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Alien as a comic book: adaptation and genre shifting.

Nicolas Labarre

Abstract

This article examines the 1979 adaptation of Ridley Scott's *Alien*. It focuses on the way the adaptation process results in two works with very different generic mix. Both the film and the comics can be read a generic hybrid, belonging both to horror and science fiction, but the balance is different. The article argues that the constraints of the comics form make it impossible to adapt the established grammar of horror cinema – especially the effect of surprise – which leads to the observed shift in generic affiliation. This leads to a broader argument on the effect of adaptations on genre.

Keywords

Adaptation, transmediation, Alien, comics, film, horror, genre

Short title:

Alien, adaptation and genre-shifting

This article seeks to examine the ties between adaptation and genres, through the adaptations of the first *Alien* movie. Its goal is to study the interaction between adaptation and genre affiliation, by studying the various incarnations of a story in which generic hybridity is pushed to the fore. After having established the way genre functions in *Alien*, we shall examine the shift in generic boundaries entailed by the adaptation process and its consequences for both the form of the work and its consumption. The identification of these differences in the context of a work which emphasizes its faithfulness to the original movie suggests the existence of a medium-specific negotiation of genre affiliation.

Comics and cinema are an especially fruitful medium pairing when it comes to adaptation study. Even though they may appear to possess ‘incompatible visual ontologies’ (Lefèvre, *Incompatible Visual Ontologies*), they display a number of stylistic and formal similarities, which has led to mutual inspiration at various points in their respective histories (Gardner, *Projections* 1-67; Lacassin; Gordon, Jancovich and McAllister vii-xvii). Novelization may have a longer history in feature films adaptation than comics do, (Baetens and Lits 16) but there is nevertheless a rich history of film to comics transpositions. As a consequence, a number of established equivalences have developed over the years (the frame of the camera and the panel border, spoken dialogues and word balloons, etc.), what Francis Lacassin has called “obvious analogies” (11), which make these transpositions non-problematic in a number of cases, even when dealing with baroque or ornate film-making (Labarre) . Because of this relative closeness and because of the history of such adaptations, studying generic shifts becomes possible without having to dwell on these many non-problematic systems of equivalence.

Alien, Ridley Scott’s 1979 film about a killing monster loose in a nearly empty spaceship has been the focus of much academic attention, mostly for its treatment of gender relations (see the bibliography in Gallardo and Smith 205-210), but also for the way it addresses social hierarchies (Byers; Eaton) and genre (Flanagan). It is on this last point that we wish to focus, keeping in mind that genre affiliations and gender representations are by no means disconnected concerns: for instance, it is *Alien*’s relatively innovative treatment of female protagonists within genre fiction, and notably its use of the then recent ‘final girl’ figure, which justified some of the attention the film initially received (Clover 46-48; 81-82).

Alien is an overt example of a film blending at least two genres, science fiction and horror. Rick Altman’s simplified description of genre as composed of semantic and syntactic elements (Altman 216-225) is useful in understanding how the two genres are articulated in the film. Using this approach, I would suggest that science-fiction elements are mostly to be found on the paradigmatic axis, as a catalogue of objects and situations (cryogenic coffins, spaceship, planet exploration, astronauts and alien creatures), while the narrative structure – the syntactic axis – owes more to the horror film (the monster chasing and killing members a frightened group in a mostly empty building,

full of shadows and dark off-screen space). At the intersection of science fiction and horror, and belonging to both genres, is the monster/alien. Hatched from an organic looking egg found in an empty spaceship, the creature is an extra-terrestrial, but its form is that of a monstrous hybrid between flesh and metal, perpetually glistening with a thin layer of liquid. It is not uncommon for science-fiction monsters to be used in horror contexts: *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951) and its remake *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982) are famous examples, but the atomic monsters found in films such as *Them!* (Jack Arnold, 1954) are also difficult to locate generically. In *Alien*, the creature's oft noted ambiguity and slipperiness, its 'indetermination' (Dufour 123) thus extends to its function as a generic marker.

Rick Altman's study of genre offers another tool to help us understand the role of the alien and the chronology of the film, through what he calls 'points of inflexion'. Altman suggests that contrary to common knowledge and pragmatic categorizing (by academics, spectators or distributors) films commonly move from one genre to another. They offer the knowledgeable spectator several moments when he or she is invited to reconsider the genre of the story. In the case of *Alien*, the appearance of the monster is such a point of inflexion.

