

PALA 2018 Conference Proceedings**Frames or Panels: Medium and Narrative Engagement in Films and Comics**

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Abstract

Compared to other narrative media, comics have historically received little attention from the academic community. Those scholars that do consider comics often do so in comparison to film. This has resulted in a number of conflicting claims on the capacity of comics for narrative engagement in relation to its formal properties. This exploratory study addresses the way in which these formal properties impact readers' responses in terms of transportation, emotional involvement, identification, and aesthetic engagement through a comparative mixed methods design that contrasts narrative engagement within comics and film. Participants (N = 211) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform, presented with either a short film or a comic adaptation of said film, and asked to record their responses to the stimulus on a series of Likert scales and a set of open questions. Quantitative analysis revealed there was no noteworthy difference in narrative engagement between the film and comic group. Qualitative analysis indicated both the cognitive engagement associated with comics' static, sequential nature and the iconic and non-realistic visual style of narrative drawings as relevant to overall audience responses, marking these as rich topics of further research. Results also suggested the personal attitudes of readers regarding comics may deeply affect their levels of engagement with the medium. Finally, while transmedial comparisons can provide useful contrasts, comparisons that present either film or comics as more effective in engaging audiences than the other are considered unproductive in furthering our understanding of either medium.

Keywords: Comics, Film, Transmedial Narratology, Neuroaesthetics, Narrative Engagement

1. Introduction

Compared to film and literature, comics have received scant attention from the academic community, particularly in English-speaking circles. Whether due to disdain for comics as products of popular culture rather than artistic or literary endeavours (Meskin & Cook, 2012), their association with children's entertainment, parodic caricature, and underground smut (Magnussen & Christiansen, 2000), comics went either ignored or were lumped together with literature and film studies.

While this view has changed in recent years, following the publication of McCloud's famous *Understanding Comics* and, to a lesser extent, Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, it is still common to see comics be compared to other media rather than discussed as independent topic of research. In particular, much of the academic writing on comics considers the medium in relation to film. Most often, comics do not fare well in these comparisons; Christiansen (2000), for example, claims that the drawn nature of comics makes them particularly poor tools for creating character engagement as readers are reminded of the existence of the artist through the drawing, whereas film has the benefit of direct engagement through the immediacy of its audiovisual nature as well as the emotional contagion that follows the viewing of an actor's face and body (see also Plantinga, 2009). Contending claims also exist; for example, McCloud (1993) argues that comics are especially engaging *because* of their drawn nature, as its stylized drawings invite readers to subconsciously project details with reference to themselves, enhancing identification.

These arguments imply a belief that certain aspects of the narrative experience are, to a degree, medium dependent. This belief follows Bordwell's understanding of the narrative experience as constructed by audiences through an interpretative process based on their comprehension of the plot or narrative events, and the way in which these events are presented through the narrative medium (1985). In this view, different media have different formal affordances, as the same plot must be told differently depending on the stylistic and technical properties of the medium.

Questions following such a view on the medium specificity or medium independence of aspects of the narrative experiences are central to transmedial narratology (Thon, 2016). This field seeks to investigate narratological concepts, approaches, and processes that may be relevant to a range of media, rather than only a single medium. Aside from the problems that follow from confusing the idiosyncrasies of individual texts for features of a medium, the main challenge for transmedial theory is to strike a balance between the idea that there is no overlap at all in the way narratives are interpreted across different media, a stance known as media

relativism, and the idea that narrative interpretation is the same across all media, regardless of formal differences, a stance known as media blindness (Ryan, 2004). When making transmedial comparisons, then, it is of prime importance to acknowledge the middle ground between these positions, and to recognize that “stories are shaped, but not determined by their presentational formats” (Thon, 2016, p. 22).

How then, do the formal properties of comics shape narrative experiences of readers as opposed to viewers of films, and to what extent is there value in the claims made about the capacity for films and comics to engage interpreters? The goal of this study is to delve into these questions through an experimental study of the effect of the formal properties of comics on various forms of narrative engagement, addressing the lack of empirical grounding for the speculative statements put forth by scholars in the field. Comics will be considered from a cognitive narratological perspective in a comparative research design. Participants will either watch a short film or read a short comic based on the same film and record their levels of narrative engagement through a mixed method survey. The results will serve to consider the following research questions:

Is there a difference in the degree to which readers of comics become transported in a narrative compared to film viewers?

Is there a difference in the extent to which comic readers care about characters in a narrative compared to film viewers?

Is there a difference in the aesthetic experience with a narrative between comic readers and film viewers?

