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The Fastest Man Alive: Stasis and Speed in Contemporary Superhero Comics

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Abstract In the world of the superhero, action is everything. Focusing on DC Comic's 'Fastest Man Alive', the Flash, this article examines the techniques used by comic book artists to animate the seemingly static images of superhero adventures. Taking its cue from superheroes' success as the stars of recent action cinema, it takes cinematic theories of action and applies them to the comic page. The frozen poses of superhero splash-pages refute the supposed opposition of narrative and spectacle, while also bestowing perceptual mastery onto the reader. Superhero comics also use their elastic temporality – made possible by the peculiar spatial and temporal aspects of sequential art – for hyperbolic representations of the impossible. The Flash's heroic feats are rendered through conceptual mechanisms for expressing motion existing within, and between, the panels.

Keywords action, cinema, comic books, the Flash, motion, spectacle, stillness, sublime, Superheroes

In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud's (1994) groundbreaking examination of the techniques at play in sequential art, he casts himself as a stand-up comedian struggling to accurately define the comic book medium. When an outraged member of the audience shouts out 'What about Batman?! Shouldn't it have Batman in it?' he is quickly ejected, off-panel (p. 9). McCloud's heckler is, of course, correct: any discussion

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of comic books *should* have Batman in it – or, at the very least, an examination of superheroes and their adventures. Comic books, unusually, have been so thoroughly dominated by superheroes that media theorist Henry Jenkins (2009) admits 'nobody really believes us' when we say there's more to the medium (p. 17). These stories are characterized by colourful costumes, secret identities and spectacular battles between good and evil; most of all, they're defined through action, as propelled by the narrative thrust of their superheroic protagonists. It is no coincidence that Superman's iconic description involves speeding bullets, powerful locomotives and leaping tall buildings. His ability to fly is an integral part of the appeal of the character, tapping into the desire for unrestricted mobility that is part of 'America's dreamwork' (Engle, 1992: 337). As recent blockbuster cinema brings more and more superheroes to the big screen, they inevitably star in action films, which share their interest in kinetic display. McCloud, along with critics like Scott Bukatman, Douglas Wolk, Henry Jenkins and David Carrier, convincingly makes the case that, while comic books may share some of their visual vocabulary with cinema, they must be analysed as their own, specific form. Comics might borrow from the visual techniques of cinema, but they also diverge wildly from it (Bukatman, 2002: 133).

For example, it is usually held that the strength of the visual storytelling of comic books is that it is so simple to understand (Carrier, 2000: 85). However, watch Douglas Wolk's (2007) struggle with the fog of semiotic confusion induced by the cover of *Showcase* #4 from 1956:

> Is this comic a showcase for art, as in a museum? A series of frozen representations of reality or representations of something so unreal that a body moving at high speed leaves parallel lines of ink behind? A movie that isn't really a movie, made out of individual images that the eye can see in or out of sequence or at the same time? Something that breaks destructively out of attempts to fix it in its place? (p. 5)

The star of this issue is DC Comics' scarlet speedster, 'the Fastest Man Alive': the superhero known as the Flash. Whether Barry Allen or his successor, Wally West, the Flash is defined by his motion.[1] As Barry's girlfriend once pointed out: 'The Flash doesn't sit around – he does things!' (*Flash* #113, 1959). Yet superheroes are born into a medium that appears to consist of static images. Without the ability to show literal movement, superheroes like the Flash are instead animated by the powerful techniques employed by comic book artists to create time and motion across the page. A favourite conceptual trick is to show two panels, a millisecond apart, but between which the Flash is implied to have invisibly performed lengthy tasks; sometimes, even within a single panel, as when he says 'Be right back' and 'Okay, I took a quick look' almost at once (*JLA* #20, 2008). This kind of impossible action illustrates the complicated dialectic between movement and stasis present in superhero comics (Bukatman, 2002: 133). The Flash

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tries to put into words: 'Catch lightning in your hands sometime. Spend a month between the ticks of a second and tell me what noise you hear when you crack the sound barrier' (*Flash* #80, 1993).

