"Of Graphic Novels and Adaptations: A History of Violence"

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Novels into Film

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In reviewing the film *A History of Violence* (2003), questions around the adaptation process often arise. For example, is it easier to adapt a work that is largely in picture format, and much like the cinematic tool the story board? What are the pitfalls faced by filmmakers in bringing such a work to the screen? Is there any value in exploring such texts? In the following pages, these questions and others will be explored, taking a closer look at the adaptation of graphic novels, such as the Vincent Locke and John Wagner piece that David Cronenberg adapted. From this, a look at the rise in cultural prominence that such adaptations give to *comics* will also be reviewed.

Firstly, it is necessary to understand that graphic novel is a fancier way of saying comic book, in an effort to qualify the work as suitable for scholarly examination (Schwarz, 58). The graphic novel is also closely associated with the Asian manga. Much like comic strips and comic books, the graphic novel has struggled for respect in the academic world, seeking a status alongside great works of literature (Baetens, 95). Thanks to burgeoning cultural studies at universities and other intellectual strong holds around the world, acceptance of cultural art and similar expressions experience greater respect. As a result, many universities currently have a faculty member who is "up on" the graphic novel and comic book scene, and may teach the media format in his or her classroom.

Acceptance is still a problem, however. The wavering respect afforded those expressions categorized as graphic novel is in part due to the fact that "the field of cultural production is a site of struggle and of power disparities" (Beaty, 322). The graphic novel is quite new in the tableau of human cultural history and "anything new often faces resistance, especially if it is part of popular culture" (Schwarz, 63). Resistance is a key issue for many art forms:

Within the graphic novel, the image resists its traditionally

inferior position, for despite our current ideas on the rise of

visual culture, the role of the image in the graphic novel is

still, in many cases, that of a visual illustration of a more

encompassing verbal narrative. At the same time, however,

the image is never an aim in itself, as readers are invited to

make sense of the images by telling their own stories. The

result of such a dynamization questions any fixed

boundaries and hierarchies between the domains of words

and images. (Baetens, 115)

Though the images of the graphic novel share in telling the narrative of the story, it is up to the

reader to fill in the blanks that the writer(s) and artist(s) leave for them. The myriad

interpretations born of those readings are innumerable and resist study. Because of this, Baetens

asserts that the effort of reading a graphic novel or comic is far more active than they are given

credit. In fact, the medium becomes a seat of intertextual necessity. The reader must draw on

their knowledge to successfully find meaning in each frame, sometimes assisted by sparse words

and dialogue. For instance, a reading of *A History of Violence* may be devoid of emotion,

because the signs required to recognize them were glanced over, the stillness of the frame created

an emotional stillness, or the reader was overwhelmed with the numerous possibilities of

meaning that it became impossible to be certain and thus became mute. What is confusing about

Baetens quote is the idea of images being *traditionally inferior*. There are several paintings in the

Louvre museum (and many other places) that might contradict such a notion.

In his review of Paul Lopes's *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book*, Bart Beaty states that "comics, in 2009, remain a healthy, albeit marginal, part of Western cultural industries" (Beaty, 321). It's hard to imagine, with the blockbuster productions based on comics, that they face any kind of struggle for acceptance. However, "Lopes argues that the history of the American comic book format has been a struggle for cultural legitimation" (Beaty, 321). Jan Baetens perfectly cites the issue in legitimizing the format in regards to the photo book, quite a similar format to the graphic novel:

> the metatextual opposition of *legitimate* and *illegitimate*
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> works of art is not at all based on more solid foundations
>
> than the textual opposition between literature and
>
> paraliterature; accordingly, the dynamic nature that
>
> necessarily characterizes the way in which we deal with
>
> texts is neither affected nor redeemed by a greater rigor of
>
> our critical discourse, which would supposedly warrant a
>
> higher degree of critical precision and adequacy. (283-284)

Adequacy appears to be the largest of all factors. Graphic novels exist in a realm of "visual vocabulary" (Zunshine, 115, 124-126). It may be easier to dismiss a photographic novel, because the observer feels that less time has been given to processing the photographs and arranging them than would be given to the drawing of each frame of a manga or graphic novel, but that is a rather subjective assumption based on bias toward the art forms (Baetens, 282). In addition, the amount of work required to interpret the photos or frames, linked with the endless possible readings may be too overwhelming and resist readings or study. So how does an observer or critic gage value under such resistance?

