CINEMA AND COMICS
AFFINITIES, DIFFERENCES, AND NEW FORMS OF INTERFERENCE
XV International Film Studies Conference
Udine, March 3-6, 2008

Interest in comparing cinema and comics is not new. At first glance, there are apparent affinities and similarities between them. These two "media" appear to share a similar aim: to tell a story by means of a series of pictures. Both use pictures as their primary form of representation and both take advantage of the inexhaustible possibilities created by linking them through "montage" – understood here in the broad sense of the term. But, although the cinema appears to create series of *continuous* images while comics create series of *contiguous* images, in the end their elective affinity is a superficial one. This is true for more than one reason.

In fact, several systems of expression share the same concern for monstration and montage: the photo novel, photographic reportage, television, web sites, video games, etc. One might very well wonder, therefore, what the real connection between what is called in French the seventh and ninth arts is, especially since their differences appear irreconcilable. To be convinced of this, one need only consider such crucial issues as time, which is fundamental to the way film images advance and are edited together but which, in comics, is only metaphorical, because the reader alone determines the speed at which the images are read. Space in comics is also a major stumbling block to comparing the two media. What we see is, so to speak, always foreseen, to borrow Benoît Peeters' expression (*prévu*), because of the tabular contiguousness of the images on the page. And what is there to be said about the drawn line in comics, which always has a sort of signature effect, whereas filmic monstration is greatly affected by the technology of recording the image.

While the mission of this conference is to re-examine these long-standing comparisons, we are especially interested in considering them in light of a more diverse media landscape than was earlier the case, one that is open to intermedial hybrids which would have been unimaginable a mere twenty or thirty years ago. This openness, reminiscent of the effervescence of the early 20th century, requires us to use more empirical and speculative bases when constructing our models. In this context, we must re-evaluate our initial intuitions and primary categories – time, space, montage, narrative – from a simultaneously historical, aesthetic and cultural perspective. As a way of becoming more attuned to this objective, we might think of a distant and particularly imagistic language: in Chinese, "cinema" is *dian ying* or "electric shadows," while "comics" is *lian huan hua* or "connected pictures". These expressions invite us from the outset to cast off our intellectual habits and the comfort of overly-rigid labels in order to bring more flexibility to our interpretation of the cultural series in question and to open them up to new models.

The following are the principal paths of reflection which might arise from the conference:

Defining cinema, defining comics: a comparative historiography and epistemology of two emerging forms

Cinema and comics have been defined as languages and been the subject of essentialist theories. But what exactly is the status of these issues today, given our awareness of intermedial relationships and the emergence of new epistemologies? Implicitly or explicitly, our definitions change with the field they are meant to contain, to the extent that formulations which would have been beyond reproach twenty or thirty years ago appear to us today to be obsolete, if not incomprehensible. The historian's task is thus not to address the validity of past definitions on the basis of present-day concepts, nor to write the history of a genre using present-day definitions. Wouldn't it more appropriate, instead, to analyse the practices, discourses and documents of each era as a way of recreating, step by step, the *cross-fire* of partial and socially constructed definitions quite different from our own which are found in the artefacts of the past?

The destiny of cinema as graphic novel and the destiny of graphic novel as cinema

The mutual influence of these two media goes beyond mere borrowings of characters and milieux. Just as a comics can be read like a film, so too does the cinema play with the highly stylised approach of comics to movement and the way it connects images – quite apart from the fact that the two art forms depict movement using singular or even perverse forms. What are the complex phenomena of translation and deconstruction at work in this mutual attraction? Haven't the economic relations between cinema and comics, especially since the 1970s, encouraged the convergence of these forms of expression? From Abel Gance's three-screen version of *Napoléon* (1927) to the technique of dividing the screen into several windows, shouldn't we be investigating cinema's propensity to "pigeonholing"? How do films such as Mike Figgis' *Timecode* (2000) and Ang Lee's adaptation of *Hulk* (2003) or the video-game adaptation of *XIII* (Ubisoft, 2003) exacerbate this disposition towards introducing a synchronic reading? It would also be interesting to analyse the way web pages frame moving images. Conversely, we need to look at the phenomenon of movie trailers and filmed versions of comics and at the Flash animation on a site such as *Coconino World* (http://www.coconino-world.com/). Finally, to the extent that cinema and comics are both fertile ground for the attraction, we need to re-examine the conventional view that what these two cultural series essentially have in common is the goal of "telling stories through a series of images".