Picture this: his schemes thwarted, the evil cult leader Kobra attempts final revenge on the Flash by firing a powerful laser at his beloved, Linda, in *Flash* #99 (1995). With a last burst of speed, Flash outraces the laser and saves her – but his velocity means he is being pulled into the mythical 'speed force', never to return. As he becomes pure energy, the panels showing us the faces of his friends and enemies start to break down, falling apart on the page, shattering like panes of glass. With a final, vertical *KRA-KOW*, the Flash disappears in a burst of white light.

The above synopsis, presented in straight lines of sensible type, simply cannot recreate the experience of following the Flash across those pages. There is an alarming lack of exclamation points. Quotes that sit comfortably in word balloons can look prim or pathetic when excised from them. The most successful superhero novels are books that invent and twist their own heroes, like Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2001). Novels that adapt already existing comic book storylines are redundant curiosities; novels that present original stories of Batman, Spider-Man, and the rest are not considered part of the 'real' continuity of their comic book adventures. Copyright concerns with the heroes of Marvel and DC Comics leave most academics wanting to discuss more than a few pages with no choice but to translate those complicated panels into straight prose. In comic books, however, words are not just words – they are pictures, too, lettered to create a visual onomatopoeia, crushing, zapping, whooshing, spelling out their power. Plain text, trapped in balloons or boxes, is kept to a minimum. Wolk (2007) estimates that it only takes 150 or so words on a six-panel page before it starts to seem cluttered (p. 25). That is half the amount contained in this paragraph you are reading now. While academic writing about superheroes might never pack the *KRA-KOW*s of comic books, these paragraphs are best seen with imaginary thick, black rectangles around them – prose-panels, if you will. The white space between them is a Bizarro World version of the comic book 'gutter'; the non-space that 'plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics!' according to an excited McCloud (1994: 66).

The fact that comics legend Will Eisner described the word balloon as 'a desperation device' (McCloud, 1994: 134) indicates how dialogue only seems to come into play when action somehow fails. In superhero adventures, action is everything. If superheroes cannot seem to be successfully translated into prose, their 'action comics' certainly share common ground with contemporary action cinema. Cinematic action heroes eschew verbal communication, choosing to let deeds do the talking; their heroic status marked by a 'reticence with language' (Neale, 1993: 71). The 1980s were particularly filled with 'hard body'

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heroes, who would be captured in body-builder poses by the camera, letting them display their spectacular musculature – often at the cost of traditional narrative momentum (Tasker, 1993: 76). Action cinema exhibits elements of so many different genres that it is best characterized not by plot, but by sequences of fights, chases, explosions, athletic feats and cutting-edge special effects (Neale, 1993: 71). Compared with regular humans, the feats of these heroes prove them almost superhuman again and again.

If action stars are superheroic, it only takes some quick box-office maths to see that superheroes are now action stars. The last 10 years have been filled with adaptations of some of Marvel and DC Comics' biggest characters, and their success shows the power of these superheroes as transmedia properties. While action cinema is a slippery category, it always foregrounds 'a visceral, even sensual, evocation of movement and violence' (Tasker, 2004: 5); superheroes fit that definition as neatly as they do their spandex costumes. The superhero body is a site of freedom – from gravity, from inertia, from all human limitations over mobility (Bukatman, 2003a: 188). To achieve this, Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) regularly transforms Peter Parker, played by actor and human being Tobey Maguire, into a fully digital Spider-Man. Free from the limitations of flesh, Spider-Man can now fight on the sides of skyscrapers and perform impossible midair stunts. Raimi stated that the technology to represent Spider-Man in motion did not exist until this film: '[Spider-Man] is a beautiful dancer who soars above the skyline, and it'll be the work of an acrobat, the work of a gymnast, the work of all the finest performers in the art of physical what-have-you' (Restuccio, 2002). The fluid shift from Maguire's body to his computer-animated alter ego can be almost invisible – although, as superhero blockbusters are now the primary showcase for special effects, studios pull back the curtain by openly promoting how these inhuman bodies are animated (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 296).

