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ARTICLE

Comparability and Value in Comic-to-Film Adaptations

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Abstract
In this article, I argue, adverting to critical practices, that film adaptations are comparable with the comics that serve as their sources. The possibility of comparison presumes the existence of covering values according to which these comparisons are made. I raise four groupings of covering values for comics—narrative, pictorial, historical, and referential—and show how they apply to film adaptations as well, and argue that a fifth kind of value, fidelity, is relevant to comparisons of source comics to film adaptations. I close with a discussion of different types of fidelity that might be brought to bear in evaluation.

Keywords: adaptation; comparability; covering values; fidelity; critical practices; comics; film

1. Introduction

Comic-to-film adaptations in popular culture are currently an inescapable presence that has, thankfully, not escaped philosophical attention.[1] Much of the extant philosophical literature on the topic has focused on what makes a film an adaptation of a comic, whether such adaptations are even possible, and, if so, to what extent a film's fidelity to a comic source can be achieved (see, e.g., Cowling & Cray, 2022, chap.10; Pratt, 2012a). In this article, I shall not revisit these topics, but rather assume certain positions for which I have argued elsewhere (Pratt, 2023, chap. 5): comic-to-film adaptations are possible and a great deal of fidelity (though short of perfection) is achievable therein.

I shall use these starting points to ground a discussion of the evaluative aspects of comics-to-film adaptations. After establishing some fundamental terminology, I argue, drawing from the practices of critical evaluation, that source comics and their film adaptations are comparable to each other. The possibility of comparison presumes the existence of values according to which the comparison is made. I raise four groupings of values for comics—narrative, pictorial, historical, and referential—and show how they apply to film adaptations as well. In addition, a fifth kind of value, fidelity, is relevant to comparisons of source comics to film adaptations, and I close with a discussion of different types of fidelity that might be brought to bear.

Before going further, it should be remarked that these issues are particularly salient with respect to comic-to-film adaptations, but not unique to them. Comic-to-film adaptations provide familiar, culturally prominent test cases for evaluative reasoning about adaptations in general, including other forms of adaptations involving comics (e.g., film-to-comic, comic-to-musical, literature-to-comic) and adaptations having nothing to do with comics whatsoever. The conclusions I reach here should, accordingly, abet a broader understanding of value in adaptation.

[1]While comic-to-film adaptations have achieved contemporary prominence through, e.g., the films in the *MCU*, the phenomenon is far from new and may have been even more popular in the early twentieth century, as Davis (2017) emphasizes.

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2. Terminology

For an investigation of comparisons between film adaptations and their source comics, the following key terminology will be helpful. Here (after Chang, 1997, 4) is an operating definition of comparability:

> *x* and *y* are *comparable* if and only if there is some positive evaluative relation that holds between them.

Positive evaluative relations at least include "better than," "worse than," and "equal to," and perhaps also "roughly equal to" or "on a par with." To say that *The Batman* (Reeves, 2022) is better than *The Batman: The Long Halloween* (Loeb & Sale, 1996–1997) is to attribute—rightly or wrongly—comparability between the film and the comic. Correspondingly,

> *x* and *y* are *incomparable* if and only if there is no positive evaluative relation that holds between them.

This definition is satisfied when the only evaluative relations that hold between *x* and *y* are negative (e.g., "*not* better than").

Comparability and incomparability alike always occur with respect to a *covering value*: the specific parameter that governs the putative comparison or lack thereof. Often, covering values are not stated, as in the foregoing example. In contrast, "*The Batman* presents a more satisfying mystery than *The Long Halloween*" contains an explicit statement of a covering value: satisfactoriness as a mystery.

Instead of using "comparability" and "incomparability," some theorists (see Raz, 1986) prefer "commensurability" and "incommensurability." For the purposes of this article, I will again follow Chang in thinking of comparability as an *ordinal* relation (indicating relative position), whereas:

> *x* and *y* are *commensurable* if and only if they can be ranked *cardinally* (according to a precise scale of measurement).

(The corresponding notion of *incommensurability* should be sufficiently obvious.) By these definitions, *x* and *y* can be comparable and incommensurable, but not commensurable and incomparable. I leave the issue of commensurability largely aside because attributions of it in the relevant critical practices are seldom, if ever, encountered.

Lastly, it will be useful to be explicit about *categories*. Following Walton (1970), categories are groupings of artworks with many properties in common (standard features) and few properties that are radically at odds with each other (contrastandard features). Newly created artworks are generally intended by their artists either to belong to an extant well-established category or to be an initial exemplar of a new category. New categories (e.g., webcomics) can arise, and it can become impossible to create new works in old categories (e.g., Golden Age comics). Categories are overlapping, malleable, and, most importantly for our purposes, nested. That is, a very coarse-grained category like visual art has within it medium-grained categories such as comics, which in turn have within them finer-grained categories such as adventure comics, which in turn have within them even finer-grained categories such as Silver Age jungle comics.

