



## Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2016

Ordinary Chronicles of the End of the World

---

### Liam Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation : Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre* // Drew Morton, *Panel to the Screen : Style, American Film, and Comic Books During the Blockbuster Era*

Nicolas Labarre

---



#### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8420>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.8420

ISSN: 1765-2766

#### Publisher

AFEA

#### Electronic reference

Nicolas Labarre, "Liam Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation : Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre* // Drew Morton, *Panel to the Screen : Style, American Film, and Comic Books During the Blockbuster Era*", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2016, Online since 14 September 2017, connection on 29 April 2021.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8420> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.8420>

---

This text was automatically generated on 29 April 2021.



Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

---

# Liam Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation : Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre* // Drew Morton, *Panel to the Screen : Style, American Film, and Comic Books During the Blockbuster Era*

Nicolas Labarre

---

## REFERENCES

Burke, Liam, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation : Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*, Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 2016, ISBN : 978-1-4968-0970-4

Morton, Drew, *Panel to the Screen : Style, American Film, and Comic Books During the Blockbuster Era*, Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 2016, ISBN : 978-1-4968-0978-0

- 1 Adaptation studies underwent a profound transformation from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s. In a perceptive review published in *Image[&]Narrative* in 2007, Heidi Peeters slyly remarked that : “The ultimate acknowledgement of the academic acceptance of adaptations, however, would be someone like, say, Linda Hutcheon writing a book on the phenomenon,” before reviewing Linda Hutcheon’s landmark book, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Peeters 2007). In addition to rejecting a hierarchical view of narrative media, Hutcheon explicitly sought to broaden the scope of adaptation studies beyond the canonical novel/film pairing, around which the field had been hitherto defined (Hutcheon 2006). Thomas Leitch in *Film Adaptation and its Discontent* (Leitch 2007) similarly discussed comics, video games and other sources, as did Henry Jenkins in

*Convergence Culture* (Jenkins 2006), in the course of his discussion of transmedia storytelling, an intertextual and industrial strategy with close ties to adaptation.

- 2 *Film and Comic Books*, the first significant volume specifically dedicated to adaptation in comics, appeared the same year as Hutcheon's book. The groundbreaking collection of essays, edited by Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich and Matthew P. McAllister, has since been followed by a number of volumes exploring the relationship between comics and film (in that order) and literature and film (in that order as well). Though the work on the literary sources of comics has not abated, it has recently been overshadowed by a genuine explosion of publications centered on the translation from comics into films. This reflects the growing inclusiveness of adaptation studies but also the immense and perhaps surprisingly long-lived popular success of contemporary comic book movies, which has positioned them as relevant objects of studies.
- 3 Liam Burke's *The Comic Book Film Adaptation* (2015) and Drew Morton's *Panel to the Screen* (2016), both published by the University Press of Mississippi and both written by media studies lecturers, exemplify this trend in their shared emphasis on contemporary films and in their choice to focus primarily – though not exclusively – on the circulation from comics to films. While Burke's text seeks to present a holistic view of the phenomenon, with an emphasis on reception and genre construction, Morton's is more closely focused on the remediation process and with issues of style. Both, however, approach their object of study from the standpoint of cultural history, with a keen eye on critical reception and commercial success.
- 4 *The Comic Book Film Adaptation* starts by examining comic book films as an economic and cultural phenomenon. Liam Burke argues that the existence of the current "golden age" of comic book filmmaking cannot be explained by one single factor, be it political adequacy, improvement in special effects, conglomerate strategies, or the emergence of a new generation of movie directors and executives familiar with the original material. Discussing the oft-mentioned notion that the success of super-hero movies stems from their political discourse (heroes, vigilantism, and patriotism), Burke echoes David Bordwell (2008) in arguing that: "[these political allusions] seem to be less about meaningful engagement than creating a semblance of sociopolitical relevance" (Burke 2015, 37). Burke does not discount the commercial efficiency of this ambiguous surface engagement but demonstrates that no single cause suffices to explain the success of a series of films caught in a constant negotiation between conflicting imperatives, such as franchising/merchandising and political relevance. This is a frustrating but hardly avoidable conclusion, meant as a corrective to journalistic rather than academic discourses.
- 5 In his second chapter, Burke uses audience reception and close attention to peri- and paratexts to show that comic book movies function as a genre as defined by Rick Altman: a cluster of recurrent textual elements whose "family resemblance" is adjudicated by a variety of users, producers, critics, academics and audience. This is a bold move, since as Burke himself points out, Leitch and others have argued that adaptation is a label but rarely a genre onto itself (Leitch 2007, 106). However, Burke demonstrates not only that movie producers and distributors have tended to align the various comic book movies through intertextual and intericonic relations, regardless of similarities in the original material (Dan Clowes' *Ghost World* shares very little with *Green Lantern*, except for their comic book origins) but also that audiences read these movies in this light. Having established the genre as discourse, Burke then seeks to