On the page, superheroes obviously lack this convergence with animation. The techniques employed by comic book artists who draw them, however, create their own 'special effects' for superhero bodies. These superhuman, often hypermuscled physiques are bursting with energy, armoured against harm, ever fluid and transforming (Bukatman, 2003b: 68). These qualities – combined with distinctive costumes, logos and colour schemes – make superhero bodies visually spectacular, and artists render them in loving detail. Rob Liefeld, from the style-obsessed Image Comics school of the 90s, is the patron saint of bodily obsession. He inks each muscle almost to the exclusion of all else, even if it means obscuring the ongoing storytelling of the sequence of panels. His comic books are left lurching from one dramatic full-page shot to the next (Wolk, 2007: 34). Liefeld certainly pushes the envelope, but he is only exaggerating qualities typical of all superhero stories, where splash pages hold back story for the sake of display. These faux pin-ups can function similarly to lavish spectacles in

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Hollywood epics – slowing down the action to a crawl to be shown in fetishistic detail (Jancovich, 2004: 84).

Any critical analysis of action cinema must deal with the long-standing supposed divide between spectacle and narrative (Higgins, 2008: 75). Seen through Tom Gunning's (1993) influential work on the theory of attractions, action cinema oscillates between traditional narrative progress and self-aware spectacles that interrupt the plot with blatant display. His description of the temporality of attractions is of particular interest to sequential art: that of an 'intense form of the present tense' (pp. 4, 5). It could also describe the process of reading a comic book, as each panel acts as a specific 'now', a discrete image, waiting to be stitched together with the next. Carrier (2000) compares the process of closure to watching a movie with a jerky, out-of-sync film projector (p. 51). The reader has control over how long to 'freeze' a moment by staring at any given panel, be it a double-page splash or barely an inch across; however, as Paul Atkinson (2009) succinctly puts it, 'the drive of the visual succession usually overcomes contemplation', and readers are consistently carried forward by the visual momentum of the artwork (p. 54). It is this pace of action on the page that can cause Carrier's hypothetical projector to 'stutter'. Even the monthly schedule of superhero comics means that one issue supplants the last, and, once read, is immediately waiting to be supplanted again by the next. Bukatman (2003a) writes: 'To be a superhero, you've got to be able to move' (p. 189). The same might be said of superheroes' loyal fans, immersed in a medium that requires them to become 'willing and conscious collaborators' in producing motion (McCloud, 1994: 65)

In *Flash* #114 (1960), 'The Big Freeze', Captain Cold activates a device that sends 'an impulse of absolute cold' throughout the city, freezing everyone and everything into stasis except for himself and Iris West. Dogs are snap-frozen in mid-chase, men in mid-stride. Apart from the expositional dialogue and some new, icy-blue colouring in the sky, however, how can you tell this from any other panel in the issue? It's why cold-based villains like Captain Cold and Mister Freeze tend to leave some helpful icicles on their victims – otherwise it could be another typical comic book pose. Elastic temporality is a trademark of superhero stories, and of Flash comics specifically. When Barry Allen first gains his powers, it does not just manifest as hypervelocity – it is also that objects slow down, hanging motionless in the air. It is the same for Wally West: 'Time's not frozen. It just looks that way to me – because I'm moving at near-light speed without the slightest effort!' (*Flash* #91, 1994). Wally even takes revenge on a super-fast enemy named Inertia by freezing him, barely mobile, and leaving him in the Flash Museum to be gawked at by tourists: 'He's trapped for eternity in a frozen body . . . forced to stare, with eyes that take a hundred years to blink' (*All-Flash* #1, 2007).