3. Critical Evaluation and the Uniqueness Argument

To address comparisons of comics to film adaptations thereof, more needs to be said about evaluation in general, particularly the prominent role of comparison in it. Comics and films would seem to be incomparable (*across* medium-grained categories) unless comics are comparable with comics and films with films (*within* medium-grained categories). Examples of critical comparisons

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of the latter types are easy to come by. Here are two comparisons of Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* series to other comics.[2]

> The likes of *Hulk* and *Venom* give readers a Marvel monster book as well. Not to mention some of DC's own attempts, with the likes of their *Gotham City Monsters* miniseries. However, none of these efforts have matched the consistent quality and unique nature of *Hellboy*, nor the spooky tone the series often takes, often focusing more on action where *Hellboy's* strengths lie in mystery and suspense. (Land, 2022)

> Mike Mignola is an amazing artist, his style was and is unique in the graphic novel field. It pays homage to the simple and clear lines of Jack Kirby, the granddaddy of American superhero comics, but is more gritty and darker. (Theo, n.d.)

And here are two comparisons of film adaptations to each other:

> The Marvel flicks are full of contradictions, of plot holes, of stupid coincidences. But you don't notice because you're having a great time. There's a lot you're willing to overlook if you're having fun (how do the Avengers talk to each other in the first *Avengers* movie (Whedon, 2012) when none of them are wearing earpieces?). *Hellboy* (Marshall, 2019) is not fun. And that makes its many flaws less forgivable. (Hill, 2019)

> [Marshall's *Hellboy*] takes del Toro's mold, adds more cussing, minimizes budget and downgrades the magnificent treatment of monsters which garnered so much adaptive praise in the early 2000s. Honestly, it's something del Toro himself could have markedly improved given the opportunity. Instead, we have to endure another "dark, gritty" reboot gone haplessly awry. (Donato, 2019)

While comparability within medium-grained categories is attributed in these examples, there could be massive error—purporting to find comparability where there are no actual positive evaluative relations. Perhaps even these apparently straightforward comparisons are impossible, dimming the prospects for comparative evaluation across medium-grained categories.

The view that no artworks whatsoever are comparable has enjoyed spates of popularity.[3] According to the primary strategy for defending it, the distinctive nature of art entails that the evaluative standards that are relevant to assessing an artwork are unique to it and do not apply to any other artwork. In effect, there are no covering values that apply to multiple artworks. If there are no such covering values, then all artworks are incomparable, since there can be no positive evaluative relation between any of them. Let us call this the *uniqueness argument*.

The uniqueness argument implies that the attributions of comparability involved in the foregoing quotations are all misplaced. As Stuart Hampshire writes, the critic

> need not look elsewhere and to possible alternatives in making his judgment. On the contrary, his purpose is to lead people *not* to look elsewhere, but to look here, at precisely this unique

[2] *Hellboy* is a tidy source for examples for two reasons. First, the comic series is relatively self-contained, and it is reasonable to expect a reader to be able to be familiar with most or even all of it, unlike what Cook (2013) terms "massive serialized collaborative fictions" like *Hulk* and *Venom*. Second, extant film adaptations by Guillermo Del Toro (2004 and 2008) and Marshall (2019) are quite different from each other, making comparisons among them natural.

[3] See Cohen (2007), Dewey (1934), Hampshire (1954), MacDonald (1954), and Yoos (1967). The position can also be extracted from certain insights of Collingwood (1938), Danto (1981), Davies (1987), and Levinson (1996), though it should be noted that these theorists do not explicitly endorse it, and in some cases, outright contravene it through other claims.

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> object; not to see the object as one of a kind, but to see it as individual and unrepeatable. (1954, 165)

In other words, criticism ought to be non-comparative. It is a mistake to consider the value of a comic or film while deploying the standards relevant to (and, indeed, generated by) any other comic or film.

While conclusive refutation of the uniqueness argument is beyond the scope of this article, I suggest that we should feel deeply uneasy about it. To see why, let us attend to what criticism is and how it works in practice. Theodore Gracyk straightforwardly associates critical evaluation with comparison: "evaluation is fundamentally comparative" (Gracyk, 2007, 110). In his view, evaluation, unlike mere appreciation, adverts to "a preferred set of properties" (Gracyk, 2007, 112) the presence of which in a work is held up as value-making. In the terminology of the previous section, the use of covering values is baked into the very nature of evaluation, if not appreciation.

