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ISSUE XVII: THE MONTAGE EFFECT

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DIGITAL CINEMA, MONTAGE AND OTHER VISUALITIES

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Digital technology is enabling a reconceptualization of film and cinema. The pliability of digital media opens up, particularly, the theory and practice of montage to revision. This pliability allows for cheap and easy copying and combining of images, and, relatedly, the transition from film frame to digital screen provides a less precious and more flexible creative space for filmmakers. In my documentary, *Comic Book City, Portland, Oregon USA* (2012), I leverage these qualities of digital media to experiment with aspects of both cinematic and comic book visualities to create a different sense of montage than the one historically associated with film.

In film studies and criticism, the term ‘montage’ is used in a number of ways. Generally, the word may simply be a synonym for editing, suggesting nothing more than a series of shots assembled into a desired order. In more particular terms, the word may refer to a dialectical philosophy of editing aimed at creating new meaning from the deliberate juxtaposition of images, or to an aesthetic practice of combining several short shots so as to compress the presentation of information to viewers. Philosophically, montage may also be seen as an alternative to ‘continuity editing.’

Whereas ‘montage’ in this sense works via the differences between edited images, ‘continuity’ functions to smooth out those differences (see Monaco 2000, 216-217 and Clarke and Doel 2007, 598). Whether used more generally or in a more specific manner, the dominant, and historical, practice of montage entails the arrangement of images into a linear sequence such that shots are viewed one after the other in a series.

The dominance of this practice can be related to the relatively fragile, inflexible, and expensive nature of film as a physical medium. These qualities limit, and constitute incentives to limit, the number and nature of cuts that can be effectively made before combining shots (Ganz and Khatib 2006, 24-25). The way in which movies are viewed, or, ‘read,’ by running reels of film through a projector, also influences the dominance of linear sequencing in cinema (Dittmer 2010, 226). As noted in the “Call for Submissions” for the current issue of this journal (<http://geography.arizona.edu/youarehere>), and following Doel and Clarke (2007), cinema, and montage in particular, is not simply a form of art, but is part of the “optical unconscious” that informs how the world is seen and experienced by human geographers and other social

scientists, as well as in everyday encounters, whether in the theater or on city streets (see 893 and 896-897). Dittmer (2010) suggests that human geographers consider comics as a related or alternative 'visuality' for understanding how the world can be encountered as montage.

represents, "a singular moment in time (or nearly singular, usually 1/24 of a second)" (229). The comics 'frame', the panel, by contrast, is "of indeterminate duration" (229). Drawing on, particularly, Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* (2007), Dittmer argues for comics as an

