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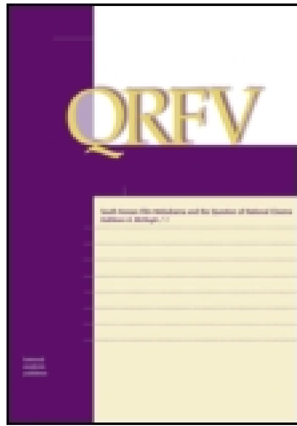

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Comics at 300 Frames per Second: Zack Snyder's 300 and the Figural Translation of Comics to Film

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Comics at 300 Frames per Second: Zack Snyder's *300* and the Figural Translation of Comics to Film

DRU H. JEFFRIES

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In her book *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, Kamilla Elliott writes that "the figurative positioning of one art as another or inside another gestures to the process by which one art raises the cognitive effects of another" (215). By extension, films attempting to not only adapt but to filmically remediate a text previously conceived and executed in another medium rely on the use of figures and figuration to bridge the gap between the specificities of the original text's medium and that of film. Such issues of figuration and transtextuality are precisely those that most impact comic books-to-film adaptations in the present moment. Increasingly, filmmakers that choose to adapt comic books and graphic novels to the screen are trying not to evoke something in their films that is particular to the cinema, but rather something that is particular to comic books.

Though some have argued against the compatibility of the visual ontologies of the two media,[1] both comic books and film communicate primarily through image-based storytelling that is more visual than verbal, and as such the process of adaptation from one medium to another does not invert hierarchies of visual and verbal signs. In other words, the distinction originally traced by George Bluestone between "the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image" does not apply to the adaptation of comic books to film, as both media are directly perceived as images rather than as abstract signs that are then internally converted into mental icons by a reader (1). To put it yet another way, where literature provides figures of speech, comic books and film provide the figures themselves (Elliott, 215).[2] We can, nevertheless, speak of some fundamental aesthetic and formal differences between comic books and film that result in inevitable transformations when adapting narrative images from one medium to the other.

Of these, the most important three for this essay are movement versus stasis (with regards to the images themselves), photography versus drawing, and the temporal juxtaposition of images in film versus the simultaneous, spatial organization of images in comic books. These tensions, like that between the visual and verbal in the adaptation of novels to film, suggest the inadequacy or "incompleteness of both forms of representation" (215). To this end, film has been called "an extension of comic strips" by no less than Will Eisner, one of comic books' most revered advocates and practitioners,[3] suggesting that the formal development of both media owe something to the other (40). Only recently, however, have comic books-to-film adaptations made efforts to translate the *form* along with the content of the comic books being adapted (the hypotext), whether that be in the form of visual transposition (of a comic book panel into a cinematic shot) or something more

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complicated that evokes the readerly experience of the original comic books. This essay identifies and investigates the use of figurative tropes in recent comic books-to-film adaptations, using director Zack Snyder's adaptation of Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's graphic novel *300* (2007) as a case study, so chosen for its comprehensive use of these figurative elements.[4]

Miller and Varley's graphic novel,[5] published in 1999 and the winner of three Eisner Awards that year, retells the story of the historical Battle of Thermopylae in a mythic style befitting the epic tale.[6] Originally inspired by the cinema (and Rudolph Maté's 1962 film *The 300 Spartans* in particular), Miller's graphic tome is an oversized hardcover of a scant eighty-eight pages, largely told through its evocative and painterly illustrations which are largely contained within Cinerama-esque "widescreen" panels. The above-average size and shape of the panels fully reveals the scope of Miller's images and the detail of Varley's watercolors in a way that would be impossible in a more conventional (i.e. smaller) format.[7] The commercial and critical success of the book, along with its rich visuals and simple but compelling story, made the graphic novel an excellent candidate for film adaptation, especially given Miller's renewed cachet in Hollywood after the financially successful adaptation of his *Sin City* (2005) graphic novels by director Robert Rodriguez.[8]

Commenting on the ubiquity of comic book adaptations, *Time* Magazine notes that "[t]he joke in Hollywood now is that in a risk-averse era, comic-book adaptations have a distinct advantage: the drawings mean studio execs can see beforehand what the movie will look like" (Keegan). Of course, this assumes that the film adaptation will ultimately resemble (both visually and narratively) the original comic books on which it is based, which has only recently been made possible by advancements in digital visual effects that allow actors to interact with perceptually realistic digital characters or props, or to be seamlessly integrated into hand- or digitally-painted backgrounds; images filmed on set can be radically altered to match the restricted palette of a comic and performances and actions can be embellished to depict larger-than-life movements that are only possible on the printed page. While all of these factors made an adaptation of *300* more likely, the comic's painterly visual style nevertheless presented a significant challenge to the filmmakers, with some saying that the action-filled story "begs to be left in the budget-free pages of a book" (DiLullo, 7) rather than be bastardized by a film version unable to recreate the visual style that made the graphic novel distinctive.

The adaptation of *300*, directed by Zack Snyder, was released on 9 March 2007 to somewhat mixed critical notices but rampant fan enthusiasm and unexpected box office success,[9] both arguably due to Snyder's strict commitment to translating the graphic novel's unique aesthetic to his film version.[10] Snyder translates the aesthetic of the book to the screen largely through the use of visual tropes that blur the line between the conventions of comic books and the cinema, or in other words by translating the material from the graphic novel in such a way that takes into account not only the content but also the form of the comic books. The first of these techniques is compositional quotation. By shooting many of the film's most iconic shots (in terms of blocking, set, perspective, etc.) just as they were drawn in the graphic novel, Snyder draws upon the tradition of *tableaux vivants,* a technique for reproducing works of art that dates back to the Middle Ages. These compositional quotations from the film's hypotext serve to reinforce the intertextuality of the adaptation while also placing the film within a history of figurative filmmaking that includes films by Pier Paolo Pasolini (*La Ricotta* [1963]) and Jean-Luc Godard (*Passion* [1982]).