In spite of its comparative design, the purpose of this study is not to establish which is the better medium – film or comics. Nor is it to purport a media deterministic view of the working of comics. Rather, the intent is to explore how audiences might relate and respond to a comic, while using responses to a similar film as point of reference to offset potential differences. At the same time, this design enables further discussion of the conflicting statements about comics’ ability to induce certain forms of narrative engagement in comparison to film by offering an empirical foothold for future research to elaborate on and by reflecting on the usefulness of comparing these two media.

2. Theoretical Background

In previous scholarly work, comics have often been dismissed as a form of “sub-literature” (Magnussen & Christiansen, 2000, p. 7) or treated as a limited version of film, nothing but “movies on paper” (Meskin & Cook, 2012, p. xii). Naturally, such views do not offer helpful

insights to our understanding of comics as individual medium. But over the past two-and-a-half decades, interest in the medium has sharply risen among Anglophone scholarship, resulting in a cautious consensus on two of the most salient formal features of comics.

The first of these is hinted at in the definition of comics offered by McCloud in his keystone text. Following this definition, comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, p. 9). Groensteen (2007), reflecting on McCloud’s definition, clarifies that the prototypical comic has to be understood as an artefact with a dual nature dealing in both pictorial images and verbal language, with the latter generally subordinate to the former. The defining feature of comics, then, is the relational play between the interdependent images that are separate yet semantically coexistent. Groensteen continues that, unlike the film image, which ‘moves’ and is primarily temporal, comic images are static and spatial, as they share space on the page or screen. As such, the visual language of comics centres around the specific spaces of the comic (such as the text bubble or panel), their placement on the page, and the relation between these spaces. In his terms, “comics is not only an art of fragments [...], it is also an art of conjunction” (2007, p. 22). The page layout, or *mise-en-page*, is crucial to readers’ processes of meaning making, and as such should be the prime focus of scholars seeking to understand the formal aspects of comics. Similarly, Cohn stresses the importance of panels as ‘units of attention’ and considers their patterned relationships as vital to readers’ semantic interpretation of comics (2013). McCloud also hones in on the gutter, the empty space between panels, as a defining feature of comics and essential to audience’s interpretative processes. Like Groensteen, he hereby describes comics as an art of conjunction; in understanding comics, readers are described as “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (1993, p. 63) as they fill in the blanks left by the gutter and complete the action depicted in their minds, a process McCloud refers to as closure.

Pratt (2012) argues that the cinematic cut is similar to the gutter, as both rely on the interpretive capacities of their audience to make effective connections across their spatial or temporal breaks. This shared ‘gapiness’ is one of the reasons why Pratt considers film and comics to be particularly similar in terms of formal affordances. He further argues this case by pointing out how both are predominantly visual media that tend towards narrative representations. Since conscious thought and memory tend to occur in the form of stories (Schank & Berman, 2003), the human brain is attuned to narrative interpretation. Both film and comics, then, lean towards narrative representations because these make it easier for the audience to make sense of their sequential imagery (Pratt, 2012).

In spite of these similarities, however, it should not be forgotten that film is a multitrack medium that may use multiple modes of communication including sound and music, writing, and visual imagery, while comics are primarily dualtrack, relying only on writing and pictures. And, to turn to the other defining property of comics, these pictures are generally drawn, where film uses photographic ones. The stylized representations of comics and the subsequent lack of realism have been considered a weakness of comics in comparison to film by some. Christiansen (2000) claims that the fact that comics are drawn

foreground the presence of the enunciator; this to a degree blocks the identification process in making it more difficult for the spectator to create an illusion of being in the locus and unique origin of all identification (p. 115).

Essentially, the indexical quality of drawings leaves a clear ‘trace’ of the creator for readers to pick up, whereas film’s perceptual reality allows it to function as a ‘magical window’ into a narrative reality. Though Barthes’ notion of filmic realism as rooted in the indexicality of the profilmic display has lost popularity in light of advances in CGI editing (Prince, 1996; Steinberg, 2014) and recognition of film as a pre-focused, artificial construct (Bordwell, 1985; Plantinga, 2009), film’s illusion of reality appears to be persistent among viewers (Nåls, 2016).

Rather than considering the lack of realism inherent to stylized drawings an obstruction to identification, numerous academics in comics or animation studiesⁱ consider it an important factor in a different type of engagement. In quoting Terzidis, Power (2009) writes how “realism strives towards completeness, but notions of incompleteness, imperfection, and subjectivity invite interactive participation and have an expressive value that can surpass this explicitness” (p. 109). Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen’s work on modality in visual languages (2006), Power proposes that narrative drawings are judged and understood by their “non-realistic qualities that are tacit, suggestive, exaggerated, affective, connotative, evocative, or in some way expressive” (p. 114). This encourages a more expressive approach to the depiction of the narrative, enabling “more active and creative interactions by audiences in making their own aesthetic and imaginative connections” (Power, 2009, p. 114).