identify the cluster of textual elements around which these discourses revolve and offers the following definition :

The comic book movie genre follows a vigilante or outsider character engaged in a form of revenge narrative, and is pitched at a heightened reality with a visual style marked by a distinctly comic book imagery. (Burke, 2015, 106)

- 6 Burke's eagerness to align comic book movies with the western and the vigilante/outsider storyline is not the most convincing aspect of the book – he acknowledges that *Ghost World* does not fit this approach easily – but his identification of a “heightened reality”, a specific style of “aggressive remediation” (220) of the comic book aesthetic indeed appears to be a key common thread linking the comic book movies, “even if it is inconsistent with the source material” (116). This is the very subject of Morton's *Panel to Screen*.
- 7 Having thus defined and characterized his corpus, Burke pays close attention in the following chapter to the various possible receptions for these texts, from comic fans viewing them as *adaptations* (Hutcheon 2006, 120-28) to non-fans, who perceive them as belonging to a cinematic genre, but may have not have any specific knowledge of the original material. Using original audience research, industry numbers and reviews, Burke delineates these non-mutually exclusive categories and highlights the continuing commercial importance of perceived fidelity to the source material, even among non-fans. Fans adjudicate this fidelity criticism, which is then amplified by mainstream audience beyond the boundaries of fandom (141). This has led movie makers and producers to establish a dedicated participatory culture around comic book filmmaking, though Burke also points to the limits of such participation within the “culture industry” (151-4), especially since these fans ultimately make up just a fraction of the comic book audience, vocal and influential as they may be.
- 8 In the final two chapters of the book, Burke asks precisely what fidelity means in the context of movies which frequently hint to decades of accumulated publishing history. Drawing on Tom Gunning's analysis of early cinema, he underlines the importance of “peak moments” in many of these adaptations :
 

'iconic' moments, which have been ratified through comics covers, pin-up images and frequent references [...] such as Superman lifting a car above his head in *Superman Returns* [as seen on the cover of *Action Comics* n° 1, the first appearance of the character] (161)
- 9 Fidelity to the source material, however, is mostly conveyed through the development of a specific aesthetic, which seeks to “narrow the semiotic gap between comics and cinema” (168). Using Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* as a reference point, Burke delineates the overlaps and disjunctions between the way cinema and comics tell stories, before enumerating the ways in which film-makers have sought to emphasize the correspondences, in self-referential, subtle, or blatantly transgressive ways ; this includes finding equivalences to bridge ontological differences in the representation of time, space and sound, but also a deliberate borrowing of comics conventions regarding framing, the representation of the human body, the use of stereotypes and even a nod to a now obsolete use of color in comics. Burke also notes that these innovations have seeped into non-comic book movies, leading to a “comic book inflection” in 21<sup>st</sup> century comic-book filmmaking (267), though he expresses doubts about the long-term prospects of the genre.