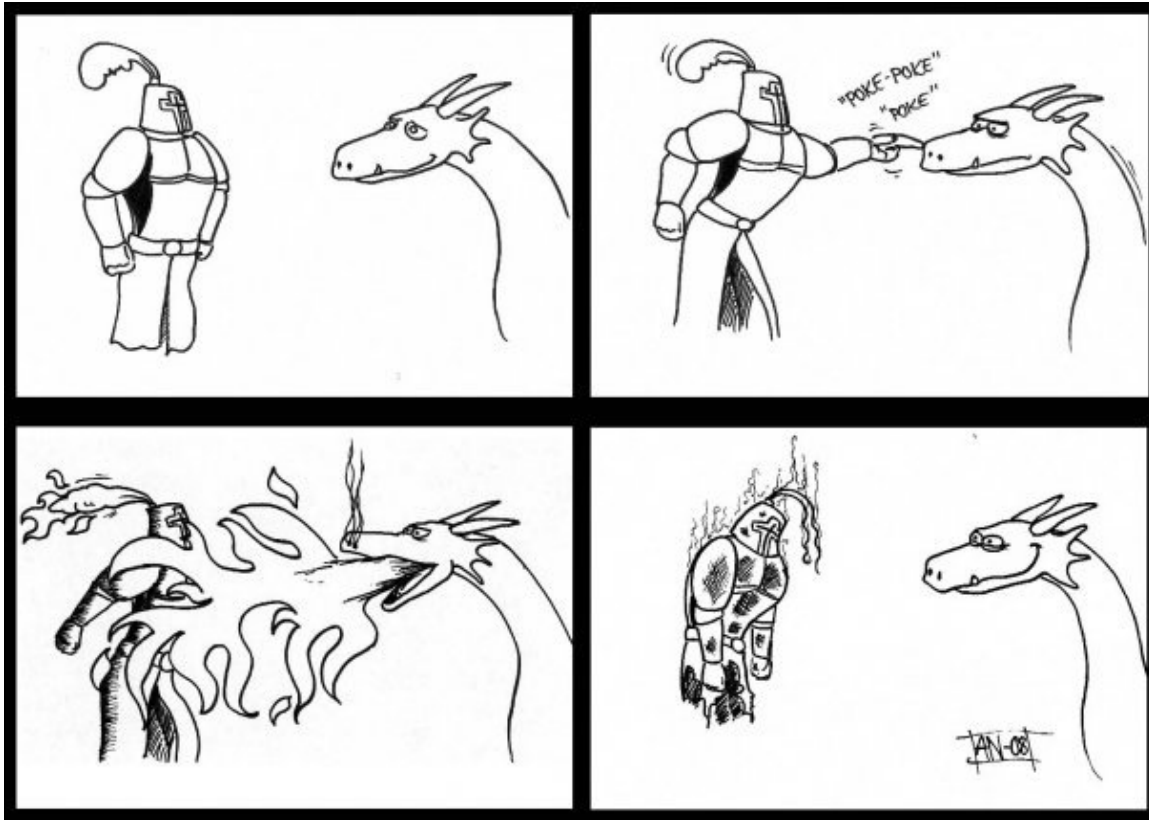


Figure 1: Comics: panel and page, "Knight and Dragon" by Dwarven Architect. [Used here under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 license via <http://dwarvenarchitect.deviantart.com/art/Comic-Knight-and-Dragon-100154955>]

Dittmer notes that, largely due to the aforementioned 'preciousness' of film as a physical medium, the visuality and practice of montage in cinema, and with film, has been limited to, "a certain rigidity of form and standardisation of film speed" (2010, 223). He notes, for example, that the film frame

alternates reference for montage because the form allows for greater, "possibilities of simultaneity and polyphony" (223).

As with film, comics are typically read with an assumption of narrative coherence that leads readers and audiences to construct relationships between different images. With

film, this primarily occurs between shots, or cuts between shots, and in comics this occurs primarily between panels – enclosures of images – laid out on a page. Dittmer argues that reading comics:

nevertheless incorporates a great deal of openness and ambiguity, and producers' expectations for clear transmission of narrative are often unmet, with the potential existing for readers to consume comics in any number of ways in large part because of comics' symbolic openness (225-226).

The quality that gives comics this sense of openness is what Dittmer, following Groensteen, refers to as the medium's 'plurivectoriality' (see 230).

For Groensteen, reading comics occurs on multiple levels, or along multiple lines (hence, 'vector'). As distilled by Dittmer (2010, 230), this process starts with recognition of what drawings represent, moves to deriving meaning from those representations in relation to other panels and images, and ends with an understanding of a whole sequence. In addition to involving these different layers of meaning, this kind of reading is also 'plurivectorial' in the sense that the second level, in particular, often entails reading back-and-forth, or skipping ahead in the narrative, before arriving at the end of a linked sequence. In other words, readers do not read in a single line, but along multiple lines, while still, essentially, reading in a particular order, that is, the relevant sequence is ultimately placed in 'proper' perspective even if the reader

has to break that order to arrive at that point.