The stylization of comic drawings is thus said to capture the imagination of the reader and encourage specific emotional or aesthetic effects. Magnussen and Christiansen (2000) similarly point to Marion’s ‘effect of brevity’, the idea that the seemingly spontaneous and unfinished stylized image encourages readers to mentally complete the drawing by attributing it with narrative agency and presence, imagining the cartoon to life. Or, in the words of McCloud

(1993), “icons [such as drawn characters] demand our participation to make them work; there is no life [in them] except that which [the reader gives them]” (p. 59).

Taking these claims of imaginative engagement to the next level, Butler and Joschko (2007) hold that the style of drawn narratives “needs to remain sufficiently abstract to allow audiences to employ their imagination and create unique bonds with characters” (p. 59). The idea that the selective focus on salient detail in narrative drawings can enhance the emotional and narrative weight of the scene makes frequent appearances throughout the literature on the topic (McCloud, 1993; Butler & Joschko, 2007; Groensteen, 2007; Power, 2009) and relates to notions of peak shift, isolation, and visual metaphor from neuroaesthetics (Ramachandran & Seckel, 2011; Zeki, 2001; Luring, 2014). Thus, the iconic simplicity of cartoons is considered inherently linked to narrative experiences such as empathy, character engagement, and identification (McCloud, 1993; Butler & Joschko, 2007; Nâls, 2016).

3. Methods

3.1 Goal

The idea that the stylization of comic drawings enhance emotional engagement and identification runs counter to the hypothesis offered by Christiansen (2000), which describes comics as a medium that is generally poor at evoking identification and emotional engagement due to the obvious artificiality of its depictions. These opposing claims form the starting point of this study, which aims to investigate how audiences respond to characters and events in comics and contrast these with responses to a live-action film telling the same story. The underlying assumption is that the formal properties of comics lead to inherent differences in the cognitive interpretation of the narrative. As a result, the audience response to comics may change compared to responses to filmic media. To this end, an experimental comparative study was conducted using a mixed methods approach.

3.2 Constructs

Medium. The independent variable of this study is the mode of narrative representation of the experimental stimulus. Categorical and dichotomous in nature, it was varied across participants, presenting them with the same basic narrative executed either as live-action film or black-and-white comic.

Transportation. Within the context of this study, four aspects of narrative engagement will be taken into consideration. The first of these is transportation as discussed by Green and Brock (2000; 2003; Green, Strange & Brock, 2003). It describes the feeling of ‘losing oneself’ in a

story, and has also been referred to as absorption or immersion (Green & Brock, 2003). Operationalization of this interval variable follows from the Likert item scale offered by Green and Brock (2000), and Busselle and Bilzandic (2009).

Emotional Involvement. While numerous scholars acknowledge the importance of emotional engagement to media enjoyment and response (e.g. Plantinga, 2009; Buselle & Bilandzic, 2009), there exists little consensus on how fiction gives rise to these emotions or how concepts such as narrative empathy, sympathy or identification overlap and relate in the empirical sense. Here, these theoretical issues will be bypassed by conceiving of interpreters' emotional involvement simply as the extent to which they care about the existence and fate of the characters depicted. This interval variable was measured using a Likert item scale adapted from Cohen (2001) and Busselle and Bilzandic (2009).

Identification. For the purpose of this study, identification was defined as the process whereby an interpreter, to a varying degree, loses touch with their own identity and takes on aspects of the character's identity instead. They interpret events within the narrative from this favoured character's point of view and, most critically, take on said character's goals as their own within the context of the story. While identification entails emotional engagement, it is not necessary for an emotionally involved interpreter to identify with a particular character. Cohen (2001) describes the loss of self-awareness as integral to identification, indicating an overlap with transportation as effects that involve reduced sense of self. In spite of likely correlations with both transportation and emotional involvement, this construct bears investigating as it is specifically mentioned by both McCloud (1993) and Christiansen (2000) in their discussion of audience engagement with comics. As interval variable, it was measured using a Likert item scale adapted from Cohen (2001), Busselle and Bilandzic (2009), and Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992).