Altman's model is useful in that it allows us to understand how *Alien* can be read in its entirety as belonging to horror or to science-fiction, while the monster itself, the obvious dividing point, only appears after forty-five minutes. Before that, *Alien* emphasizes the science-fiction setting, although it moves away from the engineer's utopia of most space-faring American science fiction films, from *Forbidden Planet* to *2001*. Through the inclusion of images of technical decadence and bricolage – a vision based in part on the graphic experimentations of *Métal Hurlant/Heavy Metal*, already present in *Dark Star* (Dan O'Bannon, 1974) and to a lesser extent in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) – these paradigmatic elements of science fiction films are not only used but reworked and altered. These transgressions within an established set of norms focus the attention squarely on these science fiction elements, foreclosing other possible readings of the initial situation in the film. When the monster appears, it is scanned, analyzed and subjected to an objective and technological description which suggests that it constitutes an understandable and ultimately contained phenomenon. In fact, the

aseptic environment of the medical room conforms to the ideal of technological neatness and efficiency of space travel science-fiction films much more than the rest of the ship. Again, the film discourages alternative readings of the elements which do not align with its ostensible genre affiliation. One such example is the scene when the ‘face-hugger’ suddenly jumps out of its egg to smash an astronaut’s helmet. The ‘startle effect’ may be a defining horror convention (Peter Hutching suggests that that convention was coming to fore in the genre in the late seventies), but it is framed in a generic context that encourages reading it as a dissonance, rather than a genre-shifting event.

The main inflexion point happens roughly after the first half of the film. Kane (John Hurt), the astronaut seized by the ‘face-hugger’ appears to have fully recovered, and is having dinner with the rest of the crew. Suddenly, his own body seems to turn against him, and after spectacular convulsions, his belly explodes, revealing a phallic monster and spraying the room with blood. In a telling reaction shot, Ridley Scott and his photographer isolate Lambert (Veronica Cartwright) one of the female members of the crew, yelling, her face covered with blood. This shot and the scene distinctively suggest a shift to the horror genre: John Carpenter’s *Halloween* had inaugurated the slasher cycle the year before,¹ and similar shots of the ‘scream queen’ – already a key structural elements for Italian *giallo* directors – were becoming a passage obligé for American horror film-makers. Of course, this was merely an expansion of a traditional reliance on the woman’s scream as a way to enhance horror – as early as the thirties, it was not uncommon to hire women to scream during the showing of horror film (Berenstein 143)– but the trope appears to have become omnipresent on-screen at the time. This emphasis on the characters’ reaction to horror has been described as a way to prepare and direct the viewers’ response to the horrific events depicted, even at times serving as a substitute for a depiction of the horror itself (Carroll 90). In that sense the effectiveness of the performance given by the screaming actress, Veronica Cartwright, conveys a sense of felt horror all the more efficiently since she had not known beforehand she would be covered with blood. The shock captured by the camera, though engineered, is genuine, adding to the intensity of the scene, and meshing with the naturalistic mode of acting used in first fifty minutes of the film. The making-of to the film included in the *Alien* *Quadrilogy* set suggests that the scenes of tensions depicted in the first half of the film reflected the

actual atmosphere on the set ('We were on edge, we were on a survival mode', Sigourney Weaver said in the 2003 documentary on the making of the film). Similarly, the choice to use a sprawling set for the corridors of the spaceship Nostromo, in which it was possible to circulate, also adds to the sense of authenticity of the film (Charles De Lauzirika, *The Beast Within*, 55' to 80', see especially 76' about the tensions on the set). This emphasis on realism and the inclusion of social tensions within the crew is one of the elements which get re-contextualized and re-decoded after the inflexion point. This drive toward human, spatial and social realism inscribes *Alien* in the tradition of so-called modern American horror films, concerned with social representations and depicting horror in domestic, contemporary settings. Of course, this is also the moment when the real monster appears (the 'face-hugger' is merely a transitory creature), marking what Peter Hutchings, quoting Steve Neale, has called the 'fetishistic division of belief' in the horror genre, an expected turning point treated with spectacular emphasis (Hutchings, *The problem of British horror* 120).

The rest of the movie, with numerous 'startle effects' and the emphasis on the off-screen menace in darkened places among other 'shock horror conventions' (Hutchings, *The Horror Film* 39) confirms this inscription in the horror genre. Yet, several other inflexion points make it possible to return to a more science-fictional reading, in particular through the subplot involving the robotic crew-member, Ash, and artificial intelligence. If the dinner scene invites the spectator to reconsider what he has been shown before, later inflexion points serve to signal a refusal to abandon science-fiction altogether. *Alien* thus foregrounds its generic hybridity, offering a dual reading rather than an alternative. Martin Flanagan has argued that the very aspect of the ship in the opening sequence, which he compares to a gothic castle, signals the presence of horror at this stage of the film (159). I would argue that this is not an aberrant decoding, but that it is only validated after the film's explicit turn to horror. The aspect of the ship allows the viewer to make assumptions about the genre, but early in *Alien*, science-fiction appears to be the favoured reading of the film.