In attempting to evaluate the worth of a work, the bias of individual readings is what is in fact taking place. Baetens reminds his readers that "our history of literature ceases to be a history of works and it becomes a history of their readings" (Baetens, 282). Often, delegitimizing an artistic piece gives strength to those already canonized (Baetens, 284). The process of evaluating works boils down to an "overt attempt to adopt the rules and forms of dominant literary models" which buttresses the support of tradition (the canon) (Baetens, 286). In this attitude toward new works, the contested object "can obtain and deserve official cultural respect through an effort of adaptation to the more traditional norms of its dominant sections" (Baetens, 284). For instance, the notion of the auteur, which is popular in film criticism, helps legitimate comics and graphic novels by attributing a tangible, singular artist behind their existence (Beaty, 321-322). And this singular artist narrows the vast readings, making the task of interpretation much easier, but also assigning a creator. In addition, if the image of the comic is delegitimized, that has repercussions for any and all canonized images (paintings, sketches, etc.). Therefore, the drawings in a comic or graphic novel may be weighed and judged to determine the level of artistic ability employed in them. In other words, was the artist aesthetically good or bad?

What is going on here is what Baetens refers to as *cultural border politics* (99). These *politics* push cultural phenomena "toward purism and hypercorrection that helps the dominated culture to claim its place within the dominant culture" (Baetens, 100). In reaction to this assimilation, many artists attempt to remain aloof from the dominant forces in the culture. This inclination was examined at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)'s 3rd annual conference on *Futures of Entertainment*. At the conference, constituents "acknowledged that many media firms and creative individuals often erect barriers to academic inquiry, furthering the notion of an *unreachable* industry" (Kompare, 119). The sentiment of resistance may still

provide a point of tension that appears as non-acceptance. This tends to leave minor cultures "entangled in disputes over boundaries, levels, and hierarchies" (Baetens, 99). If examination is resisted from both ends, it is not possible to legitimate an art form except by forcefully labeling it, which can result in crushing many of its attributes while thorough understanding fails between artists and observers.

Thankfully, "hierarchies are never fixed" (Baetens, 95). Graphic novels still belong to *minor cultures* or "*small* cultures or cultures on the periphery of larger cultures, but those cultures characterized by a critical reworking of a *dominant* culture by a *dominated* minority" (Baetens, 99). Baetens is saying that graphic novels and other art forms believed to be minor or small are working their way through the dominant culture gaining momentum. What the culture is witnessing now is a shift in acceptance from both ends of the argument. Critics see the worth of the graphic novel and an example of an ever expanding cultural output, while artists see their work being welcomed by wider audiences and curious critics. Thus, the "graphic novel tradition, Lopes suggests, has culminated in an "Heroic Age" in which comic books are defined by their author-driven content and status as serious works of art" (Beaty, 321). The effort put into drawing the frames and adding dialogue and description are being recognized. The fact that many comic heroes and graphic novel tales have been adapted to cinema has helped in this recognition, providing a recognizable list of artists working in the field. There is an ever "increasing familiarity with, and interest in, hybridized media" (Baetens, 95).

Auteurship in comics is a point at which graphic novels become similar to other art forms, linking them in a manner that gives credit to both (Beaty, 322). This linking is just one form of hybridization. Other more popular forms of hybridization are the links of video game,

television, books and film. In light of the interest in such works, it is no wonder that there is a huge market in cinema for the adaptation of graphic novels and comics to film:

> Cinema, television and video games are increasingly reliant
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> on comic books as a source of revenue generating
>
> commercial properties, while even more consecrated forms,
>
> including literature and the visual arts, have been engaging
>
> with comics for more than a half-century. (Beaty, 321)

Beaty highlights an additional aspect of the phenomena, which exposes the underlying business exchanges that drive culture. Cinema has adapted work from various locations in the culture from its start. But, would cinema care to draw as much as it does from comics if they did not turn a profit? This is an interesting question in regards to films like *A History of Violence*, which are seen as odd films for their directors to have made, but also performed quietly at the box office (Fuller, 12). In addition, certain filmmakers are becoming synonymous with the genre, such as Sam Raimi (*Evil Dead* series*, Spider Man, and Xena* TV-series to name a few) and Joss Whedon (*The Avengers*).