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Secondly, Snyder's film was largely constructed digitally, allowing him to integrate the live-action footage with elements that were created entirely with computers. The resultant effect is that the viewer cannot tell what is "real" and what is not, creating an ambiguity between the photographed and computer-generated elements. The final technique involves the use of slow-motion ramping effects (not to be confused with "bullet time" effects, as used in Andy and Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix* [1999]). Snyder exploits the potential of slow motion to bridge the gap between movement and stasis that any comic books-to-film adaptation necessarily confronts, resulting in sporadic "panel moments" that mimic the experience of reading comic books *without* necessarily using compositional quotation. By manipulating the speed of movement and the temporal duration of shots, Snyder emphasizes certain images by slowing them nearly to the point of stasis, by wresting them from the fluidity of motion just as comic books do. The strategic combination of these strategies forms the film's figurative economy,[11] guided by a figurative logic designed to replicate the experience, or "raise the cognitive effects," of reading the film's hypotext in its original medium.

Fans and critics alike have praised Snyder's success in adapting the visuals of Miller and Varley's graphic novel, in taking the iconic still images from the book and bringing them "to life" (DiLullo, 7). But what does it mean to bring static images to life? As Mary Ann Doane writes, "At its birth, the cinema's most striking characteristic was [...] its indexicality, commented upon in countless newspaper and magazine articles that heralded the new technology's ability to capture time and movement—what invariably went by the term 'life itself'" (129). This oft-used metaphor points towards life as an aesthetic ideal bound up not only with the indexical, semiologist Charles S. Peirce's term for a sign that is both created by and bears the trace of that which it represents, but also with movement rather than stasis. By virtue of their indexicality, the images in Snyder's film point towards the presence of actual living bodies and bear the traces of their subject(s), while the watercolor images in the original graphic novel have no such claim to life.

While there is no shortage of comic books adaptations that bring their hypotexts "to life" by restaging ("quoting") iconic panels in their *mise-en-scène*, few comic books permeate their adaptations as thoroughly as *300*. For instance, in one of the film's battle scenes, eleven of the seventeen panels used in the same scene in the graphic novel are remediated for the screen.[12] And aside from several scenes written exclusively for the film version,[13] this slavish devotion to Miller's panel compositions is typical of the film's aesthetic. The transposition of a panel from the graphic novel to the film version, including its composition, light, color, texture, *mise-en- scène*, as well as other visual elements that can be produced in either medium, establishes a direct intertextual relationship between the referent and the original. Obviously, all adapted works are by their very nature transtextual insofar as the hypertext (the adaptation) necessarily references the existence of its hypotext.

Seldom do adaptations *rely* on the reader/viewers' familiarity with both texts, however, as this tends to alienate members of the audience that lack prior knowledge of the original. After all, an adaptation cannot be experienced as such unless the reader/viewer has some familiarity with both versions.[14] This is not to say that one's aesthetic appreciation of *300* relies on his or her familiarity with the graphic novel, but rather that one's appreciation of the film's use of *figuration* will be enabled by knowing both versions, as the integration of material from the graphic novel would remain invisible to a viewer ignorant of the hypotext. Nevertheless, Snyder's pervasive use of visual quotation reinforces the intertextuality of the film by constantly referring—and deferring—to the images provided by the original text.

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In positioning actors within each shot in a way that evoked Miller's aesthetic sensibility, Snyder and cinematographer Larry Fong[15] were repeatedly reminded of the compositional style of classic paintings. In an article in *American Cinematographer* magazine, Fong discloses that

> "We wanted to always present the men in [. . .] a way that reminded us of the Pageant of the Masters at the Laguna Beach Festival of Arts." In this annual event, costumed players are arranged behind a large picture frame to mimic famous works of art. "That became a kind of shorthand for Zack and me, an inside joke," says Fong. "We'd look at a shot and say, 'Yeah, that's so Pageant of the Masters!"' (Williams, 62)[16]

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By adhering to the visual style of the graphic novel, the film version recalls not only the text being quoted from, but also a cultural and artistic tradition in which live performers engage in re-enactments of still images. Snyder's invocation of the *tableau vivant* trope, however, is markedly different from the traditional model in several ways. For instance, while he does bring inert images "to life" as detailed above, his recreations are not performed on a stage but rather on the cinema screen; this change erases the direct confrontation between the "liveness" of the actors and the "lifeless" image that they double, replacing the corporeal presence of performers with the indexicality—a trace of past presence—of the filmed image. Secondly, Snyder's recreations *move*; they are brought "to life" not in the sense that living, breathing, physically present—albeit still—actors perform them, but in the sense that the picture literally becomes animated.[17] In order to appreciate Snyder's revisions to the *tableau vivant* tradition, we must first turn towards a history of the trope on both stage and screen.

Though the *tableau vivant* tradition dates back to the liturgical dramas of the Middle Ages, the term is most commonly associated with stage and drawing room performances of the nineteenth century. According to an 1885 French encyclopedia of theatre, *tableaux vivants* were judged based on "their precision in reproducing a familiar work of art, their faithfulness to an original and their capacity to evoke its presence despite a distance of a country or continent" (Tweedie, 256). In his dissertation on the use of *tableaux vivants* in film, James Tweedie goes on to note that the "tableau as embodied masterpiece succeeds when it defers to the original, when it remains faithful to its source, when it basks in the aura of art"(256). To invoke the title of the famous Walter Benjamin essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *tableaux vivants* disseminated works of art *prior* to the age of their mechanical reproducibility, just as television and the Internet would later bring technologically mediated reproductions of artworks into the domestic space.