Noël Carroll conceives of the critic as "a person who engages in reasoned evaluation of artworks" (Carroll, 2009, 7). For Carroll, a piece of criticism is not "incomplete if after it shows us what is valuable in a work … it does not then go on to say whether or not the work is better or worse than other artworks" (Carroll, 2009, 187). However, Carroll, further cataloging the critic's tools for evaluation as description, contextualization, classification, elucidation, interpretation, and analysis (Carroll, 2009, 85), is at least committed to criticism being abetted by comparison. Imagine the difficulty one would have in, e.g., contextualizing or categorizing a work without comparing it to others.[4]

It might also be argued that even if specific instances of criticism can proceed without comparisons, *good* criticism is comparative. Here we can look back to David Hume, according to whom the standard of taste (used to resolve disputes about the value of artworks) is fixed by the verdicts of the true judges. Hume's solution to the problem of taste is controversial. Nevertheless, he seems to have identified in his characterization of true judges the exact qualities that consumers of art should want critics to have: "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, *perfected by comparison*, and cleared of all prejudice" (Hume, 1996, 147, emphasis added). We expect good criticism to reflect familiarity with a wide range of artworks and a sense of how they relate to each other evaluatively. We want to know whether works with which we are unfamiliar measure up to works with which we are. Time for, e.g., watching films and reading comics is limited and we do not want to waste it on works from which we are unlikely to derive benefits. A critic who never looked elsewhere and to possible alternatives (in Hampshire's words) would be a very poor one indeed, not worth our attention.

The uniqueness argument is not only prescriptive, but radically at odds with the very concept of criticism to which Gracyk, Carroll, and Hume lead us. Critical evaluation appears either to involve comparison essentially, as an important part of its goal, or as a normative ideal. Accordingly and unsurprisingly, actual criticism is saturated with comparisons. To treat artworks as unique objects that cannot be compared buries the processes, goals, and reasons for seeking criticism. It is hard to see, absent extraordinarily strong considerations to the contrary, how this would be justified. And if critical practices and the felt need for comparative reviews are not blithely dismissed, then the central idea behind the uniqueness argument—that artworks generate their own unique critical standards that ought to provide the sole criteria for evaluation—is suspect.

But what resources are critics using when they attribute comparability among works in medium-grained categories like film and comics? The answer reveals how such comparisons can proceed, a further flaw with the uniqueness argument, and a way to underwrite comparability *across* categories (notably of film adaptations to source comics).

[4]Further support can be found in Walton's "Categories of Art," in which two out of the four factors identified as relevant to categorization are comparative (Walton, 1970, 357–358).

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Comparisons of films to films and comics to comics within critical practices are connected to our recognition of covering values. Films and comics alike tend to be valuable (or disvaluable) because categories of art, regardless of grain, tend to share clusters of properties that we interpolate into covering values. The existence of common covering values removes a significant barrier to comparative evaluation. After all, if two comics (or films) are valuable due to the same properties, to the extent that those properties can be identified and amounts thereof assessed ordinally, it makes sense that those comics (or films) can themselves be comparatively ranked, though there are two complications that this suggestion involves.

The first complication is raised by Bruce Vermazen (1975) and George Dickie (1988). Even when all the relevant covering values are shared, they argue, two works are incomparable if a Pareto principle is not satisfied:

> For x and y to be comparable, x must be superior to or equal to y with respect to every covering value that x and y share.

If one comic is superior to another in terms of one covering value but inferior in terms of another, those comics would be incomparable. Applied to our main topic, it might be pointed out that in all likelihood, source comics will be superior to film adaptations in some ways and inferior in others, undermining the possibility of their comparability.

The second complication is that comparability seems to break down among works whose value is derived from heterogenous sets of properties. Perhaps members of very fine-grained categories are likely to share covering values: that would explain why it is relatively easy to engage in (and to find, in critical practices) evaluative comparisons of, e.g., superhero comics to superhero comics and autobiographical comics to autobiographical comics. But when the grain broadens, or comparisons are made across rather than within fine-grained categories, the covering values are likely to be more diverse. That would explain why it is harder to engage in (and to find) comparisons of superhero comics to autobiographical comics, let alone comparisons across medium-grained categories.[5]

And yet: critics compare film adaptations to source comics anyway. Here are two representative examples.