The most exciting aspect of the graphic novel coming into the cultural fore is the "intermediality…[which] can be…seen as a means of producing a new medium by the convergence of its non-homogeneous parts" or a study of those seemingly impossible combinations (Baetens, 97). Baetens is suggesting that the combination of various media creates a new medium altogether. It is arguable that such has already always existed in the form of intertextuality. For instance, there are numerous Disney franchises that include the film feeding into merchandising like video games, read-along books, toys, food and soundtracks (and less technological combinations as Disney is followed backward in time). However, the ideology

behind intertextuality becomes far more poignant as the culture recognizes that there are indeed devoted combinations. The MIT conference previously mentioned these very phenomena. It is not limited to just novels, comics, photos, cinema, or any other current forms of art. There are other areas that are often obscured by the nature of their position in the assembly of the products: "the viability of content across multiple nodes and mediums, and the collaboration of people embedded in key but increasingly indistinguishable areas of production and distribution" (Kompare, 117). For instance, Disney's Cars (2006) not only became interactive games and books, but Kraft® and other food products, along with textiles like clothing and bedding, creating a fully immersive multi-media, multi-commodity experience for the consumer.

Derek Kompare also refers to the laborers and administration who are key to producing a work such as film, novels and graphic novels. The graphic novel often has a writer and a graphic artist to supply their respect talents to the story. In other words, not only are their multiple interactivities with a text from the observer (consumer) point of view, but there is a great deal that is done to the text during the production phase of each installment that goes unseen by less critical observations. This is the point where assigning authorship becomes murky. Full production films rely on far more than the director to create the finished product. However, a graphic novel can be created by one artist who fills the role of writer and graphic artist. Despite the collaborative aspect of these art forms, it is unwise to dismiss them from the level of respectable art, and why intermediality is important to assess, as well as the intertextual links that poses.

Kompare asks, "what does it mean when significant components of a media experience are made freely available outside the "*core* text" (Kompare, 117)? In addition, what can be learned from how "transmedia experiences grow" (Kompare 118)? There is a drive to be

immersed and experience the text as fully as possible. The human culture is expanding into greater technological advances and therefore "producers must also be increasingly savvy about what they expect from their users" (Kompare, 118). If something is inaccessible, they will not be able to communicate with the intended audience and the work will fail, the additional commodities will not sell. Transmedia and intermediality create additional ways of viewing. They also create layers of experience based on consumer knowledge and ability. For instance, the adaptation is becoming ever more popular providing several experiences of a text on varying levels, as illustrated above. Kompare writes that filmmakers, videogame manufacturers and other similar media outputs "think of the film itself as only one part of an overall experience," but that experience they can provide is limited by the ability of their consumer to utilize it (Kompare, 118). Thus, they can repackage and market the text in endless formats, sequels, soundtracks and interactives, so long as the endless options they provide are clear and interesting to the consumer. Not surprisingly, market research has shown that "users are increasingly hungry for such experiences, which challenge the traditional separation of the *core* text from its *tertiary* texts" (Kompare, 118). For the media creators (filmmakers, videogame developers, etc), they must navigate numerous hurdles to impose continuity and ensure that the core text is echoed in each tertiary text, while keeping their efforts grounded, though they make use of current and emerging technology for a rich immersion. For example, consider the computer video game. If the game has too many key maneuvers and the maze is always unclear, the consumer is frustrated and the immersion fails.