Aesthetic engagement. The importance of interpreters' aesthetic evaluation of aspects of a production with regard to their narrative engagement has been indicated in discussions of medium and engagement (Butler & Joschko, 2007; Power, 2009). However, it has not received much attention in empirical contexts, and no previous operationalization of the concept was found. Butler and Joschko (2007) imply that viewers of animation are likely affected in their levels of engagement and enjoyment by visual and aesthetic aspects of the narrative, indicating that viewers of drawn media may be more prone to explicit aesthetic evaluations than those of other media. Here, then, the aesthetic engagement will be defined as the reflexive awareness of aesthetic, artistic, and technical aspects that follow the telling of a story in any medium; essentially, it is interpreters' attention to and awareness of form rather than content.

Control variables. Two additional variables were included as controls for effects of media affinity and familiarity with the narrative stimulus. Firstly, the participant's previous experience with film, comic, and animation was gauged, as some academics suggest that both watching film but particularly reading comics is to some extent a learned skill that can be improved with practice (Plantinga, 2009; Cohn, 2013). Secondly, given that the short film selected for the study was released in 2013, it is possible some participants are already familiar with the narrative, which may influence how they respond to it compared to first-time viewers. Media experience was measured at the ordinal level, while previous familiarity with the narrative was included as nominal variable.

3.3 Data Collection

Participants (N=211) were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and randomly assigned to the two experimental conditions. They were presented with the Australian short film *Cargo* (2013)[#] or a close comic adaptation created for the purposes of this study. A pilot study was performed to determine the likelihood of the plot of the film and comic versions of *Cargo* to be similarly interpreted. Non-randomly selected participant (N=5) were asked to summarize the comic or the film following a narrative comprehension task. Results indicated that comic readers and film viewers recalled the same main story beats in their summaries.

Data collection was performed through an online mixed methods survey (Table 1) in Google Forms using customized HTML scripts to ensure participants could not take both the Film and Comic survey, or retake either of these surveys. Results submitted by MTurk workers were rejected in the case of obvious and gross negligence as indicated by failing two or more filter questions or completion of the survey in less than 8 minutes.

Table 1: Survey Sections and Purpose

Section	Concerning	Notes
1	Demographic Information	For basic descriptive statistics of the sample.
2	Media Experience	Control variable More experience with a medium can increase interpretive skills (Cohn, 2014), which may in turn affect narrative response.
3	Understanding & Familiarity	Filter questions Establish whether participant had read/viewed the stimulus, understands the basic premise of the narrative, and whether they have previously encountered the experimental cue.
4	Transportation Scale	Adapted from Green & Brock (2000) and Busselle & Bilandzic (2009). Five-point Likert scale containing 6 items.
5	Attention Filter	Establish if participants are properly attending the survey. Adapted from Oppenheimer, Meyvis & Davidenko (2009).
6	Emotional Involvement Scale	Adapted from Cohen (2001) and Busselle & Bilandzic (2009). Also includes original items. Five-point Likert scale containing 5 items.
7	Identification Scale	Adapted from Cohen (2001) and Busselle & Bilandzic (2009). Also includes self-other scale item adapted from Aron, Aron, & Smollan (1992). Five-point Likert scale containing 7 items.
8	Aesthetic Engagement Scale	Original scale based on writing by Power (2000) and Butler & Joschko (2007). Five-point Likert scale containing 6 items.
9	Open Questions	Qualitative questions to allow participants to express themselves beyond the constructs captured in the items above, such that the statistical analysis may be contextualized in richer data, following Bryman (2012) and van Lissa, Caracciolo, van Duuren & van Leuven (2016).

4. Analysis

4.1 Quantitative Results

The main analysis of this study consisted of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to consider the differences in the means of the Comic and Film condition across all dependent variables in one test, along with possible interaction between the four dependent variables. This analysis was followed by post-hoc linear discriminant analysis to separate individual group differences between dependent variables.

Preliminary exploration of the data revealed a significant negative skew in the distribution of Emotional Involvement and Identification in the film groups, with z-scores > 3.29 indicating significance at $p < .001$. Outliers on the main variables in both groups were considered using boxplots and Mahalanobis distances. After removal of univariate outliers, the distribution of the dependent variables sufficiently resembles a normal distribution, allowing for parametric testing. Further testing revealed insignificant results on the Levene's test for all four variables, indicating homogeneity of variance (Transportation, $F(1, 203) = .18$, $p = .67$, Emotional Involvement, $F(1, 203) = .15$, $p = .70$, Identification, $F(1, 203) = 1.37$, $p = .25$, and Aesthetic Engagement, $F(1, 230) = .48$, $p = .49$). Homogeneity of covariance matrices was confirmed

using Box's M test ((Box's M = 18.31, $F(10) = 1.79$, $p = 0.056$). Correlation matrices revealed a strong correlation between Emotional Involvement and Identification, $r = .75$, p (two-tailed) $< .01$, which may indicate multicollinearity. Examination of VIF scores, tolerance levels, and eigenvalues, however, indicated that the issue of collinearity is likely mild, meaning MANOVA can be reliably performed.