> Despite featuring an all-time comics creation that is the gold standard for creator-owned comic books, and one that has thrived outside of Marvel and DC Comics' mainstream for a quarter-century, the new *Hellboy* movie (Marshall, 2019) is pretty dull at times. The film gets it right visually, but the joy of taking in the chopped-off devil horns and indestructible right hand of a character that should be having a much better time in Hollywood is drowned out by dialogue that's about as deep as one of Peppa Pig's muddy puddles…. The good news, if there is any, is that the major plot points of [*Hellboy* comic] "The Wild Hunt" are everywhere in this new cinematic adventure. It's a panel-for-panel adaptation at times. But it's still not enough. (Bettencourt, 2019)

> One thing the [*Hellboy*] movie (Del Toro, 2004) definitely does better comes in a moment when an important character dies. The movie treats the character with respect and both our protagonist's and the audience's hearts are broken. In the comic, the character just dies and everybody moves on, which in context just feels wrong and unreasonably cold. (Bragdon, 2021)

Critical comparisons like these are, to be sure, more unusual than comparisons within narrower categories. Critics—at least professional ones—are hired to focus on a specific artform like comics

[5]For a version of this point in the context of popular music, see Gracyk (2007, 120–122). Gracyk's term for a diversity of covering values is being "multifunctional," but the overall conclusion about comparability is similar.

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or film, and their work reflects their focus. Given the proliferation of contemporary popular arts, it is challenging for a critic to be expert enough in multiple categories to be able to make fruitful and informed comparisons across them. And there are simply fewer film adaptations to compare to comic sources than there are comics to compare to comics and films to compare to films. But another potential explanation looms: most, if not all, critics recognize that source comics and film adaptations are incomparable based on implicit recognition of the violation of the Pareto principle and the problem of diverse covering values.

4. How Comparisons Work

The uniqueness argument targets the comparability of any artworks whatsoever. I argued that critical practices need to be taken seriously, and that when they are, the uniqueness argument should be rejected. Even so, comparability among artworks could be limited: comics are comparable to comics and films to films, but not source comics to film adaptations. Attention to how comparisons within medium-grained categories proceed reveals, however, that comparison is not limited—at least not in this particular way.

First, though, a point about consistency. If attention to critical practices is decisive against the uniqueness argument, or at least shifts the burden of proof, then it ought to have the same impact when considering comic-to-film adaptations. Attributions of comparability need to be taken just as seriously if they range across medium-grained categories as they do if they occur within medium-grained categories. Because it is inconsistent to hold, without good reasons to the contrary, that comparability breaks down in the former but not the latter, caution needs to be taken. At the same time, it is vital not to ignore the relative rarity with which comparability is attributed between comics and films. While it is possible to explain the rarity without adverting to incomparability, we must also recognize that rarity motivates the incomparability explanation: if comics and films were incomparable, rare comparisons between them are exactly what we would expect. Holding up a few examples from critical practices will be helpful in demonstrating comparability, but more needs to be said as well about the evaluative process that underwrites them.

A particular set of comparisons within medium-grained categories shares a feature that points to the comparability of source comics and film adaptations. Take another, closer look at one of the pieces of comics criticism quoted earlier:

> The likes of *Hulk* and *Venom* give readers a Marvel monster book as well. Not to mention some of DC's own attempts, with the likes of their *Gotham City Monsters* miniseries. However, none of these efforts have matched the consistent quality and unique nature of *Hellboy*, nor the spooky tone the series often takes, often focusing more on action where *Hellboy's* strengths lie in mystery and suspense. (Land, 2022)

Land specifies not only respects in which *Hellboy* is superior to the other comics (being spooky, mysterious, and suspenseful) but also respects in which it is inferior (being action-packed).[6] As such, her evaluation violates the aforementioned Pareto principle. Yet Land clearly does not believe that these comics are incomparable. To the contrary, *Hellboy* is better overall than *Hulk* and *Venom* in virtue of its "consistent quality and unique nature" (the latter term, I take it, does not imply a connection to the uniqueness argument, but refers to *Hellboy*'s originality).

[6]Strictly speaking, Land is not comparing specific *Hellboy* issues or storylines to those in *Hulk* or *Venom*, but the series to each other. Series individuation is a tricky problem that few have taken up, though if Cook (2011) is right, a series is itself a comic that has comics as parts—so Land is still comparing comics to each other. How one settles series individuation has implications for comparing series without comparing all of the parts (as Land seems to be doing), comparing parts across series or parts of one series to a whole comic (as I will do later in this section), and comparing parts (e.g., individual issues) within a series.

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Pace earlier arguments, Land's attribution of comparability should not be dismissed. But then how is it—or even how could it be—possible? The best available answer, as I have argued elsewhere (2012b) is that she is not only ranking the comics with respect to specific lower-order properties, but also comparing those properties themselves with respect to higher-order covering values. How does this work? Suppose for the sake of simplicity that the properties cited in the foregoing passage exhaust those that contribute to the value of these comics. Being spooky, mysterious, suspenseful, and action-packed are the lower-order properties that figure in Land's evaluation. In offering her overall comparative evaluation, Land is considering tacitly not only the quantities of each of those properties that each comic bears, but qualitatively ranking them: how does each property contribute to other, more general properties that range over them—higher-order properties that themselves contribute to the even higher-order property of value-as-a-comic? For Land (rightly or wrongly—the issue is not whether her critical verdict is correct, but about how it is possible), being mysterious, suspenseful, and spooky contributes more strongly to the higher-order properties that constitute value-as-a-comic (whatever that turns out to be) than being action-packed.