The most lyrical description of the Flash, courtesy of writer Alan

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Moore, evokes these same notions of temporality and mobility: 'There is a man who moves so fast that his life is an endless gallery of statues' (*Swamp Thing* #24, 1984). Yet the Flash is *also* a statue on these pages. That is why we are always provided with visual cues to suggest his motion (see Figure 1). Stopwatches and speedometers abound, along with titles like 'Around the World in 80 Minutes!' (*Showcase* #13, 1958). When the Flash knocks a pot out of a bystander's hand during a super-speed battle through a marketplace on page four, he conquers the villain and returns to catch the pot before it hits the ground on page eight, handing it back to its owner, saying 'Gotta run' (*JLA* #3, 1997). Even the way that Wally West's narration begins each issue by stating 'I'm the fastest man alive' highlights the anxiety that perhaps we will not be able to tell by the images alone. As comic books cannot portray actual movement, they rely on these 'indices of time' to imply it (Atkinson, 2009: 46). In the mid-1980s, Alan Moore's deconstructionist classic *Watchmen* called superheroes by the collective noun of 'masks', showing its obsession with identities, secret and public

Figure 1
The Flash's super speed (which is invisible to the human eye) is made visible in comics through visual cues that mark his movement through time and space. From *All-Flash* no.1, by Mark Waid, Ian Churchill and Manuel Garcia, 2007, p. 6. © DC Comics 2007.

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(Bukatman, 2003b: 54); more recently, Marvel Comics' hero-versus-hero crossover *Civil War* (2006–7) describes superheroes with the shorthand 'capes' instead. Capes foreground movement, rather than disguise, and are important visual accessories to help imply that a flying hero is in motion. It is all very well for Brad Bird's animated superhero film *The Incredibles* (2004) to mock the ridiculousness of capes – 'Stratogale! April 23rd, '57! Cape caught in a jet turbine!' – as it belongs to a medium that has the luxury of visible motion.

Any two non-identical comic book panels, side by side, will make us notice what has changed between them, and then fill in the motion required to make sense of those changes (Wolk, 2007: 133). This process of closure creates the 'magic and mystery' that McCloud finds in sequential art. Most interesting is his preferred metaphor of mobility for this closure – readers flinging themselves from the first panel to be caught by the next moment, and the next. 'Is it possible that closure can be so managed in some cases', McCloud (1994) says, 'that the reader might learn to fly?' (p. 90). Panels might be frozen images, but there is endless movement between them. Superheroes also move beyond the edges of their panels, stretching their clean, clear boundaries with fists, capes and energy blasts warping any attempt at a simple, geometric grid. Heroes might be supposed agents of order, but their adventures are visually much more like chaos (Bukatman, 2003a: 186). Superhero comics are not just daunting for new readers because of their decades-long-running stories and constant meta-revisions of the history of their shared universes (Pedler, 2008: 36). It is also because the kinetic energy of superhero adventures tends to complicate visual landscape used to transmit them – and if the way panels are arranged on the page is confusing, then the temporality of a single panel is no less so.

Much of the critical work on comic book art foregrounds this power of the gutter to create motion above all else. This emphasis can overstate the shared language of sequential art and the filmic frame, reducing the fluid and immerse process of reading comic to Carrier's somewhat-jerky projector. It also ignores the motion contained within even the seemingly still superhero body. The comic book artist chooses a moment – such as a hero about to spring into battle – that 'describes an action', instead of one that is an undifferentiated snapshot of the supposed 'present' (Atkinson, 2009: 53, 55). Despite the way that superhero stories are less verbal than other media, language also plays an important role in the way a still image creates its own sense of passing time, by adding a temporal dimension – the time it takes for these words to be read or spoken (Wolk, 2007: 25). Dialogue is used to guide the reader around the page, too. For example, to show super-speed, *Flash* comics spread his dialogue thin – 'often' 'with' 'one' 'word' 'per' 'balloon' – to show how quickly he is covering distance throughout the panel. The reverse-logic plays out in commonly impossible, midair, mid-battle speeches. Visually, it would appear that a panel is meant to

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contain a single moment – so should we presume a paragraph-long speech by Wolverine implies that he is just hanging still in the air while he speaks? Even the 'now' of a panel has a beginning, middle and end.