Figures 1-4 visualize the group mean differences between the comic and film groups using bar graphs. These graphs not only reveal the small group differences for each dependent variable, but the overlapping error bars also indicate it is likely these differences are not significant.

Figure 1: Bar Graph of Transportation by Group

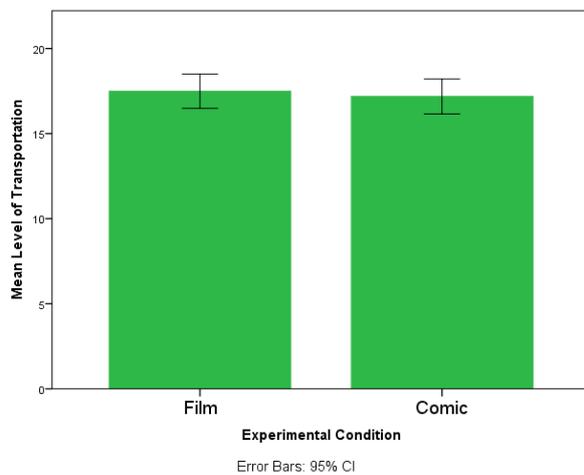


Figure 2: Bar Graph of Emotional Involvement with the Characters by Group

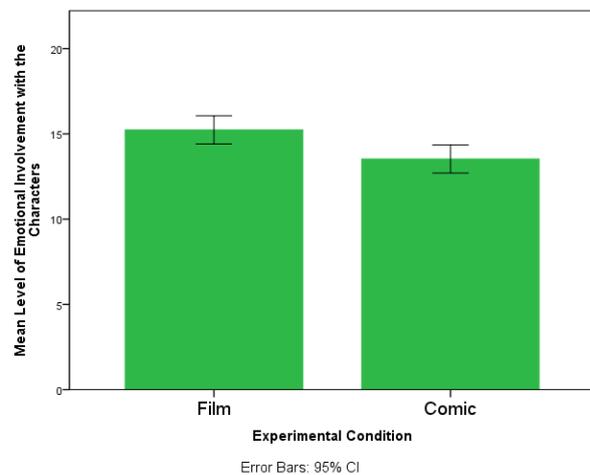


Figure 3: Bar Graph of Identification by Group

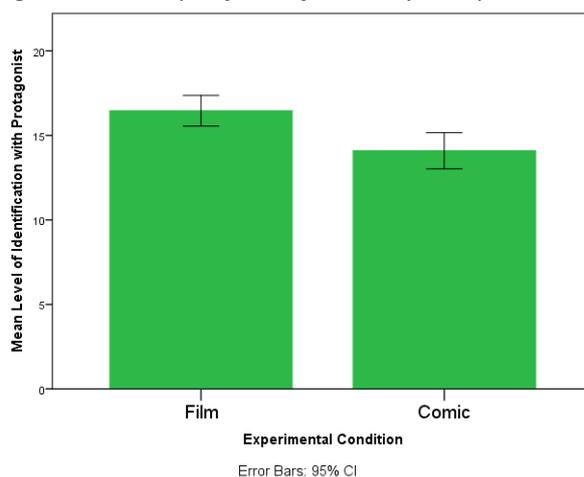
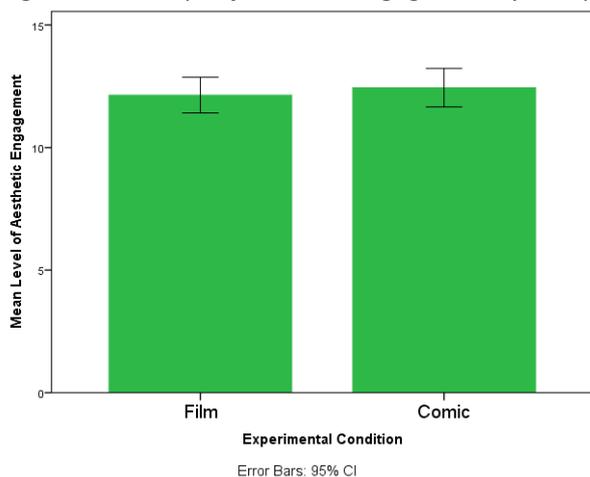