It is important that what underwrites the possibility of Land's comparison also makes possible comparability across, rather than merely within, categories of various grains. Earlier, I referenced the difficulty and rarity of comparing superhero comics to autobiographical comics—comparisons that cross fine-grained categories. Not only does difficulty and rarity not equate with incomparability, but the rarity is readily explained and the difficulty is largely overstated.

Rarity is arguably due to the corresponding rarity of the choice situation in which cross-category comparisons are useful. As mentioned earlier, professional critics are generally hired to render judgments only about works within a specific category, and most of their expertise concerns that category. And, anecdotally, consumer choice frequently slides over cross-categorical comparisons, prioritizing selection of a category itself (e.g., "I want to watch a horror movie tonight") and then considering which work within that category to experience (requiring comparisons only within categories, e.g., "Should I watch *Slumber Party Massacre II* or *Return of the Aliens: The Deadly Spawn*?"). Note that these critical and consumer practices are all contingent: critics could have been frequently called on to engage in cross-category comparisons and consumers could frequently put themselves in cross-category choice situations. If these practices had developed differently, any current real-world trepidations about such comparisons would likely have not been felt.

Now to confront the difficulty of cross-category comparisons. DC Comics' New 52: *Grifter* #1 (2011), written by Nathan Edmondson and drawn by CAFU, is a superhero comic widely savaged by critics and readers. For example, Hugh Armitage writes that it is "a mess of an introduction," that it is "difficult to care about the core character," that the drawing is sometimes "ruined by sloppy and lazy work," and that "new readers will be left confused and disinterested" (Armitage, 2011). By way of contrast, Alison Bechdel's autobiographical *Fun Home* (2006) is widely acclaimed, appearing on many best-of lists and penetrating the public sphere to a degree that relatively few comics achieve. Writes Sean Wisely, *Fun Home* is "a pioneering work, pushing two genres (comics and memoir) in multiple new directions, with panels that combine the detail and technical proficiency of R. Crumb with a seriousness, emotional complexity and innovation completely its own" (2006). Bechdel's work in *Fun Home* is "so absorbing you feel you are living in her world" (Wisely, 2006).

Evaluating *Grifter* #1 and *Fun Home* comparatively is eminently possible and not remotely difficult, despite membership in different fine-grained categories: *Grifter* #1 is a much worse comic (a medium-grained category) by far. This is a specific case of what Chang terms a "nominal-notable" comparison (Chang, 1997, 14–15), wherein something particularly bad is compared to something particularly good. Nominal-notable comparisons are even straightforward across categories of a coarser grain. *Grifter* #1 is a much worse artwork (a very coarse-grained category) than various artworks in medium-grained categories other than comics, such as novels (e.g., Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*), music (e.g., The B-52 s' "Rock Lobster") and, notably for our purposes, film (e.g., Jordan Peele's *Get Out*).

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Nominal-notable comparisons across categories are possible on two grounds. The first is the existence of common lower-order covering values. On close inspection, Armitage's evaluation of *Grifter* #1 and Wisely's evaluation of *Fun Home* (while not themselves directly comparative) advert to sets of lower-order covering values that are not entirely distinct. Both refer, for instance, to the quality of the drawing and to the reader's emotional engagement with the comics. When comics share these or other lower-order covering values, their comparability will be abetted, regardless of fine-grained category membership. If comics and films share lower-order covering values, the same point holds.

The second ground for the possibility of cross-category nominal-notable comparisons was raised already: the existence of higher-order covering values to which lower-order covering values contribute to various degrees. At least some of whatever properties make the notable artworks in the foregoing good are different from whatever properties make nominal artworks like *Grifter* #1 bad, but those lower-order covering values are themselves comparable with respect to higher-order covering values such as value-as-a-comic or artistic value in general. Nominal-notable cases show us that the lower-order covering values used to evaluate comics can be comparable to the lower-order covering values used to evaluate films, and that each can contribute to higher-order covering values that we can use to compare source comics to film adaptations thereof.