Dittmer points out that comics can be seen as a more open medium than even Groensteen allows (2010, 230-231). Readers may, for example, persist in reading a comic 'out of order' without arriving at the 'proper sequencing.' Indeed, with any comic a question can be raised about the very assumption of 'correct' ordering of panels/images. Furthermore, the previously referenced assumption of narrative cohesion may not necessarily be shared equally by readers and authors, or writers and artists. Creators may make comics that are intentionally vague as to where to begin and where to end reading. As Doel (2014) puts it, in a given comic:

- ◆ "There may be any number of sequences in play, such as a sequence of words and a sequence of pictures" (164).
- ◆ "... just because panels are contiguous in space does not necessarily mean that they are contiguous in time" (164).
- ◆ And there may be a number of devices, "that disrupt sequentiality, offering the would-be reader multiple entrances and exits that may short-circuit one another, lead into a labyrinth or give rise to lipogrammatic comics, tabular comics, palindromic comics or some other twisted form" (165).

In both Dittmer (2010) and Doel (2014), comics by Chris Ware (*Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*, Pantheon, 2000, *Building Stories*, Pantheon, 2012) are deployed as concrete examples to demonstrate the potential of a more radicalized understanding of plurivectoriality (or, in the case of Doel, to reject the notion of lines altogether).

If plurivectoriality makes montage in comics different from cinematic or filmic montage, it is due to the way in which the comics form gives readers more control over how to spatially and temporally construct the text during reading. While writers and artists may offer visual, structural, and textual clues or directions on how to read a book, and the shared assumption of narrative coherence may result in shared readings, ultimately, the reader holds the book – or device – in their hands and has agency to order panels and pages, or to spend whatever time on whatever panels and pages, that they want. In a typical film experience, the filmmakers have more control over the ordering and pacing of images, and on the uses of time and space in the film, than do viewers. It is this difference in reader agency that leads Dittmer (2010) to advocate for geographers to also consider the possibilities of comic book visuality alongside the cinematic. However, while such distinctions may be helpful when trying to conceptualize the senses of montage to be derived from these media, as suggested by Doel (2014), it is possible to overstate the formal

differences between comics and film.

What ties together comics and film for Doel is, “their common fate – which, as we have begun to see, concerns their relationship with the void,” that is, from the nothingness that comes from the cut in film and in the ‘gutter’ for comics (2014, 171 and also 175). ‘The gutter’ is a term popularized by Scott McCloud (1994) to refer to the spaces between panels. While McCloud emphasizes the ways in which readers may bring ‘closure’ to these empty, open spaces by reflexively filling in the necessary details, the missing images, to transition from panel-to-panel (1994, 63, 70-72), Dittmer describes the gutter “as an anti-optical void – there is no story to reconstitute in that space, no missing images, only a relationship to be formed in the reader’s mind” (2010, 230). In advance of Doel’s (2014) own writing on comics, film, and ‘the void’, Dittmer references Doel and Clarke’s (2007) emphasis on the relationship between the seen and the unseen in film as a parallel in explaining the gutter, further underscoring the possible relationships or similarities between the two media.

One of the transformative qualities of digital technology for filmmaking is the ability to translate different forms of audio and visual media into, “zeroes and ones, which can flow seamlessly between what were previously discrete areas of production” (Ganz and Khatib 2006, 24). In a broader sense this quality enables “remediation”, or, creative processes where, “the

aesthetic strategies from one medium are recycled into another” (Cossar 2009, 7; see Bolter and Grusin 1999). Putting this into practice with regards to comics and film was one of my purposes in making *Comic Book City*.

In one sense, my documentary is about the connections between people and place and more particularly the connections between Portland, Oregon (USA) and comics creators – primarily writers and artists, but also publishers and editors – many of whom have chosen to live and work in the city since, particularly, the early 1990s. In another sense, the film is an experiment in, and exploration of, the different and complementary temporal and spatial qualities of film and comics. I have previously written on the people and place aspect of the

project for the anthology *Comic Book Geographies* (Huston 2014). My focus here is on the visual design of the documentary.