The unification of words and pictures results in storytelling techniques that confound the traditional opposition between narrative and spectacle. In Raimi's first *Spider-Man* movie (2002), we see Spider-Man kidnapped by his arch-nemesis, the Green Goblin, and taken to a rooftop for an exposition-filled chat. They sit and stand, mostly still, to exchange promises and threats; a scene to forward the narrative before the movie happily swings back towards spectacle. This scene is particularly stilted and odd, and not just because it is between two characters hiding their faces. It is because there would be no need for it in a comic book. Instead, this conversation would take place during a fight scene, and the exposition would serve the dual purpose of also guiding the reader around action-packed panels. To defuse the narrative/spectacle split in cinema, critics have suggested a third term: 'action' (Jancovich, 2004: 85). It accounts for the fact that its spectacular moments actually do advance the plot, as visual conflicts have been narrativized (Higgins, 2008: 76). In comic books, all conflict is rendered as spectacular; ideological battles are rendered just as visually as physical ones. You can witness the childlike green Hulk wrestle with the cunning grey Hulk over control of Bruce Banner's subconscious, for example, in *Hulk* #373 (1990). Combine that logic with comics' seemingly unique way of allowing twin streams of movement and exposition to take place at once, and it is a natural fit for action as a 'third term' to best explain their ongoing narrative momentum.

In 1992, Superman was beaten to a much-hyped (but inevitably temporary) death by Doomsday, a new villain, all inhuman grunts and protruding bones. The comics in question used four panels per page in one issue, then three panels per page in the next, until culminating in *Superman* #75 (1992), which is made up entirely of splash pages – with Superman's death revealed on a special, third fold-out page. Panel arrangement does not only relate to temporality in superhero comics. It also allows moments of active engagement specific to the comic book form. We take pleasure in unfolding the unexpected third page to witness Superman's defeat. We are forced to tilt *Fantastic Four* #252 (1983) on its side to read pages arranged in a 'widescreen' aspect ratio for greater impact. We realize that Red Arrow and Vixen, buried amidst underground rubble, did not know they were actually upside down – and we turn the comic upside down to simultaneously experience their realization (via upside down lettering) in *JLA* #11 (2007). Like Gunning's (1993) cinematic attractions, these techniques invoke the logic of exhibitionism in their spectacular displays, directly and actively addressing the spectator (p. 5).

Contrast the above with the prestige project *Marvels* (1994). Retelling early events of Marvel Universe history through an everyman narrator and photographer, Phil Sheldon, the issues open and close

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with darkroom imagery, superheroes captured in developing film. The series is filled with these moments of mediation: superheroes in black and white newspaper pics, playing in movie newsreels, or caught by the reflection in a camera lens. Phil narrates:

> To follow the Marvels through their combat, as the Sub-Mariner bolted from landmark to landmark sowing destruction, the Torch a streak of fire on his tail – it must have seemed like a glorious aerial ballet. Dangerous, beautiful, and thrilling. And maybe it was. But not for us. (*Marvels* #1)

Instead, Phil is trapped down on the street, far away, surrounded by the chaos and destruction left in the Marvels' wake. When he finally gets close enough to see the heroes – and be part of the action – he is struck down by debris and loses an eye. *Marvels* is illustrated by Alex Ross, who has been called 'the Norman Rockwell of comics' (*Alex Ross Mythology*, 2003). It differs from traditional comic art in that it is painted, and in addition, painted from real-life models. The 'realism' of his artwork, applied both to heroes' facial features and their spandex costumes, gives the story new weight – creating the sense that the retelling in *Marvels* is the way these events must have 'really happened' (Klock, 2002: 81). When the series retells the world-shattering battle of the Silver Surfer and Galactus from *Fantastic Four* #50 (1966), the alien beings – now given realistic textures and shadows – leak out into the borders of the page, while the human drama is kept separate, contained in small panels. McCloud (1994) suggests that a panel without words can, perversely, seem to last even longer than one packed with narration, as its lack of timing makes it seem timeless (p. 102). Here the aliens sit outside the shared time and space of Ross's human bystanders, given new power to astonish. Since the publication of *Marvels*, Alex Ross has developed a huge following for his cover-shots of superheroes, posing for the camera, resolutely not in motion. The flying trapeze-act of interpretation and closure does not apply – there is no impetus to find the moment both before and after the image to create an ongoing narrative (Carrier, 2000: 50). Even Ross's sequential art feels more like beautiful, disconnected moments. If the way in which a superhero's body twangs with the energy of implied movement makes a comic panel better labelled as 'synchronic' rather than 'static' (Atkinson, 2009: 55), Ross's favourite poses are truly still. The heroes are not about to leap into motion; they are just waiting for the paint to dry.

