that cannot easily dictate time to the reader, because of this its storytelling must be altered when brought to a medium such as film that is not static. So while panels can certainly be made to move, doing so in a careless fashion will undermine the original intent and craft that made them effective.

In the future perhaps this division between the media will become less prominent; motion comics are a new avenue of storytelling that is beginning to open up to creators. In the summer of 2009 Brian Michael Bendis and Alex Maleev, two critically renowned creators, will launch an ongoing series that will be released first as a motion comic and then later as a traditional single issue. This series will be in continuity (this means it will have an impact on and relation to the larger story of the Marvel universe) and if successful in terms of sales it could mark a bold new direction for comics. If these motion comics become more popular motion and sound will suddenly be accessible to both comics and film. This would mean that the majority of the conclusions made in this thesis would need to be radically rethought. Film’s mastery of time and how the viewer experiences it through the control of motion and sound would suddenly be comparable to motion comics and how they would utilize motion and sound. As it stands though, comics have not yet made this leap and film still holds the viewer in a way that comics cannot imitate.

This thesis is also a response to a large portion of comics criticism that takes comics in a way that largely disregards the formal aspects of the work, favoring an analysis of themes and more literary concerns rather than dealing with how the comic is telling its story. This does not mean that I believe people like Douglas Wolk have
no place in comics criticism, or that a purely formal approach to comics is correct. Instead I hope for a joining of the two, utilizing formal analysis to more concretely analyze and understand the content and thematic concerns of comics. This thesis has skewed towards the formal aspects of the two media because the length necessitated a focus on an aspect of film and comics that would effectively represent how the two media differ and aesthetics seemed to be the most overt and effective comparison. In doing so I have had to leave behind an enormous aspect of each medium. Dealing with issues such as narrative construction, story content, and other portions of both film and comics that don’t fall under the purview of aesthetics would have been unlikely to strongly prove just how much the two media differed, but this does not mean that they should be forgotten. It is my hope that in moving forward from this work it will be possible for more critics to mix the two extremes that exist, the formal and the literary, to create a more effective and all-encompassing approach to comics.
Filmography

*Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, 2008, directed by Guillermo del Toro, DVD.

*Iron Man*, 2008, directed by Jon Favreau, DVD.

*Persepolis*, 2007, directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, DVD.

*Wanted*, 2008, directed by Timur Bekmametov, DVD.

Comicography


Bibliography