The graphic novel also enters into other roles in human culture. For instance, the graphic novel is now widely used in the classroom. Lisa Zunshine explores the uses of such a format in her article "What to Expect When You Pick Up a Graphic Novel." Zunshine writes that such

works can provide "opportunities to engage all students in a medium that expands beyond the traditional borders of literacy" (Schwarz, 58). Another reason some critics may put the brakes on equalizing this format is that it may "encourage students to question the notions of the canon" (Schwarz, 58). Yet graphic novels can improve literacy, making classics and tough subjects more accessible and therefore more teachable to every student. They have been cited as improving critical thinking skills on every level, from creating a standard of evaluation to evaluating society's preoccupations such as violence and the art of persuasion. As mentioned above, the difficulty of reading a graphic novel is far greater than at first surmised when they are dismissed as simple comics. Schwarz continues, emphasizing the usefulness of such a tool in teaching students how to navigate a media saturated world, especially as a precursor to reading film and television in a critical way. This is essential learning for today's media saturated society (Schwarz, 59-62).

Unlike cinema, the graphic novel offers a still space to study whatever focus the teacher may wish to address, due to the "unique visual and word arrangement" (Schwarz, 59). For instance, the graphic novel could stimulate discussion on difficult social and cultural issues, helping them to "play a role in the societal questions that serious art should always raise" (Baetens, 101). This aspect is far more important than deciding what graphic novels should be published, though Beatens also notes that the classroom use of them frames which will be published. Zunshine provides an example with Marvel's *Pride and Prejudice* that was geared toward a female readership, and not necessarily meant to provide linkage between the Austin text and literature courses.

Zunshine discusses the levels of cognitive "embedments" in the graphic novel frames, which create meaning when "read," and may alter meaning in the case of adaptations (Zunshine,

124). By embedments, she refers to the semiotic, meaning of signs and signifieds, which she calls *mind-reading* or theory of mind. Zunshine attributes the inclusion or absence of embedments to perceived audience parties, who may be barred or privileged to meaning based on gender roles, age or academic/non-academic fields of experience. Embedments focus on a series of levels of mental and sociocognition, from selling the piece to communicating a narrative and the emotionality of a scene. In this way, Zunshine explains, **"**graphic narratives build on theory-of-mind adaptations to offer their readers a pleasurable exercise in navigating complex social situations" (115). In other words, they can overcome mental blockades to certain subjects by being disguised as entertainment. The graphic novel uses "*visual* style or a combination of visual and verbal styles that brings in complex mental states," and shares this quality with the cinematic arts (Zunshine, 133).

The reliance of the graphic novel on image to convey meaning is one of the ways in which literacy problems are overcome in the classroom. Like film, the graphic novel's few words are accompanied by a series of frames indicating the action of the sequence and cluing the readers into the meaning of dialogue and narrative. In this form, pictures become like language. Therefore, "the idea that stable meaning is possible, that a signified can be found for the text's signifiers, that language can uncomplicatedly represent the world, that a truth can finally be delivered by an author to a reader" is a very real aspect of the graphic novel (Graham, 76-77). This too would be an interesting point of examination that should make the comic and graphic novel a worthy art.

Where does this place the graphic novel? Robert Stam points out that adaptation studies is in the school of humanities where it is usually associated with literary studies. This is because the usual item being adapted, until more recently, was the literary text. Hence, film was lumped

into literature studies because film tends to be "a form of writing that borrows from other forms of writing" (1-2). Cinema is still the most "dominant *way of seeing* in the modern world and as a condition toward which most of the visual and literary arts aspire" (Stam, 5). With the addition of comics and graphic novels into the mainstream of culture, cinema may be facing a contender for that post. As with cinema, so too, the graphic novel may attract big name writers, while it is already altering current writing aesthetics to more closely resemble itself (Stam, 5-6, 74). It is difficult to determine if this cites a reason to create a department that the visual arts would belong to. After all, a painting is a visual art. So do films and graphic novels belong to the fine arts' departments or the humanities? This is a question that has been plaguing critics for decades.

There are "deeply-rooted intertextual relationship between film and literature" (Graham, 175). These relationships often breed new ways of navigating both and result in new forms of art. It is quite possible that the graphic novel has developed from a love of the comic and the desire to see them more widely utilized and fashioned. Through cinema, television and the graphic arts, "literary traditions are radically transposed," creating astonishing new views of texts (Graham, 175). This fact alone should dispel any doubts as to the position of such cultural icons in the high art sphere.