While it is difficult to gauge the expectation the original audience had coming into the film, the available promotional material (posters, trailers, press articles) suggest that this hybridity was perceived as a selling point for the film. *The Guardian's* review of the film, for example, called it a

cross between *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* and *The Thing from Outer Space*, describing it as a ‘combination of space fiction and horror story’ (Malcolm). *Time Magazine*, for its part, seemed to deplore its function as an ‘efficient moneymaking machine’ but also noted its originality as a ‘pretty mean cinematic bastard’ (Rich). These apparently contradictory elements were also present in the original trailer: a view of a planet from space is accompanied by an eerie music, bearing little resemblance to the symphonic score of *2001* or to the bombastic brass instruments of earlier space operas; ‘realistic’ views of astronauts on a deserted planet alternate with images of a chase through narrow corridors. The trailer ends with a quick montage of horrified face and half-glimpsed horrifying images. The promotion and the eventual success of *Alien* at the time of its release were predicated on this promise of generic hybridity.² This hybridity is also a key element in the film’s production history: while it had been on hold before the success of *Star Wars*, it had also been pitched to the studio as ‘*Jaws* in outer space’ (Charles De Lauzirika, *The Beast Within*, 13’43’). It was thus not only marketed and received (at least by critics) as a cross-generic film, but also conceived and produced as such, at a time when the horror genre had made a sudden entrance into the mainstream, with films such as *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) or *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976).

It is therefore unsurprising that this hybridity should have been carried over to the adaptations. The success of the *Star Wars* comics published by Marvel had demonstrated that there was a significant market for comics to film adaptations, alongside traditional novelizations. Movies had been adapted into comics since 1934, and Dell’s successful *Four-Color Comics* had adapted numerous films from 1939 to 1962, but *Star Wars* had revived the practice, which had noticeably declined in the previous fifteen years. The adaptation was written by the experienced Archie Goodwin and illustrated by the then newcomer Walt Simonson – who would write and draw a very successful version of *Thor* for Marvel Comics in the mid-eighties – and it was popular enough to reach the *New York Times* best-seller list, the first graphic novel to do so. The choice of this creative team is fraught with expectations regarding its genre, for Archie Goodwin was a writer with notable works both in science-fiction and in horror adaptations. Not only was he the author of the record-selling *Star Wars* adaptation published by Marvel Comics in 1977 (illustrated by Howard Chaykin), but he had also been the editor of the black-

and-white horror magazine *Creepy* in the previous decade, for which he had adapted classic horror tales. Walt Simonson may have had this experience in mind when he asked for Goodwin to be brought in to the project. (Nolen-Weathington and Ash 29)

The original *Alien* adaptation, *Alien: the Illustrated Story* (hereafter *A:tIS*), published prior to the film release as a 64 page magazine by *Heavy Metal* (Futura in the UK), displays the specific difficulties of adapting the generic balance at work in the film, as well as the more general issues of adapting popular franchises into comic books. Simonson and Goodwin were given access to the set, to a rough cut of the film and had the rights to the likeness of the actors. It ostensibly seeks to be faithful to the plot and look of the film, with the exception of its cover, which bears no visible connection to its source yet claims ‘Based on 20th Century Fox’s Science Fiction Hit, *Alien*’. The claim is of course slightly misleading, since the film had not yet been released when that cover was designed, but it functions as claim for legitimacy. While adaptation theory has deconstructed the problematic relations between an ‘original’ and its ‘adaptations’, a clear hierarchy between the two cultural objects was intended in this case. Indeed, it is only a few months *after* the release of the film that the graphic novel came to appear in the *New York Times* chart.³

Reflecting its status of ‘adaptation as *adaptation*’, ‘haunted at all time by [its] adapted text’ (Hutcheon 6), *A:tIS* acknowledges its cinematic origin through a narrative motif used in the first strip of the first page and recurring throughout: a series of three or four silent panels in which a single event is decomposed (the opening of an eye, the downward movement of an elevator, the uncoiling of the alien, etc.). The device is not without precedent, but it is used more than a dozen times in the course of the story, and in some cases, with no obvious dramatic necessity. What the device provides is a form of reconstitution of the movement on the page, not unlike Muybridge’s chronograph, that seeks to emulate the perceived continuity of cinema rather than the necessary discontinuities of the comic page. The effect does not erase the difference between the two media, but it signals an effort to narrow the gap between them.⁴ The plot and dialogues also follow those of the movie closely, omitting some of the scenes shot but not included in the original release – notably the infamous vision of Dallas trapped in an alien cocoon (Gallardo and Smith 53-4). Some details do differ however, the most crucial being