Figure 4: Bar Graph of Aesthetic Engagement by Group



This observation is confirmed by the main MANOVA analysis, performed using the robust Pillai-Bartlett trace statistic to guard against the potential issues of negatively skewed distribution of the main variables and multicollinearity. There was a significant effect of the experimental condition on the combined dependent variables of Transportation, Emotional Involvement, Identification and Aesthetic Engagement, $V = 0.11$, $F(4, 200) = 6.46$, $p > .001$,

but further univariate testing indicates that while the group differences for Emotional Involvement and Identification were significant, their effect sizes were very small, $F(1, 203) = 8.66$, $p < .005$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$ and $F(1, 203) = 10.82$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.05$, respectively. Meanwhile, the effects for Transportation, $F(1, 203) = .09$, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$ and Aesthetic Engagement, $F(1, 203) = 1.54$, $p > 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 < .01$, were not significant, with extremely small effect sizes. This indicates it may be impossible to meaningfully reject the main null hypotheses of this study.

Post-hoc discriminant analysis only yielded one variate, which explained variance at canonical $R^2 = 0.11$. The low R^2 indicates the variate is a rather poor fit for the actual variance in the data, as it only explains 11% of the observed variability. Nevertheless, the differentiation offered by this discriminant function was significant, $\Lambda = .89$, $\chi^2(4) = 24.42$, $p < 0.001$. Identification ($r = .64$) and Emotional Involvement ($r = .58$) both load moderately high on the discriminant function, whereas Aesthetic Engagement had a weak impact ($r = -.24$). Finally, Transportation has a negligible effect on the discriminant function ($r = 0.06$). This indicates that while the latter barely has any influence at all when trying to differentiate between participants in the Comic condition and those in the Film condition, Identification and Emotional Involvement are somewhat relevant in making this distinction and have an opposite effect to Aesthetic Engagement. This indicates that the variance represents something that influences Emotional Involvement and Identification in a different way than it does Aesthetic Engagement. Looking back at the group mean differences, this confirms previous findings that participants exposed to the comic reported slightly lower levels of Emotional Involvement and Identification, while experiencing slightly higher levels of Aesthetic Engagement. However, the discriminant function predicts group membership with only 65.4% accuracy. This once again illustrates that difficulty of differentiating between participant responses to the film stimulus and the comic stimulus.

Through repeated independent t-tests, the significance of the control variables of Medium Experience and Familiarity with Narrative was considered, with Bonferroni's correction to control for the inflated type I error rate associated with repeated t-tests. Neither of these variables had a significant impact on the main outcome variables of Transportation, Emotional Involvement, Identification, and Aesthetic Engagement in either the Film or Comic condition.

4.2 Qualitative Results

Participant responses to the open questions were analysed using thematic analysis, paying mind to both latent and semantic aspects of the data. Initial analysis of the qualitative responses confirm the results found through quantitative analysis, as there appear to be little difference in the range and intensity of emotional responses described in either experimental condition. More in-depth analysis, however, reveals differences with regard to reported cognitive engagement and the facilitation of emotional engagement through the formal properties of the stimulus.

Cognitive engagement, or the level of cognitive effort required for audiences to properly interpret and engage with a given narrative, was considered important to many participants when asked to consider how they would respond to *Cargo* had it been presented as comic instead of a film or vice versa. Participants stated that to them, film would be “easier to view” (Q4, F76) and would have helped them to “understand [the story] better” (Q4, C82). Meanwhile, comic format would have required participants “to use [their] imagination more and ‘fill in the blanks’ with ‘material’ of their own” (Q4, F97). Interestingly, while most (though not all) thought that film was generally easier to understand as a medium, and that that comic required more imaginative input from the reader, preferences ran either way; some declared that the reduced cognitive strain in film viewing would make the story “easier to follow” (Q4, C58), while others noted they liked how comics demanded more cognitive engagement. In the words of one respondent:

[If it had been a film], I’d have been more focussed on the actors and how they spoke, what they looked like, etcetera, rather than on the sheer emotion. I think it would have been a lesser emotional response and connection if it was real actors. I could use my imagination to tell this story rather than not feeling connected and watching other people tell it. (Q4, C98)