Unlike other art forms, the film and graphic novel industry take fan opinion into consideration when creating their texts from other existing texts. *From Hell* (2001) "turned an extremely complex work into a conventional whodunit," and it could be argued that this was done to satisfy audience expectations (Overpeck, 41). The reason that it was made at all is easily attributed to the graphic novel's popularity with readers. Although the final cinematic product was altered, "many of the changes the filmmakers made can, of course, be attributed to box-office expectations," suggesting that the audience plays a larger role in production (Overpeck,

43). Unfortunately, "all of these changes take the film away from the social analysis that makes the source material so rich," and an opportunity was lost by the filmmakers to bring this to the screen and satisfy the fan base, not just the hoped for broad and lucrative audience (Overpeck, 43). However, the film industry is showing signs of maturing beyond a manufacturer of simple entertainments. Kompare noted in his MIT speech that in

> Discussing the industrial and creative issues surrounding
>
> the adaptation of comics into films, each noted that
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> producers and studio executives are increasingly of a
>
> generation already familiar with comics properties and
>
> styles, and that has in turn allowed for more adherence to
>
> fan expectations. (119)

These filmmakers grew up as fans first. This may be a reason for the *re-boot* franchises like *Batman* and *Spiderman*. *A History of Violence* is also one of a growing number of adapted graphic novels that shows this tendency toward fan influenced product. Cinema, though an art, is still an industry who views their audience as their customers. They want to be sure the audience is buying, and therefore the shift toward sating a smaller segment of the potential audience, in homage to the text adapted, is slow.

The similarity of the graphic novel to the story board gives the impression that it would be far more adaptable to the screen than a conventional novel. However, as Kyle Oliver points out in his primer on using story boards for corporate videos, "its purpose is seldom as well defined as it appears in Hollywood's packaging" (Oliver, 34). Thus it is a bit misleading to state that "the story board that prefigured it —often in graphic novel-like visual detail," as it gives the impression that the steps to follow are somehow made easy (Oliver, 34). Directors use

storyboarding to explain scenes to producers, cameramen and other staff on the set. Storyboards

can highlight flaws in the transition from screenplay to shooting, hone narrative and create a very

clear picture of the desired shooting result:

> Storyboards fulfill these purposes by spelling out the details
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> of a planned shoot. Each page of a storyboard consists of
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> several frames, one for each shot. Frames include a
>
> sketch—usually pen-and-ink —of what the shot will look
>
> like, a written description of what's going on in the scene
>
> and what type of camera work is required, the dialogue for
>
> the shot, and a few words about the accompanying
>
> soundtrack. (34)

However, this ignores that the screenwriter "searches for as complete a version as possible of the

author's intended structure, individual sentences, paragraphing, and so forth," and may be

required to make alterations that complement the findings but are still changing the details of the

narrative being adapted (Graham, 59). In addition, the director and the camera operators all make

interpretive decisions. Olson's adaptation of *History* does make several of these alterations for

varying reasons that may remain unknown. For instance, the mafia figures of the story lose their

Italian names. There is no tortured corpse at the end, Richie is instead the mafia boss behind

Tom's discovery and his brother. Richie's monstrousness remains packaged in a neat suit,

combining him with the son of the original boss from the book and Tom's teenage friend, not his

brother. Beside this, Tom is evolved through several scenes that first show him as a gentle but

average man and then erupt in violent and sexually charged moments that reveal the monster

caged within. The sexual situations cannot be found in the Locke/Wagner work. Interestingly,

the nightmares of Tom's daughter Sarah, remain pointing constantly through the story at the monsters reaching out of the dark, the consuming and frightening unknown that threatens the family.

A *History of Violence* is considered the Canadian director's "most conventional and, therefore, least Cronenbergian film in years… nothing so accessible since *The Fly* (1986)" (Fuller, 12). Cronenberg is known to most critics in the film arts "as a master of comically grotesque horror films that delve deeply into paranoia, technological obsession, and the impasses of gender difference," putting him on par with Stanley Kubrick (Dunlap, 321). Cronenberg's other films are lower budget or independent features, such as the "commercially unsuccessful *Spider*" (2002) (Fuller, 12). *History,* instead, "explores how narratives are constructed around violence and the traumatic effects of experiencing and perpetrating it" (Fuller, 16).