probably an exchange between Lambert and Ripley, the two female members of the crew, discussing the fact that neither of them has slept with the captain, Dallas, and suggesting that he may not have been all that interested in women. The aside does not transform the narrative, but it adds yet another layer to the gender-oriented readings of the story. This type of minor difference is of course to be expected, and within the range of what officially sanctioned adaptations permit. By contrast's Alan Dean Foster's successful novelization was written without the writer having had access to the film's visual effects, leading to a novel which differs markedly from the movie: this did not prevent him from being asked to write further adaptations, to the point when he became the only element of continuity in the film franchise (Foster and Larson 54-55). By contrast, such minor alterations as those displayed by *Alien: the Illustrated Story* do not modify the plot in a way that would have implications on the work's generic affiliation.

However, another necessary consequence of the adaptation process, the transmediation of the plot, does have significant repercussion in this case. By transmediation, we mean here the effect that the retelling of an identical story in a different medium has on the presentation and perception of the story, because of each medium's specificities and constraints.⁵ This process – which results in a different text but also in a different paratext – has profound consequences on the generic balance of the work.

An obvious point of divergence between *Alien* and *AtIS* in the work happens as early as the inside front-cover. On this page, the book designer chose to reproduce a detailed close-up view of the creature's head, in white lines over a black background (illustration 1). While the next two pages offers a mosaic of images culled from the book which studiously avoid showing the alien (only the tail of the 'face hugger' is visible), in a way reminiscent of the film's trailer, this inside cover introduces the monster even before the start of the narrative. A symmetrical image is repeated on the inside back-cover, and therefore appears to bookend the story. The presence of the monster thus frames the narrative, priming a horror-oriented reading. The paratext, or more precisely the peritext, thus fulfils its purpose not only as an introduction to the text, but as a way define the way it is to be consumed (Genette 7-10). After three pages devoted to various credits as well as to the aforementioned black-and-white assemblage,⁷ the narrative proper opens with a double page. The top half of that space is

occupied by an ornate rendition of the word 'ALIEN', sprawling across the fold. The shape of the letters is similar to the title displayed in the film, but instead of bars of light, the letters are bone colored and decorated with Giger-inspired tooth and bone structures (illustration 2). This design foreshadows the discovery of the giant spaceship in which the alien eggs will later be found but the different colour scheme imbues it with different connotations. Besides, while the spaceship, both in *Alien* and *AtIS*, is shown in blue and grey hues, thus making it appear metallic, the bone-coloured letters are more directly related to an alien body. As a matter of fact, they offer a stark contrast with the bottom half of this two-page spread. There, in four panels, the Nostromo is shown as awakening as it receives the distress signal which will eventually lead to the discovery of the alien spaceship, a sequence coloured in blue, black and mauve.

What is established in these two pages is thus an immediate co-presence of horror and science-fiction. The two genres are presented as distinct sets of conventions – they each occupy one half of the two-page spread, with no apparent link – brought together on the comics page. When we turn to the next two pages, in which the crew of the Nostromo is shown awakening, horror is entirely absent, while the recognizable science fiction elements of the hibernation pod dominate the pages. At this point, the narrative moves away from horror and parallel the movies in establishing a worn-down industrial vision of space-travel. The reader, however, has already been through a generic inflexion point, since the reading primed by both the paratext and the bone-like title has already yielded to another brand of generic reading. We have argued that in *Alien*, generic hybridity is reconstructed through a re-evaluation triggered by the dinner scene. In *AtIS*, by contrast, this generic hybridity or uncertainty is established in the very periphery of the narrative. Gallardo and Smith, in their analysis of the film poster, argue that it too displays the generic mix present in the film:

The poster also implies the mixing of science-fiction and horror in the vein of *Them!* or *The Thing from Another World*. The image further complicates this cross-genre impulse by replacing the masculine rocket with the ovoid form, which connects the film with monstrous birth films like *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen*. (Gallardo and Smith 199)