McCloud (1994) points out that if you are going to paint a world full of motion, 'then be prepared to paint motion!' (p. 109). Ross's version of this is to synthesize a photographer's eye. When he paints a hero in motion, it is as Lois describes Superman in *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* (1986): 'I was falling, and a violet comet was falling beside me. The reds and blues ran together, you see, so that's how he looked when he flew . . . a violet comet.'[2] In the real world, objects do not share the clear black outline that they possess

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Figure 2
Alex Ross's cover art to *Marvels* no. 0, by Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross, 1994. The cover image reveals how Ross's art differs from traditional comic art in that there is a 'realism' to his artwork that tends to freeze motion in time. © Marvel Comics 1994.

in traditional superhero artwork. Amongst all the conceptual pyrotechnics of superhero comics, it is easy to forget a simple and all-important fact: they are usually drawn (Wolk, 2007: 118). In *Flash* #95 (1994), the first part of a storyline called 'Terminal Velocity', we find the Flash running through an impossible landscape of images and colours, somewhere in the timestream: 'What is this effect?' he wonders. 'Have I been processed by Industrial Light & Magic?' Yet despite this psychedelic backdrop, one element remains perfectly clear and focused, and that is the Flash himself. Occasionally we will see him as a blur of speed, as do the bystanders of his stories, but the majority of the time we are there, keeping pace with him, even if he is travelling so quickly that everything else on the page has been reduced to abstract speed-lines. It is common wisdom that superhero stories are largely power fantasies for powerless adolescents (Fingeroth, 2004: 19). As with cinematic action heroes, the near-omnipotent abilities of the heroes better allow narcissistic identification to take place for the

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audience (Neale, 1993: 11). Fantasies of mastery do not just come through bullet-proof skin and rippling muscles, however. Superman's mastery over Metropolis comes in part from his super-vision: watching from high above, X-raying all obstacles, seeing everything in perfect detail. As if granted by a radioactive spiderbite, superhero comics bestow a similar sense of visual mastery. Even the heroes' secret headquarters are often shown with schematic, helpfully labelled diagrams, keeping nothing hidden from the reader (Bukatman, 2003a: 191).

A glance back at some of the more complicated covers of superhero crossover 'events' illustrates this visual logic. The first issue of DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985) shows dozens of identical earths destroyed by crackling energy, surrounded by more than a dozen costumed beings hanging in space in various states of distress. Twenty years later, Marvel Comics hero-against-hero *Civil War* (2006) crossover featured wraparound covers of scenes featuring scores of superheroes mid-battle; the final issue showed them lying bleeding and unconscious instead. Every hero and villain is drawn in perfect focus. Unlike the animated forms of superhero movies or cartoon, these scenes are not cut up across time and space by frantic editing. They are laid out for the reader, who 'edits' them only in the time it takes for the eye to flick across the page to a new point of attention (McCloud, 1994: 97). Temporality is further complicated by the fact that even when focusing on a particular panel, we remain aware of the panels composing the rest of the page; we take in now, past and future at once (Atkinson, 2009: 54). Certain superhero films are now attempting to approximate these visuals. Ang Lee's underappreciated art-blockbuster, *Hulk* (2003), uses shifting splitscreens as panels, at one point pulling back from the frame to reveal a whole wall of 'moments' before zooming in on another – much as the eye might on a page (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 303). In Zack Snyder's recent adaptation *Watchmen* (2009), the director's stylistic trademark of 'exhibiting velocity and action by jumping between painstaking slow-motion and abrupt fast-forward' (Thill, 2008) served to mimic the unpredictable progress of a comic reader's time and attention across still images.