Audiences were expected to be familiar with the artworks being referenced in the *tableau*, but the performance was also meant to substitute for the experience of encountering the rare original.[18] However, the direct confrontation between the living body, the live performance and the well-known work of art changes the viewer's relationship with to the image, imbuing the *tableau vivant* with a unique tension: it simultaneously enthralls and repels the viewer as it "threatens the borders of established art forms" (255), as well as those between life and death, movement and stasis, presence and mediation. The *tableau vivant* cannot reproduce the artwork without also transforming it from an inert object, one that exists independently of its being viewed, into a self-conscious performance that is charged with life and the possibility of motion.[19]

As theatrical audiences increasingly migrated from the live theatre to the less expensive cinema for entertainment, the *tableau vivant* migrated there as well. A part of cinematic representation since the silent era, Tweedie writes that the *tableau vivant* in film can serve as "the medium for a history based on images[,] an interface between art and history, film and painting, and between the present and the past" (303). Because of its roots in live theatrical performance, the *tableau vivant* also signifies "the triumph of theatricality" over more objective forms of historiography (255). For this reason, the trope's presence in the cinema, and particularly in the sound era, is curious, as film generally tended to move away from theatrical modes of representation towards the Bazinian ideal of "total cinema," of greater and greater realism. The *tableau vivant* troubles this trajectory, producing a kind of Brechtian alienation effect, disrupting the realistic fluidity of movement with patently theatrical or anti-realist imagery.[20] Snyder's *300* thus interrupts the natural flow of movement both by manipulating temporality and by gesturing towards the *tableau vivant* tradition and the tensions inherent to the trope.

Miller and Varley's painterly aesthetic in *300* makes considering the film version as a series of *tableaux vivants* more natural, as paintings are the most common subject of living picture performances. Just as the *tableau vivant* necessarily confronts the borders that divide various artistic media (by posing live performers in front of painted backdrops to create a single image), Snyder's *300* challenges aesthetic categories by maintaining a mixture of "painterly and photographic imagery [. . .] throughout the film" (DiLullo, 23), often combining 2D and 3D elements in the same shot. For instance, the blood effects in the film appear painterly because they are literally splashes and spatters of paint that have been digitally scanned from the pages of the comic and integrated into the film. According to a visual effects style guide given to the film's digital artists,

> "2D blood needs to be designed and rendered in a way that audiences can clearly identify that what they're seeing is a deliberate exercise in style, rather than a mistake. It needs to be simultaneously brutal and beautiful. In the graphic novel, Miller and [Lynn] Varley depict blood with a spattered ink effect, a technique that is carried over to the film in all the live-action battles." Actual spatters from the book were scanned and incorporated into this style. (DiLullo, 14)

The painted blood is composited together with the live actors, resulting in a hybrid image that not only mixes the photographic with the digital, but also actually incorporates elements of the original image into its own remediation. Where traditional *tableaux vivants* thrived on the tension between painted backgrounds and living performers, *300* integrates (the indexical traces of) live actors with digital backgrounds and painted elements into a single, seamless image that belies the distinction between the categories of index and icon. Many of the film's critics picked up on the resultant painterly aesthetic: *Sight & Sound*'s critic writes that "*300*'s soft focus vistas draw on the fantasy oil paintings of such artists as Frank Frazetta" (Osmond, 50), while critic Robert Enright observes that the film's protagonist, the Spartan King Leonidas, "takes an obscene degree of pleasure from his vocation as a slasher Jackson Pollack, splattering blood-red paint in every direction" (25).

Maclean's critic notes the combination of painterly and the digital: "in a painterly world forged by computer graphics, [Snyder] mimics Miller's haute-pulp vision with tableaux of slashing, impaling and decapitation that splatter the screen with Jackson Pollack blood" (Johnson, 57). It is thus clear that digital technologies allow Snyder to literally combine

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photography and painting, resulting in *tableau vivant*-like images that occupy the interstitial space between old and new media.

The aesthetic differences between the original images and their remediations in *300* are often negligible, which, as mentioned earlier, was the primary means by which the success of classical *tableaux vivants* were judged. Ultimately, Snyder's success in recreating the panels of Miller and Varley's graphic novel using both photographic and painterly elements places his filmmaking strategy in this tradition, though updating it to include new sources of inspiration (e.g. comic book panels) and new strategies of production (e.g. digital image scanning, media hybridization), resulting in new tensions (e.g. between the photographic and the digital rather than the living and the inert). This trope makes up but one part of the figurative economy of *300*.

