

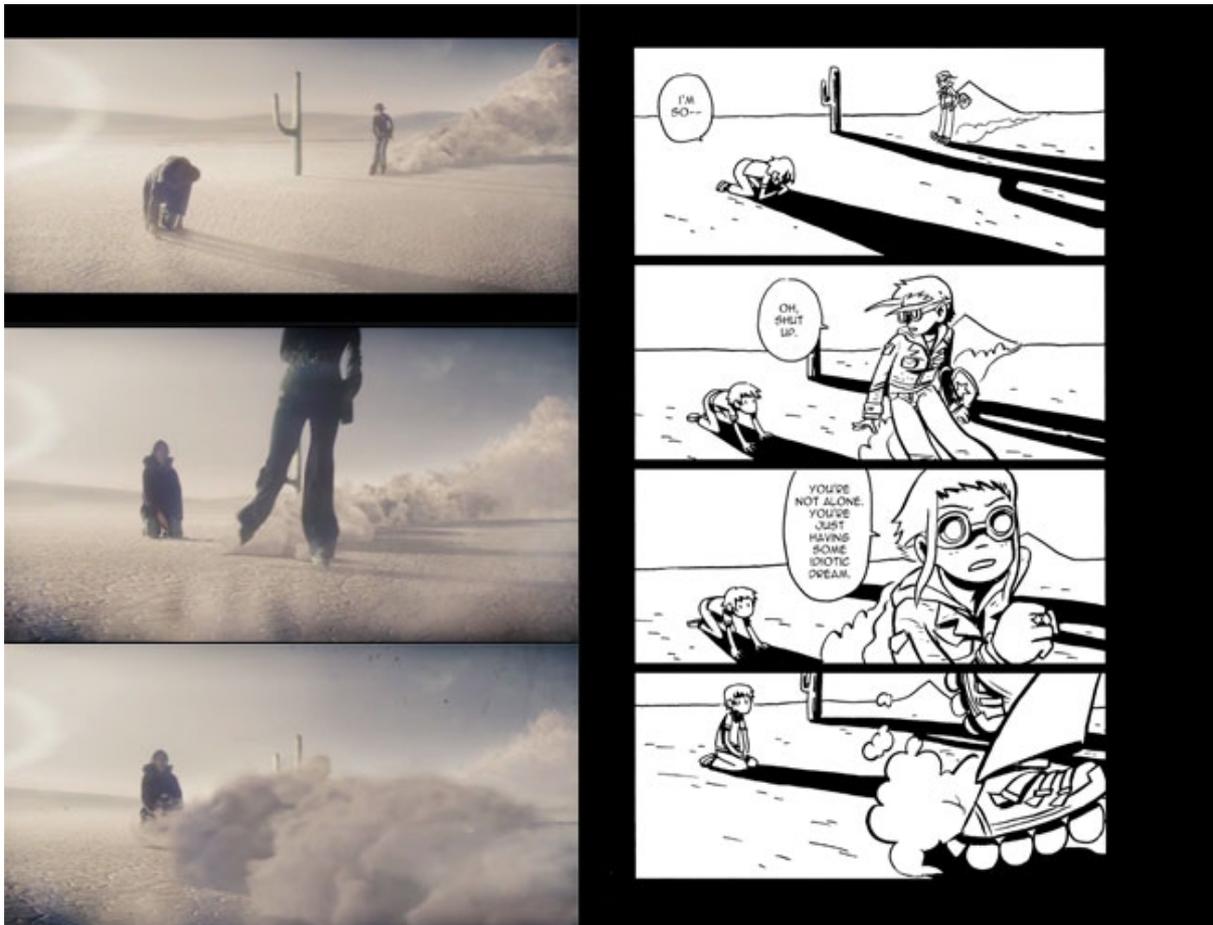
An investigation of intertextuality in *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* (2010) and its wider implications

In a world where practically every popular creative production contains some kind of intertextuality – from our TV shows to our films to our books, arguably even down as far as our magazine articles or our own personal interpretations of real life events – is it possible to create a truly “new” piece of work? Many have decided “no” (or in the case of many of the more low brow Hollywood blockbusters, are not even aware of the concept!) and thus the vast majority of what we see contains it at every turn. Some, such as *South Park* or *The Simpsons* are based entirely around the idea of embracing intertextuality. Every episode is a parody, sometimes even of their own show (i.e. *The Simpsons*’ later mocking of the standard of animation in the early episodes).

It was into this postmodern climate that *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* was released in 2010. The film was a charming breath of fresh air and generally received very positive reviews. (Rotten Tomatoes, 2011) At the same time, it was also incredibly pastiche and filled with intertextuality. An adaptation of a comic series, it is frequently self-referential and takes its narrative from elements of action & adventure, romance, comedy and various popular late eighties and early nineties computer games. Set in Toronto, it focuses mainly on the life of Scott Pilgrim and his quest to win the heart of Ramona Flowers, a girl who has just moved to town as an Amazon.ca delivery person. However, he quickly discovers that she has seven evil ex-boyfriends who have formed a League of Evil Exes lead by her most recent-ex Gideon, who serves as the main “bad guy” throughout the film and series. Scott is also in a band known as “Sex Bob-omb”, which also plays a significant part in the plot of both the original text and the adaptation.