In general, however, it is often a mistake to compare comic book scenes to cinema at all. The heroes, like everything in comics, are a result of what Carrier (2000) calls the 'aggressive caricature' of comic art; the automatic distortion that results from pencil and ink, instead of the supposed emotional neutrality of other forms (p. 6). These barrel torsos, veined arms and hypermuscled bodies – especially in the Rob Liefeldian era – are 'autoreferential', only comparable to other bodies of other heroes (Bukatman, 2003b: 59). The super-sight allowed by comic art lets us see every detail of the superhero body and world. Even those that are impossible, like Peter Parker's face symbolically half-covered by his mask upon sign of trouble, or Bruce Wayne in street clothes somehow casting Batman's shadow behind him. We see the dotted outline of the Invisible Woman's forcefield and Wonder Woman's

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invisible jet. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* begins in deep space, showing the reader the big bang of the 'multiverse'; as in Gunning's (1993) moments of attraction, no stand-in spectator is required inside the diegesis to justify it (p. 5). When the cosmic gods Eclipso and the Spectre recently warred astride the earth, their battle was invisible to everyday inhabitants:

> Their struggle, though gargantuan, goes unnoticed by humankind. There is only so much the human mind can accommodate, after all. (*Countdown to Mystery* #8, 2008.)

But not to us. We are not just bystanders like Phil Sheldon. We see it all, and the exhibitionist logic of display – of events being presented 'just for us' – is often hammered home by comic-book narration that speaks right out of the page.

Superheroes are so used to achieving the impossible that it is only fitting the visually impossible is used to depict them. The Flash might not wear a cape, but the speed lines and lightning bolts that stretch from his speeding form serve the same purpose. Stranger still are moments when he appears multiple times within the one panel, showing he is too fast to be captured in a single temporal moment. In the arthouse comic series, *The Invisibles* (published by DC's 'adult' imprint, Vertigo) this technique of rendering temporality is an avant garde abstraction (Wolk, 2007: 265); in superhero comics, it is just part of the regular vocabulary of the impossible.[3] Similarly, when Grant Morrison wrote his epic *Animal Man*, he shows his characters actually breaking through the panel edge and into the guttering of the page. It is a moment of pure horror, haunted by shadows, saying: '. . . spooned out my own eyes and still I see. We're not real' (*Animal Man* #24, 1990). Morrison often uses this kind of formal play with the gutter to torment Animal Man in novel and unpredictable ways (Pedler, 2009: 256). Years later, though, when Animal Man again encounters this same white non-space beyond the panel, it is described in superhero sci-fi lingo as 'Space-B', and concerns that it will be more 'existential isolation trauma' are quickly assuaged (*52: Week 49*, 2007).

The Flash has to deal with this kind of visual oddness all the time. Barry Allen would run so fast that he would break the time barrier, first represented by the strange typography of digits hanging in the air around him (*Showcase* #14, 1958). Wally West, moving faster than the speed of light, breaks free of the concrete visuals around him and into the pure white of the gutter, sitting between the original scene and the 'speed force': a wall of multicoloured light (*Flash* #137, 1998). This is 'solid speed'. It is time represented as space – just as it is in the spatiotemporal landscape of the comic page. As with spectacle-driven science fiction cinema, superhero comics regularly depict the infinite and the sublime, and both media exhibit this obsession in their titles alone (Bukatman, 1995: 258; Wolk, 2007: 56).[4] The endless space and time of the sublime is a place of hyperbole and excess, causing

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sensations of awe and astonishment; Bukatman (1995) holds that the special effects of science fiction create tamed versions of these infinities to allow the spectator a sense of mastery while viewing them (p. 281). Comic books go one better. Marvel Comics even made infinity an anthropomorphized being – part of the five cosmic individuals alongside Eternity, Death, Oblivion and Galactus – for superheroes to encounter. The Flash even briefly (and spectacularly) wore a crackling, golden costume made of pure speed-force, explaining that it was speed 'condensed into three-dimensional space. I think' (*Flash* #132, 1997).