In *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*, David Rodowick argues for the inherent figural potential of the digital. If, as Rodowick contends, "the figural defines a semiotic regime where the ontological distinction between linguistic and plastic representations breaks down" (2), then the digital object is necessarily figurative due to its ontological flexibility. The figural pushes the expressive capabilities of visual and verbal media, rendering text imagistic and images textual; it is, in short, where connotative meaning eclipses literal meaning and, as a result, "what is being seen is in excess of what is being shown" (Willemen, 237). Rodowick frames his argument for the figural potential of the digital with a personal revelation that he dubs his "MTV epiphany." Watching MTV, he writes,

> it was impossible not to be astonished by how fluidly text was spatialized, thus losing its uniform contours, fixed spacing, and linear sense, and how precisely space was "textualized"; that is, how the Euclidian solidity of the image was fragmented, rendered discontinuous, divisible, and liable to recombination in the most precise ways... the image [was discursive] like never before. (3)

The digital allows for such inversions because it treats all manner of representations—visual, verbal, written and aural alike—in the same way. Any digital object, when reduced to its binary source code, resembles any other; the ontological differences between various media are thus effaced, making the cinema as viable a medium in which to display the fantastic (i.e. that for which there is no real world referent) as comic books, which have never been associated with or limited to a realist ontology.[21] It is interesting to note, though, that the figural elements of MTV that so astonished Rodowick in the mid-1980s have *always* been present in comic books, suggesting that comic books as a medium might also be inherently figural.

By definition, the visual language of comic books is predicated on the discursiveness of images and the spatialization of text, as well as the fragmentation of a story world into discrete visual units—qualities very similar to those that locate MTV in the figural mode. Obviously, the creative combination of word and image is hardly exclusive to comic books; the average person is likely more acclimatized to their combination as a result of the increasing ubiquity of digital technologies (e.g. graphical user interfaces [GUI] like Microsoft Windows) and objects (e.g. music videos on MTV, moving electronic billboards). In a short but telling web article, Casey Kazan notes that "[t]he graphical user interface merges and mixes the image and word and has paved the way for [the] evolution of the graphic novel as a major art form" (2007).

While the point is a good one, its logic is completely backward, as comic books were a popular mass medium well before the development of personal computers and

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GUIs; the comparison, however, remains significant and valid. While I do not especially care to make an extended case for comic books, or comic strips, as an inherently figural medium—I would prefer them to remain ontologically neutral—insofar as they destabilize the difference between images and words, contributing to the radical spatialization of text and textualization of space, the medium anticipates the figural qualities of new media and encourages their mobilization in film adaptations.

Film, on the other hand, is a medium that is often saddled with a realist bias, perhaps as a result of classical film theorists like Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin, whose theories only *gained* credence with the rise of Peircean semiology. As a result of its resemblance to that which it is a trace of, the index "has, unfortunately, suggested for many theorists an alliance with realism as both style and ideology" (Doane, 2). Consequently, many films with their origins in comic books, including *300*, have been criticized for eschewing cinema's supposed ontological basis in photographic reality in favor of the more ontologically ambiguous aesthetic provided by their source material, figuration and the new media. Clearly, the notion of an inherent ontological bias toward either realism or artifice is outmoded in both the cases of film and comic books, as the presence of an index has never been a sufficient guarantor of an image's veracity *vis-à-vis* reality. In fact, arguments praising the photograph's inherent indexical qualities have always been greatly exaggerated: according to Martin Lefebvre and Marc Furstenau,

> the privileging of indexicality for the purpose of acquiring knowledge about a thing (or person, or event) by way of its existential relation to the camera is rather marginal. In other words, neither filmmakers nor spectators of fiction films tend, *as a whole*, to use films as they do pointing fingers, weathercocks, or footprints, i.e. *as evidence or indices that some thing actually stood in front of the camera while it was recording*." (101: emphasis in original)

Ignoring this, Pascal Lefèvre has written that moving images will *invariably* convey a greater sense of realism than static ones; of course, one does not have to strain to come up with examples that prove the contrary (e.g. a photorealist painting of a nature scene versus an avant-garde film consisting of abstract images, scratches on the celluloid, etc.). Lefèvre nevertheless argues for movement not only a criterion of aesthetic value but also as a harbinger of realism, when in truth the digital actually allows for an *increased* sense of realism rather than artifice for most visual effects-based films: for instance, while the Hulk (in Ang Lee's *Hulk* [2003] and especially Louis Leterrier's *The Incredible Hulk* [2008]) does not exist in pro-filmic reality, a digital character can be rendered realistically based on what he might look like if he were to really exist: this is known as perceptual realism.[22]

Thus the Hulk's non-existence in reality does not preclude his integration into photographic reality on film, nor does it preclude the character's believability. While Bazin famously argued in his 1946 article "The Ontology of the Photographic Image"[23] that realism is what cinema ought to aspire to at all costs, Snyder's film foregoes realism in favor of recreating the painterly and patently artificial compositions of the graphic novel, albeit with live actors. The digital visual effects of *300* are thus perceptually realistic, but only within the confines of a narrative world that is itself *unrealistic*. So rather than use digital effects to enhance the reality-effect, Snyder uses them to subvert the index's link to reality, to highlight the inherent artifice and artistry of photography.

In addition to the new aesthetic options that it opens up, the digital is also an appealing option for film studios that want to create fantastical film universes on a tight budget.

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Forty years ago, a film like *300* would have been a massive undertaking for any studio, with its large-scale battle sequences, thousands of extras, elaborate camera movements and exotic locale.[24] Today, *300* is actually considered a low-budget film within its genre, the sword-and-sandals epic, which has a notorious reputation for bloated budgets (Magid 28). By eschewing film's supposed ontological predilection for realism, Snyder's film can include both elements that would be too costly or dangerous to create practically (such as an armored elephant's fall from a cliff) as well as elements that would be impossible to achieve on set (such as the painterly, unnaturalistic skies under which most of the film takes place) (Fordfam, 78).[25] Cinematographer Fong himself notes that "even if we'd had all the money in the world, we couldn't have built the things in Frank's book" (Williams, 54). The digital thus places film on the same plane as comic books, wherein the old adage is that the "budget" is limited only by the confines of the artist's imagination. M. Keith Booker writes,