It is tempting to dismiss the argument by pointing out that the poster is not as integral to the act of viewing *Alien*, while the cover, inside front cover and title of the comic book are inescapable steps for anyone opening the comic book. Viewers having access to *Alien* on television or through forms of downloads may indeed not have access to this image, but anyone seeing it in a theatre, on a DVD or a VHS is likely to have his watching of the film framed by this picture. However, the poster remains distinct from the narrative; as a matter of fact, the image does not occur in the film itself, while the bone-like title in *AtIS* is integrated into the very grid of the comic: it does not simply frame the narrative, it is part of it. Additionally, while Gallardo and Smith's reading is certainly a valid one, it is informed by their knowledge of the film, and serves as a confirmation of their findings. The poster may 'tell the whole tale' (200), but it does so in such a condensed manner that it remains ambiguous. This ambiguity is also carried by the tagline 'In space, no one can hear you scream,' which can be read as tying either to the slasher cycle (the scream) or to Frank Poole's death in *2001, a Space Odyssey* (as pointed out in *AlienWoman*). This ambiguity invites future generic clarifications in the light of a more complete context – the whole movie – but apart from the word "scream", there is little unambiguous content pointing to horror. The letters covered in bones, teeth and claws which form the title in *AtIS* point to a clearer generic affiliation: the poster may promise the emergence of the 'freak', but that lettering already affirms its presence.

As early as page 6, the freshly established and already problematic reading of the story as belonging to science-fiction is disrupted again, on the occasion of a depiction of spaceship Nostromo, which takes up the top two thirds of the page. Again, the colors suggest a different mood from that of *Alien*, since the ship appears in brown earthy hues. The towering and ornate structures bear a strong resemblance to the vision of *Métal Hurlant* co-founder, Philippe Druillet. Druillet's style is somewhat similar to Giger's, in his forceful connection of hypertechnology with biology. In the words of Danièle Chatelain and George Slusser, in an essay about space travel in French *bande dessinée*:

Past and future, the highest and the lowest forms of evolutionary life, supermachine and simple bivalve – all are drawn as if on a Moebius strip, into a spatialized disposition of forms where linear narration is folded into a dream emblem. (Chatelain and Slusser 32)

Druillet's work had been published by *Heavy Metal* in the United States, and for some readers at least, such a panel is bound to have been fraught with potent intertextual hints regarding the process of generic and thematic fusion at work in *AtIS*. Indeed, the *Heavy Metal* issues which contained teasers for *AtIS* also included works by Druillet (*Heavy Metal* vol.3, #1 and 2, May and June 1979). Moreover, the panel also borrows from Druillet's aesthetic the practice of having extremely ornate panel borders. In this case, the ornamental motif is reminiscent of the details of the letters in the title page, though less easily identifiable. Their presence is all the more noticeable since no other panel in the comic book bears this kind of framing (a thin black line delineates most of them, with occasional bleeds in the margin and a few instances of blood, explosion or projected objects crossing the panel border). They do not so much reintroduce horror as reintroduce it at the periphery of the narrative, lurking literally between panels, as a reminder that an inflexion point has already been crossed. Pascal Lefèvre argues that the graphic style in comics implies 'an ontology of the representable or visualizable' (Lefèvre, *Medium-Specific Qualities* 16). This panel suggests that style is therefore a central element in the perception of genre in comics, since genre also relies on delimiting what is expected or even possible within the confines of the story; to quote from genre theorists Jonathan Culler, 'Each genre constitutes a special vraisemblance of its own.' (Culler, quoted in Altman 85). Of course, style cannot be equated with genre, since genre is a dynamic process, which not only shapes expectations but is also subject to a redefinition when these expectations are squashed, while the graphic style of a comic narrative is integral to the work considered. Nevertheless, they do interact, through a process of reinforcement, inflexion or contradiction.

The rest of the narrative up to the dinner scene and the apparition of the monster is similar to what is present in the film, both in plot and in its adherence to a recognizable science fiction form. The function of the dinner scene – the appearance of a monster able to draw blood and inflict bodily harm, which enables and encourages a horror reading – is identical in *Alien* and in *AtIS*. The dialogue is mostly identical in both versions, though the choice to include it in panels encompassing the whole crew erases most of the nuances to be found in the film performance, including sexual innuendos and looks of disgust (Gallardo and Smith 42). The difference lies in the length of the moment of

uncertainty. In *Alien*, Kane complains of a pain in the chest and spends the next thirty seconds lying on the table, with the rest of the crew wondering in panic what is happening to him. In *AtIS*, this moment of hesitation is reduced to two panels, with no apparent panic. The apparition of the monster is therefore preceded in the movie by a moment of uncertainty, which displays a series of erasures: banter disappears, a man takes the place of food on the table, the divisions between members of the crew are noticeably diminished and finally, genre and bodily boundaries burst open.