- 10 Drew Morton's, *Panel to the Screen* seizes on the themes broached in these last two chapters of *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, in seeking for "stylistic remediation" (Morton, 2016, 5), later defined as "the remediation of formal and stylistic attributes that are specific to one medium or the other" (24). To do so, the book presents a series of case studies, which serve to highlight the way certain attributes of comics are remediated into film and vice-versa.
- 11 Morton differs from Burke at the outset, since he seeks to separate adaptation from remediation, "the representation of one medium in another", as defined by Bolter and Grusin in 1999, stating that "stylistic remediation differs from adaptation in two ways : it is not tied to a specific text, and it can be linear or dialogical" (8). Puzzlingly, he suggests that an adaptation is not necessarily a remediation, though this definition would seem to position adaptation either as a specific case of remediation or a phenomenon existing at a different level altogether. In any case, the existence of a shared "comic book aesthetic" among contemporary adaptations – as demonstrated by Burke – means that this distinction is a moot point, as nearly all these movies are adaptations as well as remediation of the comics form. This bold theoretical option is reflected in the bibliography, which does not include either Leitch or Hutcheon, though Morton refers to Robert Stam's work on several occasions. In order not to get sidetracked by the difference in cultural and industrial practices in Japan and in Europe, Morton focuses exclusively on contemporary films (1978-2013, from *Superman* to *Man of Steel*) based on American comics.
- 12 The book is divided into three parts. In the first, "Definitions and Historical Context", Morton uses Edgar Wright's *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010) as a case study. The film was both a financial failure and a case of fan-pleasing multi-faceted stylistic remediation ; this remediation affects the construction of time, space, the image ratio and various visual disjunctions, such as a flashback using comics images while the film uses a photographic apparatus (21-31). Morton also points out that *Scott Pilgrim's* borrowing from other sources, notably video games, creates a "transmedia style", a stylistic counterpart to Henry Jenkins's concept of transmedia storytelling : "Transmedia style [...] can be defined as a unified series of texts in different media that a unified by a unique stylistic approach" (35). This is an important and effective concept, in that the *Scott Pilgrim* comics, film and video games do echo and reinforce each other but does not reward involvement through interlocking narratives. Morton observes that *Scott Pilgrim's* box-office failure, though not entirely attributable to its stylistic choices nevertheless seemed to demonstrate that overt stylistic remediation, even when appreciated by fans, was a risky gamble.
- 13 A second chapter in this first part presents a capsule history of comic book films from 1934 – the year comic books were invented – to 2013 in 20 pages. Morton describes Burkes' "golden age" of comic book film as "The High Fidelity Cycle" of such films, following the Superman Cycle (1978-1987) and the Batman Cycle (1989-1997). This fidelity is manifest in the way certain storylines are referred to, in the implication of fans or even of the original creators – Frank Miller being credited as the co-director of *Sin City* – and in some cases in stylistic remediation. The high point of this chapter is the discussion of the 1978 *Superman* film and its stylistic choices, which has received less attention from academics than the later *Batman* movies, for instance, though it inaugurated the modern age of superhero movies with panache and a historical awareness of its predecessors.

- 14 The second part examines two key examples of stylistic remediation, *Dick Tracy* (Beatty, 1990) and *Hulk* (Lee, 2003). Morton uses these two case studies to examine the way characteristic elements of the original comics – the construction of space, caricature and in *Hulk's* case, the multiframe, the arrangement of panels on the page – can be recreated or approximated on the screen. While both examples have been discussed extensively by other scholars, Morton resorts to comics theorists such as Eisner, McCloud and Groensteen to provide an insightful analysis of the *Hulk's* incomplete spatial remediation of the layout of the comics page through various split screen configurations. From these two examples, Morton concludes that stylistic remediation is and remains expensive in spite of digital imagery, but also that such a remediation is likely to result in “a degree of stylistic noise”, a series of compromises which undercut the attempts at visual fidelity (86). He then moves on to examine Zach Snyder’s *300* (2006) and *Watchmen* (2009), focusing again on remediation but also on the marketing strategies accompanying these films, which resulted in a contrastive outcome: an unexpected success for the former and a disappointing result for the latter. Finally, *American Splendor* allows Morton to examine the remediation of the specific relation between texts and pictures in comics, notably through the inclusion of on-screen thought balloons. Again, and even though the adaptation is one of the most elaborate examples of stylistic remediation, Morton concludes that “the formal vocabulary of the remediating medium – film – dominates” (108).
- 15 In a third and final part, Morton examines the dialogic process of remediation, as opposed to the unidirectional adaptation presented before. He demonstrates how comics informed Sergio Leone’s spaghetti westerns, whose influence can in turn be detected in modern comics in a western setting. The use of the “bullet time” in *Matrix* is connected to the representation of time and speed in comics, and this example allows Morton to delineate more clearly the way in which his notion of transmedia style can be articulated with Henry Jenkins’s transmedia storytelling. Finally, the example of the Joker and a careful examination of Frank Miller’s career in comics and in Hollywood serves as examples of the way comics and cinema constantly draw from each other’s formal and narrative innovations, which Morton calls a “dialogic stylistic remediation” (173).
- 16 His conclusion suggests that while stylistic remediation has become “a lucrative means of drawing fans and potential readers towards both synergistic and transmedia texts” (177), a string of economic failures and a form of “cultural fatigue” (180) appears to have reversed that trend.
- 17 *The Comic Book Film Adaptation* and *Panel to the Screen* have much in common. The salient examples and even specific discussions, such as the use of “bullet time” in *Matrix* are repeated from one book to the next. They also resort to the same theorists for the most part, from Groensteen and McCloud to Bordwell and Thompson to Jenkins, which reinforces this overlap and strongly suggests that a core theoretical corpus exist for these comics adaptation studies.
- 18 Their focus and method differ, however, as Morton’s book is more interested in theory, formalism and close readings, while Burke’s is especially successful in charting and characterizing audience reception. The thematic approach in *The Comic Book Film Adaptation* also produces a more satisfying overview of the phenomenon of comic book films, and the framework of genre theory proves helpful in charting the various discourses which surround these films. The film by film approach in *Panel to the Screen*,