> until very recently, the technology available to filmmakers simply did not allow them the range and scope that have always been available to comic artists, whose creativity was limited only by their own imaginations. After all, it costs very little to draw an action scene [...] that might cost millions of dollars to produce for the screen—if it can be produced at all. (ix)

This paradigm has, of course, has shifted to the point that anything that can be drawn in comic books can be digitally and believably "drawn" in movies.[26] Fong sums up the attitude towards the digital that was held by Snyder and company thusly: "we embraced our CG world and never worried about trying to fool the audience into thinking it was real" (Williams, 54). Doane writes that such an attitude towards photographic manipulation has resulted in a loss of credibility and a "crisis of legitimation" with regards to indexicality as proof of something's existence (1). The endpoint of this trajectory would naturally be the complete loss of faith in the photograph's claim to truth, but as Fong notes, not even the photographed elements in *300* tried to make such a claim. To quote Bazin, "if the film is to fulfill itself aesthetically we need to *believe* in the reality of what is happening *while knowing it to be tricked*" (qtd. in Lefebvre, 81: latter emphasis added).

Digital cinema uses photography not only as the means of obtaining images, but also as a starting point from which captured images can be modified in a variety of ways. Films like *300* rely on teams of outside specialists (known as visual effects houses) to complete digital post-production work which, to increase efficiency, is divided up across many separate teams across the world according to their unique skill sets developed on other projects.[27] This sort of strategy makes the production of film more like the production of comic books, which have always incorporated and layered several discrete elements (including but not limited to pencils, colors, inks, letters, word balloons and captions—all done separately by individual specialists) into a single composite image. Digitally produced films similarly consist of several discrete elements that are produced separately and composited together to create the final image. Thus Lev Grossman in *Time* magazine writes that in *300*, "[e]diting becomes more like painting than moviemaking" (45). Indeed, because so much of the final onscreen product in *300* has no link to photographic reality, it occupies that interstitial space between filmmaking and painting. As a result of the digital, the ontological identity of film as a vehicle for realism is further destabilized and, consequently, new modes of filmic expression, new aesthetic possibilities and the increased potential for figuration that has always been available in comic books are made available.

The final technique that makes up *300*'s figurative economy may prove to be Snyder's most significant intervention in the mode of comic book adaptation, and perhaps in film style writ large. We have already seen how *300* draws upon visual quotation and the *tableau vivant* trope, as well as how the film's digital construction appeals to new modes of expression while simultaneously undermining photography's appeal to realism, giving the film the same ontological flexibility inherent to the comic book medium. While fans and critics have noted the compositional similarities between shots in the film adaptation and panels in the graphic novel,[28] and many have also noticed the film's frequent use of slow motion, nobody has yet connected the two. This is an oversight that causes the very purpose of Snyder's use of slow motion to either be elided or mistaken as an empty stylistic gesture.

In *300* (and subsequent comic books-to-film adaptations that have drawn upon this figure, including Snyder's own 2009 adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*), the intermittent use of slow and fast-motion within a single shot imitates the very experience of reading comic books, which is always an interactive process involving the reader in filling in the gaps between each panel. When slow-motion is used for this purpose, I call the resulting series of frames a panel moment because it isolates an (nearly static) image within the visual flow just as each panel in a graphic novel privileges the moment that it represents. *300* thus references its hypotext in *three* ways, each of which draws on the use of figures and figuration: direct quotation (*tableaux vivants*), ontological similarity (by virtue of the digital) and formal similarity (panel moments). In order to understand panel moments fully, we must first understand the formal properties of comic books that *300* seeks to emulate.

Cartoonist and graphic novelist Scott McCloud's seminal volume on the language of comic books, 1993's *Understanding Comics*, is itself written in comic book form and is thus perfectly suited to explaining and demonstrating the interworkings of the medium. According to McCloud, "closure," which can most succinctly be described as the means by which readers mentally connect one panel to the next, is the most fundamental process of reading comic books, performing tasks equivalent to cinematic movement (between frames) and editing (between shots). Obviously then, closure plays a salient role in the *experience* of reading comic books, above all; if "visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics," writes McCloud, "closure is its grammar" (1993: 65). In the formatting of most comic books, there is a small blank space between each panel known as the "gutter." Theoretically, each reader inserts into this space with what s/he imagines to transpire between the panels based on the available visual and narrative information. In film, viewers perceive movement between frames based on the illusion of persistence of vision: due the lack of perceivable visual downtime between each frame, the brain performs closure unconsciously when watching a film, connecting what are actually discrete images into an illusory fluid motion.

In comic books, however, each reader must be "a willing and conscious collaborator" in the creation of his/her reading experience (McCloud 1993: 65). When reading comic books, the brain does not subconsciously intuit movement as in film; instead, the reader must actively fill in the gaps between panels, if only mentally, turning the gutter into a site of productivity and figuration where, once again, "what is being seen is in excess of what is being shown" (Willemen, 237). In *300*, Snyder slows down selected moments, privileging certain images just as comic books artists privilege the moment that they visualize in each panel, before quickly speeding (in fast-motion) to the next slowed-down panel moment, thus rendering visually and cinematically the internal process of closure that is particular to the experience of reading comic books. While the film spectator is not an active participant in the construction of these "in between" images, this technique could nevertheless be

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considered as the visualization of one reader's (in this case, Snyder's) interpretation of what lies in the gutters of the graphic novel: it is Snyder's internal reading of the comic books made manifest on the cinema screen.