We are now positioned to further diagnose the flaws with the uniqueness argument, which depends on the claim that no artworks have common covering values. For lower-order covering values, this is false: for instance, multiple comics derive part of their value from the quality of the drawing. And even when lower-order covering values differ across artworks (whether within or across categories), comparability can occur when higher-order covering values incorporate comparative weighing of lower-order covering values, as we see in cross-category nominal-notable comparisons and other comparisons that violate the Pareto principle.[7]

5. Covering Values

Provided that the comparability of source comics and film adaptations is established, we should consider what can be said about the specific covering values used to compare them. I want to be clear that this section is not an exhaustive treatment, since critical practices are diverse, complex, and malleable. Nonetheless, there seem to be some plausible candidates, currently and prominently in use, for covering values common to comics and film.

As a start, we can think about covering values that range over comics. I have argued at some length elsewhere (Pratt, 2023, 140–148) that there are four general groupings of value-making properties of comics, each of which contributes to varying degrees of valuable reader experiences.

1. Narrative value, constituted by properties relevant to the effectiveness of a comic's storytelling.
2. Pictorial value, constituted by properties relevant to a comic's visual appearance.
3. Historical value, constituted by properties relevant to the conditions of a comic's origin, its influence, and its intertextuality.
4. Referential value, constituted by properties that relate a comic to factual and normative aspects of the actual world.[8]

Each of these covering values applies equally well to film; a few comments should suffice to drive the point home.

[7]For a further criticism of the Pareto principle in comparisons of artworks, see Pratt (2012b).

[8]This list is not intended to be exhaustive. There could be further covering values that range over both source comics and film adaptations, such as value connected to a work's use of language.

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Perhaps not all comics are narrative; certainly, not all films are. However, in the most prominent cases, the comics that are adapted into film are narrative, and the films into which they are adapted are also narrative.[9] For narrative source comics and adaptations, assessing the comparative success of the narratives is natural. It is common (if not universally accepted) in narratology to distinguish between *story* and *discourse*.[10] The former is the events within a storyworld that a narrative presents, roughly, the plot. The latter is the way in which a narrative relates those events—the telling of the plot. Story can be evaluated regardless of artform, and even if comics and film *qua* artforms have different discursive techniques available for telling stories (see Pratt, 2023, chap. 5), it should be possible to evaluate comparatively how well these techniques are used in each.

The source comics that have been adapted into films are also (to my knowledge) all pictorial, as are their film adaptations.[11] Indeed, it is common in comics criticism to evaluate the quality of the pictorial art (e.g., drawing, inking, coloring, lettering, tabular layout); it is common in film criticism to evaluate the quality of the cinematography (e.g., composition, focus, lighting, camera angles, camera movement, exposure, color grading). As both sets of features concern the artistry of a work's visual appearance, they stack nicely against each other and provide a second common covering value.

Some have argued on formalist grounds that historical and referential properties are irrelevant to artistic (or at least aesthetic) value. That is, these properties are not manifested in the artwork itself: to study them is to go outside the artwork and engage in history, biography, ethics, and the like. Refutation of formalist approaches to comics evaluation is too ambitious to undertake here (for more, see Pratt, 2023, 145–146), but suffice it to say that formalism commits the familiar error of running roughshod over central practices of critical evaluation and comparison. Comics and film critics alike are interested in originality, influences, and allusion (historical properties). Likewise, they are interested in realism—relative to genre norms[12]—and sensitive to moral offense (referential properties). *Ceteris paribus*, a film adaptation that is deemed by a critic to be less successful with respect to these properties than a source comic will be deemed to be worse, a conclusion that depends on attributions of comparability.

All this is to say that there are covering values that comics and films share that can ground their comparability. It might be noticed, however, that we are concerned not just with comparisons between comics and films but between source comics and film adaptations. Such comparisons do not merely consist in the evaluation of a source comic as a comic and its film adaptation as a film. Those evaluations are important, but critics are also interested—perhaps even *primarily* interested—in how well the latter adapts the former, which involves a covering value particular to adaptations: fidelity.

Whether fidelity is indeed relevant to comparative evaluation of adaptations is a matter of debate, which cannot be settled here. Some dismiss considerations of fidelity on the grounds that it unduly privileges the source, which will always be better at being itself than the adaptation can.[13] Nonetheless, as Paisley Livingston contends, "questions pertaining to fidelity are inevitable in any appreciation of adaptation as such" (Livingston, 2010, 112). If Livingston means that critics will

[9]As Davis points out, in the early twentieth century, many films based on comics "exist so that we may enjoy seeing a character we had previously known only as a static, drawn image become a moving, photorealistic image" (2017, 4). If these non-narrative films are adapted from narrative source comics, then the narrative value of the latter will obviously be higher in comparison.

[10]The distinction between story and discourse is due to Chatman (1978), and parallels the distinction made by the Russian formalists between *fabula* and *sjuzet*.