Participants also discussed how they thought the narrative medium facilitated (or obstructed) emotional engagement. In particular, participants felt that the way in which characters portrayed emotion was essential to their own engagement. Many held that comics could not “pick up certain nuances that can be expressed in body language or in the eyes” (Q4, F104) and that this lack of detail reduced their emotional engagement with the characters. Others, however, believed drawn characters capable of expressing “certain degrees of emotions” that “would be hard to recreate in reality” (Q4, C43), likely because of the way stylization allows more intense portrayals of emotion. The concept of realism was also central to participants’ evaluation of the *Cargo* narratives; realistic performance, drawing style, or simply the depiction of real actors rather than drawn characters was linked to greater emotional engagement and identification by

most subjects. One participant stated that “seeing real people go through [narrative events] makes me feel more bad for them because it’s easier to put myself in their position” (Q4, F44). Another noted that the fact that the comic was “drawn in a realistic manner” helped them to relate to the story (Q2, C67). A number of participants agreed that a comic “would not have felt as real” (Q4, F90), and that the use of real actors would make the narrative “more memorable” (Q4, F74), “visceral” (Q4, F66), “more intense” (Q4, C95), or “more emotional” (Q4, C104), and allowed them, as audience members, to “get more immersed” (Q4, C76). Interestingly, one participant who also noted the importance of realism expressed the exact opposite sentiment, stating that:

I wouldn’t have felt as compared to care [if the comic had been a film instead], as actors are real people. There’s always a degree of suspension of disbelief with live action properties. The reaction’s more visceral in an animated or drawn medium precisely because there’s no reference point for the characters. They are subject to life or death by the narrative itself. (Q4, C51)

Thus, it would seem that in spite of the lack of clear-cut differences in narrative engagement in either the comic or film condition, participants in both groups were very much aware of how the way the narrative was presented to them impacted their engagement and enjoyment.

5. Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to empirically investigate the way in which audiences respond to and engage with a story told through comics with reference to audience responses to a highly similar story told through film. Literature on the topic appears to assume that there is a marked difference in narrative engagement between these two media, offering a broad hypothesis, but the effect of the film or comic format on specific forms of engagement remains a topic of debate (Pratt, 2012; Magnussen & Christiansen, 2000; Meskin & Cook, 2012).

However, quantitative analysis of the data did not reveal strong evidence in favour of rejection of the null hypothesis. MANOVA did reveal a significant difference of the combined effect of the dependent variables of Transportation, Emotional Involvement with characters, Identification, and Aesthetic Engagement, but the effect size of this difference was very small. Post-hoc linear discriminant analysis showed that Aesthetic Engagement did have a weak predictive power, along with the previously identified Emotional Involvement and

Identification, implying that participants in the comic group were slightly more likely to score higher on Aesthetic Engagement than those in the film group, while scoring slightly lower on Emotional Involvement and Identification. However, these results had very small effect sizes, trivializing their importance, and the significance of the results may be due to the large sample size rather than meaningful variation between groups. In other words, in spite of claims made by various scholars, no statistically noteworthy difference in narrative engagement with comics or film could be found.

The qualitative results mostly corroborate this lack of differences in engagement across groups, as reported emotional responses and patterns of salience were highly similar between viewers and readers. However, thematic analysis did reveal some nuances that cast narrative engagement with comics and film in a different light, particularly with regards to the differences participants *expected* to encounter if they had been presented with the story in a different medium. Cognitive engagement was generally deemed to be higher for comic consumption, though opinions differed whether this obstructed or enhanced emotional engagement. Most tended to believe the accessibility of film would render it more engaging and less likely to confound. Film was similarly thought to be better at facilitating emotional engagement through its technical affordances, particularly through the use of music and sound, through the portrayal of emotions by live actors, and through its naturalistic mode of visual representation. Both groups appeared to value realism in the depiction of the story, connotating it with greater intensity and emotional impact.

To return to the original research questions, this study sought to investigate if

There is a difference in the degree to which readers of comics become transported in a narrative compared to film viewers?

There is a difference in the extent to which comic readers care about characters in a narrative compared to film viewers?

There is a difference in the aesthetic experience with a narrative between comic readers and film viewers?

Contrary to predictions from the literature, no evidence could be found for a strong difference between film and comics in their capacity for narrative engagement in the form of transportation, emotional engagement, identification, or aesthetic experience in the empirical sense. There are indications of more nuanced differences in engagement, though it should be noted that these appear to be highly dependent on interpreters themselves, as many referenced previous experiences, preferences, and beliefs about comics and film in their responses. While

many participants did express different experiences and expectations for their engagement with different media, these differences failed to quantitatively manifest in an experimental context.

5.2 Validity and Reliability

Due to the use of convenience sampling, the external validity of this study is somewhat questionable. Subjects were all subscribers to Amazon's Mechanical Turk service, which means they self-selected for participation. The resulting sample is both non-random and non-representative of the American population (or even the general MTurk population, following Paolacci, Chandler, and Ipeirotis (2010)). Additionally, due to the use of an online survey format, no controls were in place for the circumstances in which subjects interacted with the stimulus. It is likely that these circumstances do not mirror real life media entertainment behaviour. Thus, it is possible that different groups, in more life-like circumstances, will respond differently to narratives in either film or comics.