What I have just described is an example of a panel moment that also involves the use of direct compositional quotation from the graphic novel, but the two tropes need not overlap; with or without the use of *tableaux vivants*, the figure is meant as a formal appeal to the way that comic books are read and understood by readers, to the experience of comic books *as a medium* rather than any single text, or any single moment within a text. One could say that the trope is motivated by the same principle that underlies the impulse towards the use of *tableaux vivants*, but with regard to form rather than content: if compositional quotation satisfies the desire for literal translation of the hypotext on the micro level, panel moments satisfy the same desire on the *macro* level by mimicking not the hypotext itself, but the medium in which it was originally written and experienced.

Slow-motion photography is the key technical element to the figure of panel moments. To this point, Walter Benjamin has written in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" about the different viewing procedures that film and static art demand of their viewers: "The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested." Indeed, one of the most significant differences between the respective ontological characters of film and comic books is that while film is a temporal medium, wherein images occupy a consistent space (the screen) over a set duration determined by the film's editing, comic books are a spatial medium, wherein images are organized across space (the page) and are experienced not over a predetermined time period, but rather at the reader's discretion: comic books readers will contemplate certain images extensively while merely glancing over others, determining individually the duration of the reading experience.

Hence while film is projected at twenty-four frames per second and occupies a set duration, comic books occupy what can be called *psychological time*. The use of slow motion is one way in which a director can alter a film's temporal flow in order to simulate this experience. While the film's duration remains uninfluenced by the viewer,[29] it ceases to represent time as experienced in external reality: according to Jean Epstein, "Slow-motion [reveals] a world where the kingdoms of nature know no boundaries," allowing us "to extend the variability of intimate psychological time [. . .] to external reality" (189). Panel moments thus constitute another legitimate challenge to the ontological distinction between film and comic books, pushing film closer toward the interstices between the two. *300* can be thought of as lying in the gutter that separates film from comic books, influenced heavily by the form, production processes and content of both media without fitting comfortably into the accepted ontological paradigms of either.

While panel moments occur fairly regularly throughout the film—the scene wherein Leonidas kicks a Persian messenger into a well is a good example of the figure at work, as is the shot of Persian troops falling from the cliff at the Hot Gates—the example *par excellance* is what was known to the production crew as the "Crazy Horse" shot, so called for the name of the camera rig used during its filming. The shot, which occurs at the 48:01 mark in the film and lasts for a full seventy-two seconds,[30] is possibly the most iconic shot in the film that does not have an obvious referent in Miller's comic books.[31] In the shot, which can almost be considered as a mini-battle scene on its own, Leonidas slashes his way through several enemies before hurling his spear through the air; the camera follows the spear as it flies and finally hits its target, impaling the soldier and sending him to the ground before Leonidas finishes him off by impaling him with his sword.

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Throughout the shot, the speed of playback changes about twenty times, alternately ramping up into slow-motion to isolate an iconic panel moment before ramping down to hasten the transition to the next moment, thus cinematically rendering the experience of closure. The effect of this shot in particular was achieved by shooting with three cameras at once—each equipped with a differently-sized lens but all shooting from the same angle[32]—all recording at one-hundred-and-fifty frames per second,[33] much faster than the typical frame rate of twenty-four frames per second.[34] In post-production, these separate shots were edited together to create the illusion of one seamless take, with the twenty-seven cuts masked by digitally-produced morph and zoom effects (Fordham, 78). The presence of these hidden edits reinforces the illusory nature of temporal flow in *300*, where what appears fluid is actually made up of separately filmed elements that are stitched together in post-production using digital editing technologies. They also strengthen the comparison between how comic books are read—as a series of separate images that are connected together only by the reader's intervention—and how panel moments work in film, which is to render visually the contents of the gutter between slowed-down, iconic moments.

The distinction should be drawn between panel moments and another similar figure that is popular in comic book adaptations, as well as genre films more generally: bullet time. Panel moments are often mistaken for bullet time because of their shared dependence on slow-motion photography, on the "romanticization of the pause" (Rehak, 26) —an error that usually leads to *300*'s visual innovations to be overlooked. However, the figures are actually quite distinct in terms of both their production and their role in the narrative and figurative economies of the films in which they appear. Bullet time first exploded as a popular effect after its use in *The Matrix*, and can also be seen in films as diverse as Keenan Ivory Wayans' *Scary Movie* (2000), Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson's *Shrek* (2001) and the Sam Raimi's comic book adaptation *Spider-Man* (2002). The effect is produced using elaborate camera setups consisting of many (in some cases, over a hundred) individual cameras.

To produce the proper effect, as explained by Bob Rehak in his article "The Migration of Forms: Bullet Time as Microgenre," each camera must be "tripped sequentially as action occur[s], generating a set of frames that [are] then digitally stitched together to make a 360-degree image. [. . .] Instead of multiple exposures from a single run of film through a unitary mechanism, bullet time blends many single shots into an apparently unbroken take" (34). But while bullet time necessarily takes a series of discrete images and creates the illusion of fluidity by suturing them together, panel moments need not; simply filming at increased frame rates and ramping up and down between fast- and slow-motion is all that is technically required for the trope.[35]

The most significant distinction between bullet time and panel moments, however, is that while bullet time serves both narrative *and* stylistic functions, panel moments can only be explained by their connection to a comic book hypotext. It is this connection between the film adaptation and the comic book on which it is based that makes the use of speed ramping figural, as the alternating speed of playback becomes an appeal to the experience of reading comic books. Conversely, bullet time is used in *The Matrix* because characters like Neo, Trinity and Morpheus have the ability to bend and slow the flow of diegetic time. In other words, time is being altered in both the world of the film and in the screen representation of that world; both the audience *and* the characters experience the narrative events depicted in bullet time.