Spider is "Cronenberg's most psychologically based and least imagistic film" (Fuller, 15). However, it did precede *History* and focused a man coming to terms with his violence. Most of his films are "a series of conflicts between man and woman, nature and machine, science and society that seem somehow to traverse and manifest the grotesque" (Dunlap, 322). For instance, the repulsive orifice in James Woods's stomach in VideoDrome (1982) or Jeff Goldblum's half fly body. Equally grotesque is the way in which the mother is displayed in *Spider*. At first Mrs. Cleg, cleverly performed by Miranda Richardson, is a beautiful angelic image that erodes into a yellow-toothed harlot until Spider (Dennis Cleg, played by Ralph Fiennes) kills her with asphyxiation via the gas stove in his grimy childhood flat (technically, this does count as science and technology, no matter how ordinary). The relationship between mother and son is clearly Oedipal, supported by his mistrust and growing suspicion of his father intertwined with sexualized images of the parents. Spider cannot imagine his mother in the role of his father's

lover, and thus replaces the angelic image he has of her with that of a crude, bar-hopping mistress. Eventually, as Spider pieces his web back together and thus his life, he discovers that it was not his father who killed his mother but him. He grew to see her without the eyes of a young son's blind-adoration, effectively killing the mother he once knew. His perceptions shifted so startlingly, that his mind created a story to cover the shock, but did not stop him from losing his mind.

History follows quite a similar premise, though critics of the film thought it an odd endeavor for Cronenberg. "The film presents an *ideal* American home whose exterior layers peel away to reveal the violence that always lived there" (Lowenstein, 201). These images suggest that the monsters we most fear live inside us, barely restrained and thinly veiled, and that "home's mirage of peace depends on the violence hidden within it" (Lowenstein, 201-202). These statements could easily describe *Spider* and even most of Cronenberg's productions. It may be this similarity that attracted the director to the story.

Similarities to *Spider* continue. For instance, "Tom Stall is a man who wants to leave a gangster's life of violence behind," just like Spider would like to become good-natured Dennis again and cease to be a murderer (Dunlap, 322). *History* is also a film about the aftermath of a young man coming to grips with adulthood (Dunlap, 334). For Tom it is "as an adolescence thankfully passed beyond," while for Spider it is something he cannot come to terms with and cannot pass beyond (Dunlap, 329). In addition, *History* explores a male growing to accept women not as castrating figures, but equals, partners and/or outlets of desire (Dunlap, 331). Spider contrasts this exploration, delving into the stunted mental development of a man who could not accept the truth about his mother as a sexual being, or his changing understanding of her and himself.

Violence is a theme common throughout Cronenberg's films, *Crash* (1996) being one of the most violent. The adaptation of *History* was rendered by Josh Olson and David Cronenberg did not review the novel (Fuller, 13). However, the graphic novel is a perfect fit for Cronenberg. Bluestone's notion that one may "often find that the film adapter has not even read the book…has depended instead on a paraphrase," turning that information into their raw materials (Hutcheon, 62-63). This is one reason why, as Naremore tells us, people don't always recognize an adaptation (Naremore, 1-2). This is not the case with *History*. Aside from a few surface details, the narrative follows the graphic novel it was adapted from. Strangely, the graphic novel is ultra-violent, whereas the film is oddly tamed down through culturally acceptable forms of violence. We are not treated with a breathing version of a limbless and barely recognizable Richie at the end of the film. Instead, he has become a white-collar gangster, living in a fancy house, no less a monster who was mutilated by Tom's abandonment.

One critic describes the production as "culled from the Noir and Western genres" and possibly numerous films in Cronenberg or Olson's lifetime, "a calculated but disorienting grab-bag of tropes" (Fuller 13). Graham Fuller is describing the intertextuality of both the film and the novel. Intertextuality allows for the realization of multiple influences (like the Noir and Western genres), but also its reflections that can be found in any number of artistic productions like "painting, music, architecture, [and] photography" (Graham, 169). They each help to create multiple readings and hence multiple meanings from those readings. Old tropes can successfully impart meaning, though they may be viewed as unimaginative.