The biggest issue inherent to the design of this research, however, is the ambiguity of the influence of the stimuli. Though both pilot testing of the materials and the main results indicate that the comic and film were perceived as highly similar in terms of narrative, the fact remains that the independent variable of medium is made up of a myriad of different factors that may all have played a role in the final results – something which cannot be investigated further within the current design. It is quite possible that different artistic choices in the comic adaptation, such as the use of colour, would have drastically altered the conclusions drawn. More research is needed to decide if, as Ryan warns, the particularities of individual representatives of the narrative media under investigation did indeed obscure wider transmedial trends (2004).

5.3 Transmedial Comparisons

At the onset of this paper, I outlined the tension within transmedial narratology to strike a balance between media relativism, and media blindness. The former represents the idea that narratives, their effects, and the way they are studied cannot be compared across media due to their inherent differences, while the latter describes the point of view that medium does not affect narrative responses at all. The dominant view represented in the literature acknowledges the near-universal nature of certain narrative experiences such as transportation or emotional engagement, while admitting that different media may use different formal techniques to give rise to these experiences. There is a strong tendency, however, towards hypotheses of ranked

affordances, and claims that one medium is better or worse at inducing certain effects are common – and often contradictory.

The results of this study, however, indicate that such comparisons may not be helpful to our understanding of narrative effects across media. In the case of comics and film, no quantitative evidence could be found for noteworthy differences in transportation, emotional involvement, identification, or aesthetic engagement between these media. Meanwhile, qualitative results offer selective support for the full range of academic hypotheses discussed.

Framing transmedial comparisons in terms of which media is ‘better’ than the next is problematic, as it draws attention away from the unique formal properties of each medium and the resulting narrative affordances. Such deterministic comparisons also downplay the importance of individual differences and preferences, which, according to the qualitative results of this study, may explain different levels of engagement with different media to a significant degree.

Though it remains true that both the comic and the film version of *Cargo* offer unique phenomenological experiences, both appear capable of transporting interpreters and eliciting a wide range of emotional and aesthetic effects. Given that this study dealt with only one example of each medium, and the vast range of different styles and traditions within each, it seems unlikely that sweeping statements regarding comics’ inherent ability to engage interpreters compared to film can ever be proven plausible.

With this in mind, future research ought not to focus on determining the capacities for narrative engagement of either medium, but rather on the way in which each medium’s unique formal affordances give rise to narrative effects. In the case of comics, more fine-grained research is needed to understand the comprehensive process of interpreting individual panels in relation to one another, as well as the effect of the drawn quality of comics on cognitive and affective processes. Both of these factors were salient aspects of participants’ qualitative responses and warrant further study.

In summary, due to the wide focus of this study, certain constructs and variables have been generalized and conflated, particularly with regard to the stimulus material itself. New research may take a more nuanced approach to tease out the specific impact of comics’ mise-en-page and visual style (particularly with regard to realism) on engagement and enjoyment, and address how these latter two constructs interrelate with aesthetic engagement. Additionally, interpreter-dependent variables such as their attitudes towards comics may be considered, as the results of this study imply that, more so than competence gained from reading comics or formal aspects

of the medium itself, affiliation with the medium may be a critical factor determining narrative engagement.

Over the past two-and-a-half decades, scholars such as McCloud, Cohn, and Groensteen have all contributed to a more systematic understanding of comics. But, as illustrated by this research, our present knowledge of the full range of formal properties of comics and the cognitive processes associated with their interpretation remains limited – in part, perhaps, due to an overdue focus on the relation between comics and film. In the end, speculating about the superiority of one medium over the other, of frames over panels, is hardly conducive to our understanding of either, and film and comics are better understood as different, yet equal. Both offer endless possibilities for engagement, entertainment, and enjoyment, and both make for infinitely interesting research subjects in their own right.

ⁱ Though distinct media, both comics and animation typically present interpreters with drawn representations of characters and settings. As such, those theories that deal with the specifics of drawn visual representation can be considered to be relevant to the discussion of both comics and animation.

ⁱⁱ *Cargo* (2013) © Dreaming Tree Productions, Ben Howling, Yolanda Ramke. Materials used in this thesis belong to their respective owners, and have been incorporated following the Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Scholarly Research for Communication Scholars stipulated by the Center for Media & Social Impact.

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