In *Spider-Man*, Peter Parker's "spider-sense" is represented using bullet time, demonstrating his superior reflexes compared to the bully that would beat him up (if only he

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could land a punch). When his spider-sense is engaged, Peter experiences the world in slow motion, allowing him to out-maneuver his aggressors. Again, the use of bullet time is motivated by the character's perception of and experience in the world rather than the aesthetic effect that it produces. The characters in *300* have no such superpowers or heightened perception: when certain moments are presented more slowly than others, it is merely to heighten the aesthetic impact of the composition and to allow the viewer more time to contemplate the image. While bullet time makes manifest the subjective experience of the characters, panel moments visualize the experience of the comic book reader.

This raises the question: can panel moments exist in films that are not comic book or graphic novel adaptations? Certainly the figure has proliferated in a variety of films since the release of *300*, including the superhero reboot *The Incredible Hulk* and director Timur Bekmambetov's adaptation of Mark Millar and J.G. Jones's six-issue comic books series *Wanted* (2008): while both of these films centre around characters with superpowers (not unlike Spider-Man and Neo), the slow-motion effects are never motivated by the characters' own experience of time, but rather by the experience of reading comic books as explained above. To answer the question, then, we must create a taxonomy of slow-motion usage with three categories: (1) slow-motion motivated by the subjective experience of one or more character(s) in the diegetic world of the film; (2) slow-motion motivated by stylistic or aesthetic effects; and (3) slow-motion motivated by its ability to externalize a viewing subject's internal experience of time.

Bullet time is defined only by the first category, though even Rehak mistakenly identifies films such as Dominic Sena's *Swordfish* (2001) and Michael Bay's *Bad Boys II* (2003) as exploiters of bullet time when they actually fall into the second category. Such films and others like them typically use slow-motion to accentuate impressive moments, usually involving elaborate stunts or special effects, but are not experienced in slow-motion by the characters in the diegesis and are not, therefore, examples of bullet time. The third category is a variation of the first, but instead of the character experiencing the world in slow motion, the *viewer* does. Panel moments fall under this third category, as the slow motion is designed to replicate the lack of visual fluidity and reader-determined duration fundamental to the experience of reading comic books. While this third category could conceivably apply to films that are not adapting comic books material, such use of slow-motion could not, strictly speaking, be defined as a panel moment, because that figure (as I have defined it) depends on the existence of a temporal or narrative gap between *images in sequence*, and as such only films adapted from comic books can use it. It is the gutter that panel moments visualize, and it is this trope that bridges the static art of comic books from the moving, *living* pictures of the cinema.

This essay has examined, however, only one example of how the adaptation of comic books or graphic novels can be discussed in terms of their inherent figurative potential. Though considered a comparatively base art for most of its life as a mass medium, the comic book experienced a renaissance in the mid-1980s with the publication of crossover successes like Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, both of which brought the superhero genre into the postmodern era and imbued the so-called ninth art with newfound respectability. Since then, film adaptations of comic books have flourished, including the aforementioned adaptation of the seemingly un-filmable *Watchmen*. That film uses and expands upon all of the figures discussed in this essay, with detailed *tableaux vivants* of iconic panels interspersed throughout the film, and original *tableaux* featured in the opening credits montage; CG animation and motion-capture technology bringing the instantly recognizable landscapes, colors, and characters

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of Gibbons' dystopian comic art to life; and the distinctive speed ramping that has become synonymous with Snyder's cine-comic aesthetic providing a viewing experience that recalls that of reading the original comic books. Graphic novelist Moore has been notoriously curmudgeonly when it comes to cinematic adaptations of his comic books, citing irreconcilable ontological differences between the two media, like Lefèvre, arguing that the cinema *simply cannot do* what comic books can; but with the aesthetic possibilities opened up by figuration and the three figures discussed in this essay in particular, his perspective may be becoming less and less valid.

Notes

1. See Lefèvre 2007.
2. Given the focus of *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, Elliott mentions only film and not comic books as trafficking in figures rather than figures of speech. The statement can, however, be safely applied to both media.
3. That the annual awards for achievement in comic books are called the Eisner Awards should give the reader a sense of his stature in the comic book community.
4. Throughout this essay I will attribute authorship of *300* (the film) to its director Zack Snyder. While I would not necessarily make a case for Snyder as an *auteur* in Andrew Sarris' sense of the word, interviews with the film's crew and visual effects teams all point towards Snyder's as the controlling vision behind this project. The creative areas that this essay explores—framing and shot composition, visual effects, editing and montage—will thus be attributed to Snyder, who drew all of the storyboards, worked directly with the visual effects houses and oversaw the editing of the film.
5. The terminology involving graphic novels and comic books are often confused and contested by experts and laypeople alike. For my purposes here, 'graphic novel' will refer to a long form comic book that either collects multiple issues of an ongoing or limited series (as *300* does) or a single story, conceived and published as a single book, that is longer than the standard pamphlet-style comic book; 'comics' (in the plural) will refer to the medium itself.
6. My focus on the film's formal elements precludes a discussion of the film's themes and politics, which have been written about elsewhere. See Burris 2011 and Courcoux 2009 for discussions of the film's politics and treatment of masculinity, respectively. See Whissel 2010 for a discussion of the relationship between the use of digital extras and themes of apocalypse in *300* and other contemporary Hollywood films.
7. The book, written and drawn by Miller and colored by Varley, was original published in instalments over five months in 1998 before being collected in a single volume the following year. Given that each individual issue of the comic conformed to the standardized size of pamphlet-style comic books (10" x 6.5") rather than the landscape (approximately 10" by 13") orientation of the hardcover, it would be interesting to compare the aesthetic effects of the original run of *300* with its collected version.
8. Miller had previously been unsuccessful in the film industry, having written largely reworked drafts for both Irvin Kershner's *RoboCop 2* (1990) and Fred Dekker's *RoboCop 3* (1993). Miller is credited as co-director on *Sin City*, and later directed a feature by himself, an adaptation of Will Eisner's property *The Spirit* (2008).
9. In its first weekend alone, the film grossed over $70 million, $5 million more than its production budget. The total domestic gross was over $210 million (Box Office Mojo).
10. Of course, this is not the only reason why the film captured the cultural zeitgeist when it was released. However, fan discourses linking fidelity with quality definitely held some degree of sway over the film's reception, as indicated in reviews of the film (many of which are cited throughout this essay).
11. Here I draw upon the terminology of Nicole Brenez. Because, unfortunately, her work has yet to be translated into English, my understanding of these terms is informed by William D. Routt's review of her 1998 book *De la figure en général et du corps en particulier: l'invention figurative au cinema* for the online journal *Screening the Past*.
12. The scene in question takes place between 44:06 and 52:42 in the film.