Giant, planet-devouring Galactus trails irony as well as destruction in his wake. When he seemed ready for his moment of transmedia glory, ready to appear on the big screen in the special-effects-laden *Fantastic Four 2: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (Tim Story, 2007) his comic book visual was unpalatable for the realism required by cinema. Instead, he was presented as a destructive space-cloud. Those disappointed by this should take heart that it was also revealed that Galactus does not *really* look as Jack Kirby draws him. Galactus simply cannot be perceived by human eyes:

> Yes, you're big . . . but humanoid . . . nose, fingers, optic nerves, etcetera . . . is how my brain registers you so it doesn't melt down. Truth is, you're so far beyond what I recognize that my piddling human senses are beneath you. (*Fantastic Four* #521, 2005)

Galactus's appearance is deemed too fantastic for the cinema screen, but here his usual visual representation – that of a purple-helmeted space-giant – is retroactively declared to be a watered-down version of his never-seen 'real' form. In the multi-dimensioned universe inhabited by superheroes, it is intriguing to imagine that 'aggressive caricature' is actually protecting us from the unmediated sublime: an overwhelming 'spatiotemporal grandeur', as Bukatman (1995) puts it, that no technology can tame or represent – whether pencil and ink, or expensive CGI effects.[5]

The Flash is held responsible for rejuvenating interest in superheroes, with DC Comics writer Geoff Jones even saying that 'without Barry Allen, we'd still be reading comic books about cowboys' (Sacks, 2008). The Flash, and his connection to the boundless velocity of the 'Speed Force', makes him a perfect vehicle for stories with the speed and spectacle required of superhero adventures. As the Flash explains: 'When you do this trick right there's a point where . . . momentum . . . overcomes . . . gravity' (*Flash* #54, 1991). As more and more heroes are claiming their own Hollywood films, it has been suggested that this big screen success – combined with dwindling audiences of superhero comics themselves – might mean that the future will hold only 'screened' versions of these stories (Fingeroth, 2004: 170). Cinematic blockbusters have certainly found new excuses for action through the adaptation of superhero stories. Seeing the Flash run from one jagged panel to another, trailing lightning bolts through the limbo of the gutter

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that separates them, it is obvious that the static images of comic book spectacle require a visual vocabulary that is specific, complicated, and often joyously impossible.

Notes

1 Barry Allen and Wally West have also an entire 'Flash Family' of fellow speedsters populating their comic books, including Jay Garrick (the original Flash), Bart Allen (the latest Kid Flash), and many more.

2 In the television series *Smallville* (2001–), a young Clark Kent is yet to become Superman, but good deeds performed at superspeed eventually earn him the unwieldy title of 'the Red-Blue Blur'.

3 In fact, these multiple images are a long-running feature of *Flash* comics, arising from representations of his own speed; the numerous super-fast characters who share his logo as part of the 'Flash Legacy'; and villains like the Mirror Master, who can create duplicates of himself at will. When the cover of *Flash* #74 features multiple Flashes with the blurb 'Too many speedsters!', it is not immediately obvious why this should be different from any other issue.

4 Readers are so used to the procession of *Infinity Gauntlets* and *Infinite Crises* that their latest crossover attempts to generate drama using the opposite logic – calling itself the dangerously finite *Final Crisis* instead.

5 A precedent for this might exist in the way comic books protect readers from seeing profanity through the long-standing tradition of substituting random visual signs for swear words: '@#%!'.

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