The film succeeds very well in keeping both the “feel” and spirit of the original without simply being a comic book put onto screen frame-for-frame in the vein of *Sin City* (2005) or *300* (2007). This is partially because the original comics come in six volumes, each of which comprises of around two hundred pages and putting it all onto screen simply would not have been realistic without breaking the film up into multiple releases. However, it is also worth noting that the visual style is embellished upon significantly: the graphic novels are almost entirely in black and white and feature very stylised artwork. In the film much of this is kept but also brought into colour and made appear more spectacular. For example, the fight between Scott and the first evil ex Matthew Patel appears in the comic as a battle straight out

of a 2D beat 'em up computer game and also has that feel in the film while also remaining colourful, fresh and modern due to the way it is shot as well as the special effects.



The film version largely uses the original artwork as its inspiration, staying faithful to it while still having its own distinct visual style

Many of the differences are cosmetic and usually necessary – various sequences are shortened or new ones are added to reach the same basic plot point. Due to timing issues (the film was in advanced stages of production by the time the graphic novel was released), the ending is actually quite significantly different. It is hard to put this down to lack of fidelity, however, as presumably if the sixth book had been released earlier the main elements of it would have made it on screen. This being said, there are some notable omissions or changes from comic book to film:

- Most significantly, two boyfriends of Wallace's are left out of the film entirely, including the psychic Mobile who plays a somewhat important role in the third book (when Scott fights Todd). The other, Joseph, plays a minor part in the comic. Lead singer of Sex Bob-omb Stephen Sills is also eventually revealed to be gay. Similarly,

Knives has a brief “hook up” with Kim at a party in the original and this does not make it into the adaptation. The film is relatively progressive in terms of its treating homosexuality as “normal” but one cannot help but think these elements were left out on purpose so as not to risk controversy. The film also, as a result, comes across as being much more hetero-normative than the graphic novels.

- The character of Knives develops differently as the books progress and there is no mention of Scott nearly getting back together with her as in the film. In fact, she winds up in a serious relationship with Young Neil.
- Sex Bob-omb eventually breaks up in the books after attempting to record an album with Scott and Kim overcoming their differences to form a new band featuring just the two of them, this element is entirely absent from the film.
- There are numerous, frequent flashback scenes which explain a lot about the back story of various characters such as Scott, Kim, Envy Adams and Wallace amongst others. These again are almost non-existent in the film.

In terms of overall fidelity *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* clearly falls somewhere in the middle. It is not as painfully faithful as *Sin City*, *300* or *Watchmen* (2009) but at the same time it does not take the large number of liberties that numerous other adaptations do such as *From Hell* (2001). It is interesting to note that unlike many adaptations there was no need for contemporisation as the books were produced between 2004 and 2010 while the movie was written, filmed and produced in 2009/2010. There are some examples of technology in the movie that do stick out, however. The computer which Scott uses to order the books off Amazon.ca looks incredibly dated in both the comic and also in the film version (it is a blocky monitor that would have looked very old in 2004) and many of the retro video game references are left in-tact. However, there is a sequence added to the film where Scott and Knives play an ultra-modern, 3D dancing game at the local arcade which is not included in the books and looks massively out of place in a film which is so heavily referential to elements and narratives from older games. Similarly, less emphasis is placed upon Scott sitting around playing games which is a frequent activity which he engages in the books.

The film is limited in the sense that in order to keep the spirit and feel of the books it is forced to take on a very comic-like feel at various points. For example, the way many of the scenes are shot, while not frame-for-frame, are strongly reminiscent of a comic. Numerous scenes take in wide pans of the action with several characters in frame – this is necessary in a comic where you need to establish all of the important information in a certain number of

frames but is not quite as important in a film where in a short number of shot changes taking up a few seconds you can give the viewer the same information. Similarly, many scenes use very quick swipes from action-to-action in a manner that is very similar to the way action moves from frame-to-frame in a comic book. While one can argue that this adds to the intertextuality of the movie and gives it a nicely stylised feel it is also something which at times feels forced, perhaps because reimagining certain scenes to the screen may have been too complex or time consuming when a layout and format was already in place.