The theme of violence is the most apparent intertextuality that runs through these works. Liz Powell writes that:

> Tom speaks to a cultural imagination preoccupied with
>
> notions of masculine power and justice; his character
>
> establishes a visual and thematic reference point from
>
> which the narrative can begin to critically explore the
>
> foundations of this icon of national identity. (166)

Tom is evoking the troubled Noir heroes who try to evade the doom grasping for them out of the shadows, or the tall-in-the-saddle John Waynes of yesteryear who seem such a prominent icon of American cultural history. Because of this connection, *History* can be listed as a Film Noir, but also connects on a sub-level with crime/gangster films and westerns. Moreover, Fuller describes *History* as "a film of and for the moment, in which the dark side of the American psyche emerges into the light" (Fuller, 16). Tom is the anti-hero pivotal to the genre, inseparable from the narrative and iconography. Like many Noir anti-heroes, a cold "depiction of evil in the opening sequence stands in stark contrast to the initial representation of the film's central protagonist" (Powell, 166). The purpose of this is to remind viewers of Tom's true past, to show him as a flawed character cast in a murky light (Powell, 166). By the end of the film, Tom has become wholly a Noir figure. His life is forever changed by the dark history he tried to keep hidden: "his face contorted and sprayed with blood, the quiet hero Tom Stall has morphed into the grotesque villain Joey Cusack" (Powell, 167). *History*'s status as a Cronenberg film, further links it with the Noir realm. Much of Cronenberg's work is Neo-Noir, depicting no way out from the ugly choices presented the not-so-heroic lead. The frames rendered by Locke, reflect a noir landscape, the drawings mirroring the chiaroscuro lighting of classic Noir.

Returning to *History*'s relation to the Western, Richard Slotkin wrote of in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992):

What is distinctively *American* is not necessarily the

amount or kind of violence that characterizes our history

but the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds

of violence we have actually experienced, the forms of

symbolic violence we imagine or invent, and the political

uses to which we put that symbolism. (Fuller, 16)

For instance, there is an ideology that striking women is more abhorrent than striking another

man, and this can be examined against corporal punishment for children. All three are examples

of violence, but the culture has graded them from acceptable to unacceptable, and all have plenty

of gray area between. Similarly, the Western "centers on myths of national identity and which

held significant cultural currency throughout the latter half of the twentieth century" (Powell,

164). The Western has long stood for the ubiquitous American story, glossing over the realities

and violence that existed in the real history of the period: genocide, sexual assault, robbery,

murder, prairie justice, and raw survival. Rugged individualism is another term for the images

that Powell's words evoke in regards to the American West. American men frequently see

themselves as the heroic cowboy, an image crafted and perfected for film that has little to do

with the reality of the vocation, but stands out as the American national identity. Just as he forms

a Noir anti-hero, Tom also reflects the Western hero (the Western borrowed from Noir quite

frequently):

This notion of a heroic, generous, and selfless American

identity, in opposition to a villainous other who is

indifferent to human life and suffering, is introduced in the

opening two sequences of the film. However, as the film

progresses, the boundaries between these identities become

increasingly blurred, resulting in an image of America

masculinity that is simultaneously heroic and villainous.

(165)

Another image that this brings to mind is the Gangster. By the end of the film, you learn that

Tom used to work with his brother for a crime family. Tom is a former street hood and criminal,

an identity that contrasts the heroic cowboy with the white hat. However, it does fit the *High

Noon* (1952), Noirish Gary Cooper type. The troubled-past-hero frequented many westerns in the

Post-Second World War era, owing his makeup to the commercially successful anti-heroes of the

Film Noir and Gangster genre. Tom reflects the ambivalence of these roles in American culture.

The gangster challenged the catalysts of the Great Depression, despite being ruthless criminals,

while the Noir man challenged the increasingly intrusive government.