while helpful in providing a syncretic view of the various examples, also leads to a degree of repetition and structural indeterminacy (it is unclear, for instance, why *American Splendor* was included in the chapter which also discusses Zach Snyder's films). *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, also the longer of the two books, is therefore a preferable entry point into the phenomenon, grounded in an impressive amount of original research, undergirded by a solid and extensive theoretical framework.

- 19 *Panel to the Screen*, is less inclusive in that it barely mentions the films which Burke describes as employing a "subtle" remediation, such as Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy and most of the Marvel films. The book is thus focused on examples of overt remediation, which have often been widely discussed by other scholars, including Burke. It does succeed however in arguing for the recognition of stylistic remediation as a distinct creative and commercial strategy. The notion of "transmedia style" also offers a welcome corrective to the excessive attention paid to narrative in multimedia and transmedia franchises at the expense of style and design. It makes it possible to question franchise incarnations by deploying the crossmedia/transmedia dichotomy: does the work repeat an existing story or does it expand on the already available narrative? But this questioning is also achieved via a transmedia style/singular style dimension: does the work adhere to the stylistic choices made in other parts of the franchise, and if not, why? These advances make it a recommended reading for scholars interested in the evolution of transmedia, a field recently enriched by a number of significant historical and theoretical works.
- 20 Taken together, these two books attest to the vitality of the field of comics-centric adaptation studies. Their publication by the University Press of Mississippi over the course of 18 months also points to the fact the interest generated by the adaptation of comics into films does not extend to other adaptation practices involving comics. It is striking, to name but one example, that neither book mentions "official" adaptations of films into comics, of the kind regularly produced by comic companies since the 1940s. Adaptation studies have struggled for nearly fifty years to move beyond their exclusive focus on the novel-to-film translation. Despite the undeniable quality of the two books under review, it would be disheartening to see comics-to-film studies similarly eclipse the many other existing circulations between comics and other visual media.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Works cited

BORDWELL, David. « Superheroes for sale ». *Observations on Film Art*. 16 August 2008. <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2008/08/16/superheroes-for-sale/>. (visited on July 15, 2017)

« Bullet Time ». 2017. *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bullet\\_time&oldid=799216226](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bullet_time&oldid=799216226). (visited on August 30, 2017)

BURKE, Liam. *Comic Book Film Adaptation : Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*. Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 2015.

DAVIS, Blair. *Movie Comics : Ppage to Screen/Screen to Page*. New Brunswick, New Jersey : Rutgers University Press, 2017.

HUTCHEON, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York : Routledge, 2006.

JENKINS, Henry. *Convergence Culture : Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York : New York University Press, 2006.

LEITCH, Thomas. *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents from Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*. Baltimore, Md. : Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2007.

MORTON, Drew. *Panel To The Screen : Style, American Film, And Comic Books During The Blockbuster Era*. Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 2016.

PEETERS, Heidi. « Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (review) ». *Image [&] Narrative*, n° 16 (février 2007). [http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/house\\_text\\_museum/peeters.htm](http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/house_text_museum/peeters.htm). (accessed on August 30, 2017)

## AUTHORS

**NICOLAS LABARRE**

Université Bordeaux Montaigne