[11]I hold that comics is essentially pictorial (2023, 45–49), but take no stand here on whether film is. Interestingly, there are extant audiobook readings of comics (e.g., Maia Kobabe's *GenderQueer*) that are non-pictorial. It is unclear to me whether these are adaptations, but if so, the pictorial value of the "source" comic will obviously be higher.

[12]See Hazlett and Uidhir (2011).

[13]See Mitaine et al. (2015, 12).

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almost invariably employ fidelity in any comprehensive evaluation of an adaptation, he is surely correct. Given the prevalence of fidelity talk in criticism, which specific questions is the critic to ask, and what should they do to find the answers?

We might start by attending to what adaptations are supposed to accomplish. To that end, Geoffrey Wagner helpfully distinguishes between three types of adaptation: *transpositions*, *commentaries*, and *analogies*.[14]

In transpositions, the source is "given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference" (Wagner, 1975, 222). "Motion comics," in which the panels of a source comic (generally with text removed) are sequentially shown in video form with sound effects and voice-over, are extreme examples, as is *Sin City* (Rodriguez & Miller, 2005). Many contemporary comics adaptations trade in transposition to a lesser degree—recall Bettencourt's claim that Marshall's *Hellboy* film is "a panel-for-panel adaptation *at times*" (2019, emphasis added).

To the extent that an adaptation is a transposition, the critic is invited to consider fidelity rather directly, as the entire goal of the adaptation is to reproduce the source as closely as possible. A framework established by P.D. Magnus to make sense of cover songs can be usefully ported here. Mimic covers (for which the aim is to sound just like the original recording) and transposition adaptations alike are to be evaluated according to what Magnus calls, with a hat tip to Lydia Goehr, the "ideal of perfect compliance" (Magnus, 2022, 57), though what it is to comply will, of course, differ substantially depending on the specific media at issue.[15]

In commentaries, the source is "taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect… when there has been a different intention on the part of the filmmaker, rather than infidelity or outright violation" (Wagner, 1975, 224). In analogies, a "fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art" is undergone (Wagner, 1975, 226). The boundary between commentaries and analogies is at the least epistemically vague: it might be difficult to determine whether an adaptation is making a statement about its source by means of the play between similarities and alterations, or whether an adaptation merely uses its source as inspiration. Films that attempt to exploit comics-style devices like panels and non-diegetic text—such as Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003) and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (O'Malley, 2010)—obviously take comics as inspiration, but also seem to be saying something about comics itself.[16] By way of contrast, the films of the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) do not seem to be commenting much, if at all, on the comics from which their characters (and some plot elements) are drawn, but rather are using those comics as a jumping-off point for blockbuster action.

To the extent that an adaptation is a commentary or analogy, another ideal can be usefully ported from Magnus's discussion of rendition covers (which result from aims other than duplication of the original recording): the "ideal of rewarding deviation" (Magnus, 2022, 59). Magnus points out that in evaluating rendition covers, whatever remains of compliance with the original is still an interpretive choice, and as such is critically relevant. But deviation is also relevant—not merely that any deviation is a bad-making feature (as is the case for mimic covers), but that deviations can be good-making features when cover songs shift the meaning or genre of the original in such a way as to give the cover its own distinctive positive value. Just so with commentaries and analogies: there, the relation between a film adaptation and a source comic is to be understood not merely in

[14]Wagner is writing about non-pictorial literature being adapted into film, but his typology generalizes appropriately. Andrew (1980, 10–11) advances a similar classification of adaptations as borrowing, intersection, and transformation, with similar implications.

[15]Cowling and Cray (2022, 289–291) also note the similarity between assessing adaptations and assessing covers.

[16]An excellent example of this phenomenon in the other direction is the film-to-comic "adaptation" (the film does not exist, so it is not really an adaptation) at the end of Tom Scioli and John Barber's *Transformers vs. G.I. Joe* (2017): a hilarious commentary on the way that film adaptations of comics smooth out nuance and force their sources into a radically different format.

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terms of a direct comparison of compliance—strict fidelity—but in terms of what the adaptation does that is new, different, distinctive.

And yet further complexity looms. A film adaptation can simultaneously be a transposition, a commentary, and an analogy, because, as Cowling and Cray point out, "there is no such things as fidelity *tout court*" (2022, 288). Various theorists have noted the following (intricately related, potentially overlapping) types of fidelity, and there are probably more yet to be explored.