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13. For example, in the film there is an added subplot involving Queen Gorgo, a character without a significant presence in the graphic novel.
14. See Hutcheon 2006.
15. Fong worked closely with Snyder to achieve replicate Miller and Varley's images on screen. As cinematographer, his responsibilities included lighting the sets to replicate the use of light and shadow in the graphic novel.
16. The Pageant of the Masters, an annual part of the Festival of Arts in Laguna Beach, California since 1941, is a ninety-minute program consisting of about twenty living recreations of great and famous paintings and sculptures set to a live orchestral score (Malloy). The *tableaux* feature "special lighting effects and highly sophisticated technical miracles" to help recreate the overall visual effects of the original as much as possible (Shemanski, 18–19).
17. As a counterpoint, Michael Williams has argued that *300*'s hyperbolically muscled and digitally enhanced male bodies evoke a sense of death, because they more closely resemble bronze statues than living persons, particularly when shot in extreme slow motion bordering on stasis (46). In my view, however, the stasis of these images, and in particular the way that they are constantly teetering on the edge of full, embodied motion, brings them closer to the *tableau vivant* tradition, and thus to life rather than death.
18. To anticipate a Benjaminian response to the present case study, I believe that the question of aura in the case of *300* is moot as the original text is a mass produced object to begin with. The motivation of the *tableaux vivants* therein is thus not to provide access to an inaccessible work, as it was in the nineteenth century, for the graphic novel is at least as accessible as the film version, if not more so.
19. Recent practitioners of *tableaux vivants* have pushed these inherent tensions even further. For instance, the 1998 CounterPoses exhibition in Montreal, Quebec incorporated elements of interaction and movement into traditional *tableau vivant* practice, taking the trope from the realm of the still life to that of living/performance art. Citing the tendency of new technologies to transcend the corporeal level of experience, the CounterPoses curators sought to repurpose the *tableau vivant* in order to both recuperate "the body as a site of experience and knowledge" in the age of new media (Fisher, 6) and to undermine the disinterested aesthetic gaze of the museum goer by confronting them with living bodies and active agents rather than inert, un-interactive pieces of art (12).
20. Often, in films such as Godard's *Passion* and Pasolini's *La ricotta*, the *tableaux vivants* are being produced for a film within the film. Such a positioning within the narrative can serve to reinforce the inherently transtextual nature of the *tableau vivant*, though this is not the case in *300*. See Leutrat 1986 and MacBean 1984.
21. This is partly because comic books have never received the same level of theoretical treatment that the cinema has, but also because comics, like painting, do not lend themselves to a single, restrictive ontological identity.
22. See Prince 2004.
23. See "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" by André Bazin, trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13.4 (Summer 1960): 4–9.
24. While *300* takes place in ancient Greece, the film was shot entirely in Montreal—and during the winter, no less.
25. While the digital provides an inexpensive means of producing a painterly aesthetic, such results are not exclusive to the digital and have been discussed in these terms elsewhere. For a compendium of writings on the topic, see Vacche 2003.
26. "Drawn" being the operative word in both cases due to the use of digital tools in the creation of most cinematic visual effects.
27. For instance, Munich-based house Scanline, who had previously worked on Wolfgang Peterson's *Poseidon* (2006), was employed to create the water effects in the six-shot storm sequence (Fordham, 75).
28. See Albert 2009 and culturalelite 2006.
29. Home video technologies, which give the reader the ability to pause, fast-forward, rewind and slow down the action at will, constitute a notable challenge to this paradigm.
30. Timecodes obtained from the film's official DVD version.
31. It actually does recall the first panel on page 45 of the collected hardcover version, but the compositions are not so similar that one immediately recalls the other.

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32. The lenses were 85 mm, 35 mm and 18 mm, giving radically different depths to each camera despite the identical shooting position.
33. If projected at the normal playback rate of twenty-four frames per second, each second of profilmic reality would take over six seconds to view.
34. The entire film was shot at no slower than fifty frames per second, allowing for subtle slow-motion effects to be inserted in any shot of the film during editing.
35. The reader will recall that the aforementioned “Crazy Horse” shot is, like bullet time, an amalgamation of discrete images that are edited together to create the illusion of fluidity; while this is true, it is the speed ramping that defines the panel moments within the shot as such, rather than the suturing.

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