Fuller suggests the film is Tom's dream, and cites Cronenberg's past films such as

VideoDrome which draw on the dream-like images of surrealism (Fuller, 13). Similarly to

VideoDrome, Tom is engaged in one of "the most ancient of stereotypically masculine fantasies:

to achieve freedom from and control over the body" (Dunlap, 323). Adam Lowenstein writes that

"the promise of violence lives on in the body, even if the mind surrenders to tortured uncertainty

about identity" (Lowenstein, 206). Quite possibly, another theme may be "of an instinctive body

outpacing a rational mind" (Lowenstein, 206). Tom has tried to evolve beyond his instincts, but

comes to realize instincts are what keep him alive when threatened by an outside force. Man

must accept that he is the animal within. The outside influence is an unstoppable threat to man's

survival, which he must use all of his faculties and strengths to defeat.

Cronenberg's early films could be said to fight against the acceptance that life is mundane, while his later pieces suggest an acceptance of the mundane and a resituation within it, finding that *normal* is still interesting (Dunlap, 333). In addition, Cronenberg's "grotesque becomes internal to mundane reality" instead of manifested outwardly in the forms of aliens and technology (Dunlap, 327). In light of this film, Aron Dunlap believes that "Cronenberg has actually discovered the most grotesque dimension of all" in the ordinary (Dunlap, 328). He also sees that the grotesque that Cronenberg had put on display prior to *History* "not as that which violates the mundane, but rather as that which informs the mundane at its most banal and unremarkable core" (Dunlap, 321).

Despite all of these rich points of analysis, critics saw *History* as disappointing. Fuller writes:

> It's as if there were already a tacit resistance to seeing *A*
>
> *History of Violence* as one man's existential crisis, as a
>
> disconcerting analysis of the nature of identity, or as an
>
> allegory for America's psychic identification with the myth
>
> of regenerative violence. (12)

Perhaps the premise itself is unsettling, as it asks the viewer to face their inner shadows. Cronenberg's film, and the graphic novel it was adapted from, both stand as products of a violence loving culture. The title also comes with connotations that may insight resistance, alluding to a history of violence in the United States that has also been masked. Adam Lowenstein writes, "the histories of violence…will likely unsettle a number of different kinds of spectators for a variety of different reasons" (Lowenstein, 205). Each reading of the text is essentially different, as it is informed by the unique experience of the viewer. Likely, readings

include the "blurring of boundaries between hero and villain" (Powell, 167). Also, there is "the problematic nature of justifying one act of violence while condemning another" (Powell, 167).

In Bluestone's words, novel writing is "packed with symbolic thinking which is peculiar to the imaginative rather than visual activity" (23). Yet through intertextuality and the cinematic apparatus, it can be shown that symbolic thinking is very much a visual activity. It is still true that writing in a novel and writing for a film are separate institutions with different "limits and possibilities" as well as "conflicting conventions" (45). The combination of graphics and literary narrative create a sort of story board, but this does not ease the conflicts entirely for an adaptation. Even in the graphic novel there are points of resistance to an adaption. Bluestone writes that "between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media" (Bluestone 1). In the case of graphic novels becoming film, the root difference between the media lie in the meanings made from the still images interlaced with very brief narrative and dialogue. There almost seems a lack of emotion in the stillness of the frames, and this could cause a difference in what lies on the page and the screen. What else is missed or absent? In addition, the numerous readings that take place during the course of making a film can alter meaning greatly.

Though it would be nice to discard any question of artistic or cultural value, "a value-oriented approach is in fact inevitable" with any critical study of a cultural phenomenon like film and graphic novels (Baetens, 280). However, the terms of this process could be renegotiated. Instead of attempting to apply autership to achieve value, it is better to examine the pieces from the realm of intertextuality, where the author little matters in exploring the limitless depths of texts. In this way, the meaning and the way that individuals and groups use previously constructed texts to communicate would become the focus of study. In addition, applying the

criticism from the visual and the literary arts into a new intermedia would alleviate the

assumption that film, graphic novels or comics lack dignity or a set of practices. It would also

provide new insight into such practices that move beyond the individual work and creator, and

examine the culture that inspired the works.

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