In *AtIS*, there is no such extended preparation. In fact, the scene is distinctly unspectacular, with four rows of panels in a regular layout, people in civilian clothes and a conspicuous absence of the science-fiction background. Comics, through its technical apparatus but also through the conventions readers are familiar with, makes possible this creation of a diegetic space which does not fully cohere (the same locale is seen on page 4, in a brighter light and a distinct technological look). The scene therefore is not meant to raise the readers' expectations. On the contrary, it is meant to appear as dull as possible, preparing the reader not for the *resolution* of a slow-burning crisis (Kane was brought back on board against quarantine regulations and against Ripley's will) but for a *surprise*. On the next page, the appearance of the 'chestburster' takes the form of a spectacular eruption of blood, which not only occupies the whole page but even spreads to the right-hand page, almost a pun on the notion of a 'splash page' (illustration 3). The creature appears to break panel boundaries, to run over the fold and eventually to leave the scene altogether through the edge of the right-hand page. The effect of surprise is effective, through the change of scale of the panel, the change of color scheme (the two pages are literally drenched in red) and the appearance of a shock to the very system of the comic.

What it does not do, however, is induce a retrospective reevaluation of the first half of the story, as the film scene does. This is indeed an inflexion point, but it is far from the first. It signals a return to horror, a shift in the balance established early in the book rather than a reversal. In the general economy of *AtIS*, this generic shock takes place in an already established generic mix. The moment of uncertainty, the slow erasure of boundaries pictured in *Alien* is not necessary since generic boundaries, at least, have already been shown to be porous.

The scene also calls the attention to the constraints inherent to the construction of this type of shock effect in the comics. The emphatic contrast between the dinner scene and the appearance of the monster derives from the necessity to heighten the experience of surprise built in the very structure of the multi-page comics. By definition, surprise marks the sudden appearance of the unexpected. In cinema, a sudden cut can introduce this effect, especially if reinforced by an accompanying aural disruption of the existing situation (Turner 88). In comics, the reader is aware not only of the panel he or she is reading, but also of the general context in which it is located, if only in a peripheral way. In addition, while temporality can in some cases be inscribed in a single panel, we will follow Scott McCloud in arguing that reading comics implies the reconstruction of the ellipsis between two panels, or “closure”, which means that a panel is only fully legible as part of a sequence (McCloud 65-73). There is, in that sense, no present tense in comics narration, but the constant perception of a sequence of three panels. This *simultaneous* perception effectively prevents the creation of surprise, except in the one place where the materiality of the comics page prevents the reader from exercising his or her forward glance: the panels before and after the turn of the page.⁷ Surprise is therefore possible at this junction, but is also *expected* by the cognizant reader or really by anyone familiar with the code of comics (Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée* 44). It is, in other words, highly constrained and severely hampered by the medium.

The rest of the comics illustrate this constraint: all but one of the appearances of the creature rely on the brief turn of the page hermeneutic gap to create surprise. However, the device offers a perceptible diminishing return, as the imposed rhythm (hint that the alien may be here – turn of the page – revelation enhanced by a visual effect, usually a very large panel) becomes predictable.

Surprise, a crucial tool of the horror director, especially in the late seventies (Hutchings, *The Horror Film* 135), is therefore neutralized to a large extent. The most efficient ‘startle effects’ to be found in horror films blend *surprise* with *suspense*, to borrow from Hitchcock’s famous distinction (Truffaut 59). As noted by Peter Hutchings, these startle effect serve to ‘punctuate scenes of suspense’ (*The Horror Film* 135) as an off-screen threat suddenly appears next to a character. This is problematic, in that, as noted by many theoreticians, there is no ‘off-panel’ space in comics (Groensteen, *Système de*

la bande dessinée 50). Because every line is drawn, every sign is put on the page, no space can be seen as accidentally included, no space is neutral. In ‘transparent’ Hollywood storytelling, the viewer may be drawn in to the characters to the point of identifying his or her space with that of the character being shown, erasing the presence of the *monstrateur* (Bordwell, Narration 161). In comics, as recently argued by Jared Gardner, the *graphiateur* is always perceptible: the presence of the monster therefore appears as a choice rather than a frightful accident. (Gardner, Storylines)

More generally, the control a film director may have over the rhythm and pacing of the narrative is yielded to the reader in the case of a comics. This is fraught with consequences in the case of the monster. As early as its first appearance, the monster can be detailed, examined at will, and though the text suggests its speed, its sudden exit (‘It moves faster than the eye can follow’), the reader is at liberty to examine the creature, to reconnect it to the bone-like structures of the story’s title, then to the derelict alien spaceship visited earlier.