A significant third perspective

What if the relationship between cinema and comics was better understood through an external paradigm? Wouldn't it make sense to examine the encounter between these two media from the perspective of another significant term, media or art form which played a major role in the 20th century? This could be print media, photography, opera, literature, painting, theatre or the animated film – anything capable of introducing into the cinema/comics equation something that would distinguish them: Pop Art and 1960s comics and their influence on Godard, Antonioni and others; the mosaic style of page layout in illustrated newspapers in the late nineteenth century; the drawings of Eisenstein and Fellini and their connection to caricature and animated films; the the-

atrical model as the guiding metaphor (as opposed to cinema) in the work of Pfeiffer, Copi, Herriman, etc.

The range and spectre of montage: from composition to compositing

Montage, in the cinema, has long been the art of organising a film's shots in time and space. But we must admit that much has changed since the arrival of digital technologies. Non-linear editing software and information and communications tools have transformed the way we think about connecting images. Temporal editing is no longer the only way to organise them. It has become possible to place different images of potentially different sizes and scales on-screen at the same time. Lev Manovich, in *The Language of New Media* (2001), calls this spatial montage. It thus becomes difficult not to look to comics and the whole question of tabular images to understand this kind of montage. How do the concepts of *découpage*, framing and temporal and spatial connecting help us to better delineate the often hybrid practices found in cinema and comics, insomuch as montage, as Manovich remarks, remains the key technology of the twentieth century for creating false realities? Doesn't the concept of spatial montage, which re-introduces the questions of composition and transparency, enable us to revisit, among other things, the famous examples of depth of field in the films of Renoir, Welles and Wyler and to relate them to the stylised depth of field found in comics? In addition, we must focus our attention on the series of digital operations used to employ various sources as a way of creating a seemingly homogeneous compound image. Shouldn't we be thinking about the ways in which different visual layers are fused within a single space? Here, we invite discussion of the entire range of special effects, from the early optical tricks found in *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) to the present-day digital effects of *Star Wars*.

The dizzying heights and graphic destiny of the image

The Chinese expression for cinema, "electric shadows" (*dien ying*), demonstrates the medium's profound affinity with shadow plays, its fixation with strong, emblematic images and its use of silhouettes, projected shadows and graphic compositions, as seen in German Expressionism, the work of Eisenstein and the avant-garde films of the 1920s. The arrival of colour rendered these multilateral relations even more complex. In this sense, cinema could be considered a full-fledged graphic art and a source of inspiration for young drawers today.

Intermedial hybrids: when cinema and comics cross with other cultural series

The connections we make between cinema and comics often rest on such falsely obvious and deeply encrusted forms of media visibility that we forget their complexity and temporary and changing nature. It is thus necessary to broaden and redirect our enquiry into cultural series whose hybridity played a part in the "construction" and transformation of the two media. Comparing cinema and comics thus consists in following the trail of the cultural series which run through them, at times bringing them closer to each other and at others setting them apart. We might think here of the Luna Park vaudeville and the music hall, modes of transportation (cars, trains, etc.), fairy

plays or sports, but also of these two media's relations with current events, news reports from abroad, satire, caricature, story boards, etc.

The neo-baroque and seriality

Cinema and comics enjoy privileged relations with other emerging narrative forms (usually tied to the growth of digital technology): films made up for the most part of special effects, video, hypertext, etc. These new configurations, for example the super-slick images in the film adaptations of *Sin City* (Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez, 2005) and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006), seem to be leading contemporary production in the direction of an aesthetic which, according to Angela Ndalianis in *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (2004), shares a number of traits with the baroque: a distinct taste for intertextual labyrinths, technological virtuosity, going outside the screen and the frame, a fascination with the fragment and repetition, polycentrism and, above all, seriality. So many features and trends to define the parameters of new forms of cultural literacy!

Deadline for paper proposals: October 26, 2007

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