The term “intertextuality” was originated by the literary theorist Julia Kristeva in the mid-1960s and the concept was inspired by Russian theorist M.M. Bakhtin. (Allen, 2000, 15) Fischer (2006, 28) describes intertextuality in the following simple way: “Texts are about life. Texts are about other texts. Life is about texts?” before going on to note that “postmodern literary critics might say that texts owe more to other texts than to their own makers”. This is very challenging because it suggests that because texts in various forms are all around us that instead of literature being produced about life, we ourselves now see our lives as a “narrative” of sorts, framed by what texts have influenced us the most. As a result, we no longer produce art that is about life, we produce art that is about the life we are influenced by other art to *think* we are living. This results in a situation where our personal makeup and experiences are strongly shaped by the narratives around us, hence the idea that an author no longer simply produces his own story. Directly or indirectly, he is usually drawing heavily from other films, TV shows, cartoons, comics, books, video games, newspaper articles and music etc that he has been influenced by over the years. (Worton & Still, 1990, 1) The things which he has been influenced by are, ironically, most like the result of someone else being influenced in a certain manner by an entirely different set of texts. This can often work both ways – while the adaptation of a film into a book is rare, in an essay for the book *The Classic Novel: From Page to Screen* (Gildings & Sheen, 2000, 198) author Bronwen Thomas explains that we often see passages in books that are clearly influenced by the way scenes are shot in movies. This manner of intertextuality can be clearly seen throughout the graphic novel version of *Scott Pilgrim vs The World*, for example many of the fight scenes clearly take their lead from computer games and action movies.

I contend that the production of *Scott Pilgrim* is a direct result of these concepts. By reading the books or viewing the film, one can immediately see the various texts that most likely influenced Bryan Lee O’Malley. The romance element and love triangle is straight out of thousands of romantic comedies. The action-adventure narrative is also present in the vast

majority of films produced in Hollywood these days. Similarly, the idea of a young person in a band which is trying to make it big can be traced to numerous popular films (i.e. *The Commitments* (1991) which may not have directly influenced O'Malley but contains many of the same elements – a band which does not always get along travelling to various farcical gigs trying to make it big). Lastly, the film contains extensive references to computer games such as *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Super Mario Bros*, *Street Fighter* and *Streets of Rage*. The idea of the collection “coins”, of getting “extra lives” and fighting “bosses” while having a “health bar” are all concepts which were popularised by these titles, amongst others.

Even many of the characters can be seen as composites of numerous others, further reinforcing this notion. The idea of the charming, lazy slacker as the protagonist can be seen in movies as disparate as *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *High Fidelity* (2000). The mysterious girlfriend with a past is a frequent feature in Kevin Smith's films such as *Clerks* (1994) or *Chasing Amy* (1997). Even minor characters such as Lucas Lee are intentional parodies of buff action movie stars and the characters they portray. This is not an element in which *Scott Pilgrim* excels in the same manner that it does in terms of the way that the narrative is pieced together. While many of the characters are emotive – charming, witty, funny, likeable or dislikeable as required – they are in general very much pieced together cut outs of numerous other common personalities which we see throughout literature.

What *Scott Pilgrim* makes out of these various characters and texts is an extremely engaging narrative which somehow feels fresh while in many ways being anything but. It combines all of these pastiche elements while still managing not come across as simply being a parody, which is an extremely tight balancing act. It is an extremely postmodern conclusion to come to, then, that both the text and the film adaptation manage to seem original while its nuts and bolts are anything but. As such, it is my contention that in a world where everything has “been done” and in which we tend to see everything as being framed by popular narratives that in order to seem truly groundbreaking we must take what has already been done – in many cases thousands of times – and reinvent it in a manner that makes it feel new or at the very least unfamiliar. Unless there is a very fundamental change in Western culture and thinking, books and movies like *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* will prove to be amongst the most creative (if not challenging) that Hollywood and pop-culture can provide. As Orr (2003, 171) argues “the only way to ‘surpass’ predecessors is to say similar things in more exhaustive, complex or abstruse ways”. It should also be noted that one of the key theorists on adaptation Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006, 4-5) contends that

intertextuality and repetition are a key element of why adaptations have become so popular. We enjoy seeing something that is already familiar being re-imagined or changed slightly. The same old story with a new twist is something which appeals to society as a whole, if box office records and Oscar awards are anything to go by.

In conclusion, *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* is an interesting example of an adaptation in a number of senses. While not the most faithful translation from fiction to film in existence, it does a very good job of doing the original justice while keeping much of spirit of it intact. It is also a fascinating example of intertextuality in the modern age. It is extremely unique not in the sense of its narrative or even that it is *so* pastiche but more so because it is so creative in terms of *who* it draws from. It is a romantic comedy and band journey movie with elements of action & adventure as well as an over-arching narrative which is drawn from numerous retro video games such as *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Street Fighter* and *Super Mario Bros*. It does all of this while remaining an engaging, charming and overall fun movie – it is arguable that no other film in the modern era since *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) has achieved such a feat with the same level of critical success. It is my contention that movies which manage to piece together bits and pieces from other narratives in the most inventive fashion will be the most “original” films that we will see going forward.

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