Numerous writers have worked on referencing the differences between comics and cinema, and the lists of features mentioned above does not pretend to cover all the problems inherent in this particular transmediation (Lefèvre, Incompatible Visual Ontologies; Groensteen, Du 7e art au 9e art; Pommier; Christiansen). These areas of non-congruence between the two media have an impact on the way specific effects can or cannot be created in each medium, bearing in minds that those effects contribute to a grammar of the horror genre as it is understood in its cinematic form. Because of the many subtractions from the techniques used in horror cinema, horror in comics lacks the element of surprise and the apparent transparency of the medium. It veers towards a more intellectual and less visceral kind of horror, which endures even through sustained examination. The distance between the reader and the comics page – a distance that is much less perceptible in the classical Hollywood cinematic form (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, Classical Hollywood) – collapses horror into a more analytical genre, and brings it closer science-fiction. The sustained examination to which the comics reader can subject the alien turns it into a frightening but understandable phenomenon. A comparison to entomology is tempting here, as the alien pinned on the page may elicit fear as a trace of its cinematic presence only in the way a butterfly in a glass case elicits reminiscence of its fluttering

beauty. The emotional response is curtailed when chance glances are replaced by contemplation, by a more constructed and deliberate understanding of the presented subject. In the case of the alien, even though its first manifestation is kinetic enough, the depiction of fast movements can only urge the reader to move forward, it can only suggest an appropriate reading speed but not enforce it. If the reader fails to identify or to follow these suggestions, the alien quickly ceases to be unknowable and becomes a fully realized, frightening but understandable space monster. Thus, at the point in the plot when the film inverts its genre hierarchy, resorting to the ‘conventions’ of horror, the comic book does not alter its own storytelling techniques to the same extent, in large part because of the inherent constraints of the medium.

Conclusion

The interaction of science-fiction and horror in *AtIS* thus differs from its counterpart in *Alien*. While a horror reading is triggered in the film by an inflexion point after half of its running time, both genres are present in *AtIS* from the onset. The reversal in genre hierarchies after the dinner scene in *Alien* is also much less pronounced in *AtIS*, in part because comics do not seem to have an established style associated with the horror genre, which would support the horrific images with an appropriate narrative framework. Quite the contrary, the shift to horrific content and horrible death appear to be impaired by the constraints of the medium: not only is surprise harder to create, but the increased agency of the comics reader as opposed to the film viewer also reduce any feeling of threat, entrapment or powerlessness. A further explanation lies in the fact that there is no such thing as ‘transparent’ comic books – in the words of Charles Hatfield, ‘there is a marked and opaque quality to the text that makes the narrative resist abstraction or paraphrase into some disembodied “gist.”’ (Hatfield and Gardner) – while in pre-digital cinema, every time an actor is shown on screen, an irreducible remnant of naturalism is present. Body horror works all the more efficiently when an actual body is shown, through the apparently neutral eye of the camera, which also explains some filmmaker’s reticence to use CGI until a recent period, since it was felt special effects done on-camera

retained some of that naturalistic aura (Dufour 122). By contrast, comics foreground their own construction and their idiosyncratic depiction of spaces and bodies. That mediation of content is so crucial to the form that the photo-comic which retains all of the apparatus of comics while doing away with this ostentatious subjectivity of representation, has mostly been a marginal phenomenon. In other words, comics offer a coded representation, through the visibility of their apparatus (as opposed to the quasi-naturalized Hollywood style described by Bordwell et al.), ‘the inevitable encounter with the laboring body of the *graphiateur* and the constrained body of the form itself’ (Gardner, *Storylines* 66). Comics are about code, and as such, a menace is only possible if these codes are among the threatened elements, while cinema, another codified form, has the ability to generate a different form of empathy by offering the illusion of an unmediated access to actual bodies. The horror genre has been in use in comics since the late forties, giving birth to notable works at various times (the EC horror comics, the early *Creepy* and *Eerie* published by Warren, a good part of DC’s Vertigo imprint, etc.). However, it appears that in most cases, the thematic and technical aspects of horror cinema cannot be separated, which makes it problematic not to write horror comics but to adapt horror films into comics. The horror genre did generate a grammar in comics in the fifties, but these short stories and their surprise endings created a specific model with regards to pacing, rhythm and text density, with little applicability to the *Alien* story. While the tools developed for adapting films into comics are numerous and the practice is well-established, it appears that the horror genre is especially resistant to such a transposition.