In editing, I worked by drawing analogies between shots and panels and scenes and pages. These analogies are not perfect – a panel has qualities of a film frame as well as those of a shot, while a page may function like a shot, or a ‘scene’ can extend beyond a page or be limited to a single panel – but as a heuristic device for thinking through how I might employ ‘aesthetic strategies’ from comics in a film, making these comparisons was useful. The shot and the panel are both single, enclosed images that are often conceived, however problematically, as the fundamental units of meaning in their respective media (Dittmer

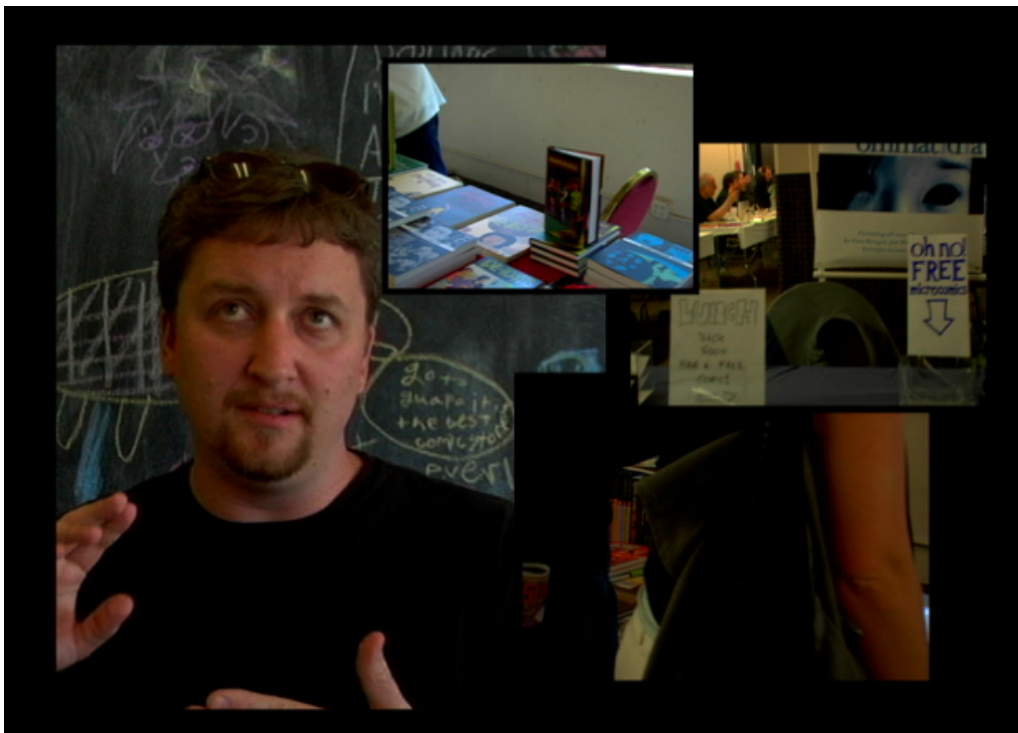


Figure 2: Image from *Comic Book City* featuring writer and artist Kevin Moore.

2010, 228, Monaco 2000, 160). ‘Page’ and ‘scene’ are concepts that I employed more loosely to work through the idea of combining panels/shots into sequences, or series, or collections, of images that could be interrelated by reference to a particular subject or theme. The result is arrangements of images into montages that have qualities of both a film and also a comic.

By way of illustration, you can view an excerpt from the film prepared for use with this article here: <https://vimeo.com/90419482>. You can also view the film in its entirety, as well as longer excerpts from here: <http://vimeo.com/album/2278357>. For more immediate reference, see Figure 2.

As demonstrated here and in the linked clip, by giving viewers multiple images to read simultaneously, particularly throughout the running time of the film, and not just in the context of a brief split screen or other cinematic effect, I open up the documentary to the kind of plurivectorial reading that Dittmer (2010) ascribes to comics. At the same time, because I was engaged in remediating comics to film, there are limits to the extent to which the documentary works like a comic. The appearance of shots/panels on screen is up to my discretion, and was driven by practical and aesthetic considerations such as movement between themes, a subject’s speech rhythms and length of comment on a topic, and visual matching to other cuts, rather than elected by

readers/viewers to the same extent it might be in an actual comic book. I was attentive to the analog of the comics page such that I sought to provide opportunities for readers to order and reorder images visually, but the same considerations for movement and rhythm and matching, all practices and codes associated with film and cinema, means that viewers are not afforded the same control over duration that they would with a comic.