1. Pictorial fidelity (see Lefevre, 2008, 12; Pratt, 2012a, 158). How does a film adaptation convey the static (typically drawn) pictures constitutive of a source comic by means of the moving image?
2. Formal fidelity (Pratt, 2023, 121–122). How are effects produced by a source comic's tabular organization (page layouts and page turns) transitioned to a filmic image fixed in one space with a typically static aspect ratio?
3. Story fidelity (see Harold, 2018, 94).[17] Are the propositions constitutive of the source's narrative events preserved by the film adaptation?
4. Discourse fidelity. Are the events of the source comic's story linked together in the same way and order in the film adaptation?
5. World fidelity (Cowling & Cray, 2022, 288). Does the film adaptation adequately preserve the storyworld of the source comic (i.e., the fictional truths of the source comic not limited to the plot elements)?
6. Character fidelity (see Cowling & Cray, 2022, 288; Davis, 2017, 3; Harold, 2018, 94). To what extent does a film adaptation preserve the central properties of the characters that appear in source comics?
7. Theme fidelity (Cowling & Cray, 2022, 283–284; Harold, 2018, 94). Is the general subject of the source comic conveyed in the film adaptation?
8. Spirit/mood fidelity (Harold, 2018, 94; McFarlane, 1996, 8–9). Is the affective "feel" and artistic vision of the source comic transmitted to the film adaptation?

Some adaptations, such as *Sin City* (2005), have a high degree of each of these types, but generally, the degrees of fidelity will be mixed. Consider again the *Hellboy* adaptations as case studies. In Del Toro's two films, all the types of fidelity come and go. Sometimes images and compositions are, as Del Toro says in the DVD commentary track, "Mignolaesque"—panels and designs are transposed from the comic—but more often, the pictorial and formal style reflects Del Toro's own visual sensibilities, to the extent that the expressionist and gothic spirit/mood of Mignola's comics becomes almost entirely absent. The story of the first movie borrows the comic's "Seed of Destruction" plotline in its main elements, but adds significant characters, changes a major monster, and so on; the second movie transposes almost no story directly from the comics (which is sufficient, though not necessary, for low discourse fidelity as well). One critic puts it, "These movies aren't exactly accurate representations of their source material, only adapting the broad strokes of Mignola's stories as they focus on character moments and apocalyptic shenanigans" (Luiz, 2022).

In the Del Toro movies, Hellboy, portrayed by Ron Perlman, mostly looks the part (pictorial *and* character fidelity), but has boots instead of hooves, not to mention regular human proportions. The movie character, however, is more boisterous and huggable, reducing character fidelity severely. The second movie more than the first explores two prominent themes of the comic—a monster finding belonging in a world hostile to him, and the passing away of a wilder, beautiful, magical, and

[17]Harold (2018) argues that story fidelity is not relevant to the value of the adaptation as it is not an artistic achievement. Though I cannot defend the point here, I am including story fidelity as a relevant critical consideration on the grounds that since media have significant effects on storytelling capacities, transferring a story into different media can, in fact, be an artistic achievement.

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dangerous past—but both movies emphasize themes that are handled very differently, if at all, in the comic (fatherhood, romance).

Marshall's critically savaged *Hellboy* film has its own distinctive relationship to the comics. Many aspects smack of transposition: Recall Bettencourt's claim that Marshall's *Hellboy* film "gets it right visually" (2019). Indeed, certain characters look very like they do in comics (others, much less so). Much, if not all, of the story and storyworld are taken from the comic's "Wild Hunt" storyline, with other comics storylines shoehorned in (reducing discourse fidelity) as fan service. But if other aspects of the film are intended to be a transposition, they fail radically. Mignola's distinctive pacing and the comic's gothic mood are substituted with a "dark, gritty" vision with ample cursing, washed-out color grading, gore, and inconsistent CGI. This is an extreme, hard rock-soundtracked *Hellboy*, the main theme of which appears to be the importance of *kicking ass*. As Richard Trenholm puts it in a favorable review, "Subtlety is not [Marshall's] strong point, and he's cranking this new version of *Hellboy* up to 11" (2019).

Given differences in different types of fidelity, what positive relation holds between the film adaptations of *Hellboy* and their source comic—or any film adaptation and source comic? Whatever the answer, a responsible critic's process of arriving at it will involve what now appears to be an incredibly complex set of considerations. Films will need to be evaluated as films; comics as comics. Shared covering values will need to be assessed; where absent, lower-order covering values will need to be assessed and qualitatively weighed for their contributions to higher-order covering values. Type of adaptation—transposition, commentary, analogy—will be relevant to overall evaluation of fidelity, but also for fidelity of different types, and it will need to be determined to what extent lack of fidelity is critically relevant.

Despite their complexity, comparisons of source comics to film adaptations, not to mention comparisons of sources to adaptations in general, are commonplace. Neither professional nor amateur critics are likely explicitly to employ or even to have available to them the vocabulary or theoretical resources developed in this article. Nonetheless, evidence drawn from their practices points to a widely shared set of abilities that allows them—or, to put it more broadly, *us*—to do the necessary critical work of sorting the wheat from the chaff.

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