This reconfiguration of genres is significant since *AtIS* is conceived with faithfulness in mind. Fidelity to a source may not be a relevant criterion for academic studies of adaptation (Murray 5-7; Hutcheon; Wilkins), but it is a factor for tie-in products, in the mind of their producers, creators and consumers. In this case, the widespread promotion of the book, the pain taken to capture the likeness of the actors and the set, as well as the fact that the comic book creators had access to the set and to initial cuts all indicate that fidelity was seen as one of the keys to the success of the transposition. Walter Simonson even suggests that this was a novelty in comics adaptation, pointing out that it was uncommon before *Alien* to license the likeness of the actors (Nolen-Weathington and Ash 32-33), although the *Star Wars*

comics had done it before. This calls to mind Jan Baetens and Marc Lit's remark that: 'novelization seeks to be a double of the film rather than something other' [my translation] (La Novellisation 13). With comic books adaptation being included in multi-media franchise exploitation following the success of *Star Wars*, it is perhaps unsurprising that they too would attempt to create duplicates of the adapted works.

While the popular success of the book can be explained by a variety of factors besides the quality of its content, it tends to confirm that the choice to aim for faithfulness was well received. Yet, for all this attempted fidelity, as we have seen, the generic mix in the comics is much different from the one found in the movie.

It is tempting to consider *AtIS* and *Alien* as what phonologists call a 'minimal pair'. In phonology, this refers to words differing only in one phonological element. A 'minimal pair' in adaptation would be a pair of cultural objects which differ solely by the medium in which they tell a specific story. While the view is somewhat simplistic in the light of the many small differences mentioned above, it suggests that the very act of transmediation has a significant impact on the perception of genre. This shift may be specifically easy to identify in *Alien*, a film which openly mixes very recognizable genres. However, studies conducted on romance and teen fiction, for instance, suggest that similar generic shifts can occur as part of the adaptation process. While a comprehensive theory of these shifts is yet to be written, it seems plausible at this stage that genre gets transmediated at the same time as the work it characterized, getting transformed along the way.

Notes

1. Peter Hutchings notes that films anterior to *Halloween* anticipate to a large extent the slasher format, a list which includes *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974) and *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (Irvin Kershner 1978), yet *Halloween* is perceived as the source from which most posterior slasher films stemmed. (Hutchings, *The Horror Film* 195)
2. It is worth noting, however, that for all its critical legacy, the original *Alien* was successful but not tremendously so. According to Boxofficemojo.com, its original gross of roughly \$100

million dollars would be equivalent to a \$250 million in 2012: the sixth most popular film in the US in 1979.

3. The book appeared in the best-seller list from July 29 to September 16, 1979, peaking in 7th place in the “mass market” category. The film had a limited release on May 25, 1979 then a wider one on June 22, but it was still drawing significant audience in September (according to the weekly figures available on the *Box-office Mojo* website, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=weekend&id=alien.htm>). It is worth noting, however, that Alan Dean Foster’s novelization, following his work on both *Star Wars* and *Dark Star*, was also on the list and was outselling its comics counterpart most of the time. Alan Dean Foster’s work was on the list from June 22 to September 9, 1979, peaking at number 3.
4. Thierry Smolderen argues in *Naissance de la bande dessinée* that the history of American comic strips can be read as a reaction to Muybridge’s photogram, a parody of their mechanic aesthetic. Winsor McKay and A.B. Frost in particular illustrate this wish to sabotage the photogram format. (Smolderen)
5. This assumes that a film or a comics is a specific presentation of an underlying fabula, which exists independently from its presentation in a specific object. Such view is disputed (Lefèvre, *Medium-Specific Qualities* 15-16), but appears integral to any discussion of adaptation.
6. This assemblage is in itself an interesting construct, in that it presents a grid reminiscent of the comic itself, which seems to invite a narrative reading, thanks to a horizontal first strip. The rest of the assemblage, however, is unreadable according to the usual ways of moving through the comic grid. The effect is that of a fragmented narrative in which the reader is invite to cobble together meaning, by negotiating a way through the disruption. The effect is all the more striking since the content of the panels is in most cases perfectly legible, with a realistic depiction of the protagonists and visions of futuristic elements, identifiable through a familiarity with generic conventions.
7. Verbal surprises are still possible, though, since reading speech balloon *is* a linear task, and since peripheral vision generally does not allow us to anticipate their content, except in the case of an unusual typography.

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Illustrations

1. The creature is present in the peritext even before the narrative begins. Goodwin, Archie and Simonson, Walt. *Alien: the Illustrated Story*, inside front-cover. ©Titan Books, 2013.



2. Introducing horror in the comics grid, through the lettering of the title. Goodwin, Archie and Simonson, Walt. *Alien: the Illustrated Story*, p.1-2. ©Titan Books, 2013.



3. The apparition of the creature, breaking the boundaries of the comics grid to reinforce the effect of surprise. Goodwin, Archie and Simonson, Walt. *Alien: the Illustrated Story*, p.35-36. ©Titan Books, 2013.