The various collections of images I have assembled in the film often exhibit no obvious connection to each other. The images are frequently from different source media – digital still photos, video, artwork from various file formats – have distinct subjects, and serve different purposes, some denotative, some connotative. As underscored by Dittmer (2010), like a comics artist, I rely on the reader’s assumption of coherence, to make these collections work narratively. My film engages viewers particularly at Groensteen’s second level of meaning, where images are given sense in relationship to other images and, in this case, to what my informants are saying. Unlike a in a comic, the timing of any given shot/panel often provides a direct reference for making meaning, that is, the image appears in concert with a particular statement from an interview. At the same time, but also unlike in a comic, that moment often passes quickly; in other cases, I am able to hold on an image, or images, while an informant discusses a particular topic for an

extended period. These latter instances are where the film scenes begin to function more like a comics page.

The visual disjunctures and simultaneity of images in the film demonstrate Doel and Clarke's (2007) assertion that, with film and in cinema, "every combination of images bear witness to the Open" (899), that is, to the never-ending multiplicity of meanings that could be made from the 'non-sense' created by the act of cutting a shot before combining it with another in an attempt "to withdraw sense from non-sense" (899). In the same way, particularly set against a black background as in the featured still, the film's 'pages' show comics in Doel's (2014) terms, as a medium that "presents a constellation of stills suspended in the void" (162). By bringing different shots together on a 'page', separated by 'anti-optical' emptiness, my visual design for the documentary can be seen as demonstrating the "voiding" of images via cut and gutter (Doel 2014, 162; see also Doel and Clarke 2007, 905).

The fluidity of digital media is what allowed me to experiment with these different forms of montage in *Comic Book City*. While the manipulable qualities of digital film is associated most frequently with CGI, or computer generated imagery, and the transformation of mise-en-scène (see Cossar 2009, 10), here I was not altering what's in the frame, but the frame itself through changes in image size, aspect ratio, and cropping. By combining multiple images to

be viewed at once, there is no longer a frame marking the 'seen and unseen', but *frames* creating simultaneous, "spatially and temporally contiguous" 'unseens' (Doel and Clarke 2007, 905) in a way that is both cinematic and also like a comic book (Dittmer 2010, 234-235).

In digital cinema the frame becomes more of a suggestion than a limit. The primary creative space is no longer the frame, but the screen, which is where the filmmaker assembles and shapes their images – their data – without the physical constraints imposed by analog film (Ganz and Khatib 2006, 24). In my non-linear editing program, the space on the screen where I can see the film as it comes together is the 'canvas', a term that suggests an association with arts like painting, illustration, or comics, where images are composed on a surface rather than in a space, which is the traditional task of the filmmaker (Monaco 2000, 187).

In practice, a filmmaker employing digital technology will, at some level, first compose for the frame before composing on the screen, but, following Cossar (2009), "Digital cinema ... recontextualizes the notion of production and workflow and thus leads to spatial and stylistic shifts with regards to screen shape. As Manovich asserts, 'production just becomes the first stage of post-production' for new media and digitextual products" (11). In my own experience, while shooting video footage, I was always thinking about how I might want to alter the image in editing. This meant leaving

space in the frame for later cropping and re-orienting. The frame is not irrelevant here, but neither is it absolute.

As Dittmer (2010) suggests, my purpose here is not to supplant one form of visibility for another, but to experiment with different ways of seeing:

... if, as Doel and Clarke (2007) argue, cinematic montage is the foundation of academic geography's 'optical unconscious', what insights might be gained by emphasizing the specific qualities of comic books' montage? ... What new geographies can the possibilities of simultaneity and plurivectorial narration of comics help us envision (234).

In *Comic Book City* I demonstrate a third possibility, one that has qualities of both the more directed and 'linear montage' of film and also that of, "the more open comics page and the multiple paths through its frames" (Dittmer 2010, 235). A persistent theme in theories about montage and human geography is that of the multiplicity of possibilities for seeing, or combining images of, the world. To enact that multiplicity will require continued experimentation with different forms of visibility and practices of montage.

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