Sin City and Color: Comic Adaptation and Shifting Meanings

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It is a black and white night; a woman in a red dress overlooks the city below her. "She shivers in the wind, like the last leaf on a dying tree" (Miller 29). She knows the man joining her on that balcony is there to kill her. He lights her cigarette, and her eyes shine a deep green contrast against her bright red dress. The man tells her he loves her and shoots her; her blood blends against her red dress. He will cash her check in the morning.

Robert Rodriquez's *Sin City* film adaptation adds color to the original graphic novel to enhance characterization, serving as semiotic cues to help the viewer read specific story segments in a particular way. Essentially, color in film allows for artistic visualization of who a character is, affording filmmakers a purely visual style to allow viewers a peek into the characters they bring to life on screen. Since comic books and graphic novels are already a highly visual medium, the adaptation of these originals to film becomes more intriguing for their use of color because filmmakers make the creative decisions on what to include or exclude from the original image. Therefore, this article focuses on Robert Rodriguez's 2005 adaptation of Frank Miller's *Sin City* and how color through adaptation, both its absence and addition, serves to create a new visual literacy when watching films. Specifically, this article contributes to the field through examining how color shifts semiotic meanings, especially as they relate to understanding the characters' motives and internalizations.

The adaptation adds the woman's red dress and green eyes to the original monochrome text, utilizing them to tell a different story from the original graphic novel sequence. Specific colors are used to represent a character's identity, so the film uses the green eyes to show potential corruption and allow the audience to read

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other characters as similarly corrupt throughout the film's other sequences. These shifts of character and color cues become part of the meaning-making that filmmakers engage in to create their visions for the characters. Since filmic adaptations of literature are not usually privy to textual cues about a character's psyche, the use of color is one such heuristic approach to enable an audience to engage with this translation from text to screen.

This happens using color as a semiotic process. Semiotics in film is part of the cinematographic language that helps give a film depth beyond mere moving images. Christian Metz highlights that pioneers of this cinematographic language (i.e., Méliès, Griffith) were not concerned with any formal symbolism or message for their films, being more concerned with telling their stories; however, they essentially created cinema's narrative background, taking on the qualities of a language. From a semiotics perspective, the adaptation of color operates as the denotation itself that is being constructed, organized, and to a certain extent "codified" (codified, not necessarily encoded).[1] Lacking absolute laws, filmic intelligibility nevertheless depends on a certain number of dominant habits: "A film put together haphazardly would not be understood" (Metz 68). Without cinematographic elements and this cinematographic language, films risk confusion.

David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) is an example of cinema breaking these rules, and while the film is praised for its originality, audiences are left confused and critics are left pondering the meanings presented in the shifting diegesis. However, careful examination of the colors the filmmakers use helps viewers navigate the film's mixed reality. Regarding *Mulholland Drive*, Katherine Hayles and Nicholas Gessler claim, "A clue is given in the opening shots, which show someone sleeping under red sheets covered by an orange blanket. These colors reappear in Betty Elms's spangled sweater, visually connecting the sleeping Diane with the personae she creates in her dream" (491). Therefore, color is part of the filmic language that helps viewers understand the characters presented in the narrative, even in particularly complex narratives that break other elements of the cinematographic language.

However, just because a filmmaker codifies a specific message or image does not always mean that viewers will decode that message in the same way. This

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[1] Codify is used here, since the use of color is something arranged in a systematic manner, as opposed to encoding, which involves converting information from one form to another.

difference is especially true when considering the use of color as a signifier in the cinematographic language. Metz notes:

> The speakers of ordinary language constitute a group of users; filmmakers are a group of creators. On the other hand, movie spectators in turn constitute a group of users. That is why semiotics of the cinema must frequently consider things from the point of view of spectator rather than of filmmaker. (69)

While films like *Pleasantville* (1998) spend much of their time utilizing color as a key identifier of the narrative plot, comic book films such as Zach Snyder's adaptation of Frank Miller's *300* (2006) create hues to match the tone or signify the placement of the original graphic novel. However, viewers unfamiliar with the original would not be able to decode these signifiers in the same way the filmmaker intended. Before delving into the semiotics of color in *Sin City*, it is important to understand the history of adaptation, adaptation as translation, graphic novel film adaptation, and the history of color in film.

A Brief History of Film Adaptation

Film adaptation has been a film-based storytelling inspiration since early cinema. In 1903, Cecil Hepworth and Percy Stow adapted Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into a short film. William Shakespeare's works were popular adaptations for short silent films as well, including William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson and Walter Pfeffer Dando's *King John* (1899), Clément Maurice's *Romeo and Juliet* (1900), D.W. Griffith's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1908) and multiple renditions of *Hamlet* (Clément Maurice, 1900; Georges Méliès, 1907; Henri Desfontaines, 1908). These early short films only adapted smaller scenes from the larger literary works, and several of them have been lost to time.

As film technology expanded to include longer works, filmmakers could adapt more of the original works into their screenplays and production. However, the nature of the different mediums (i.e., film and literature) presented a new problem: what to include and exclude. Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924), based on Frank Norris's novel *McTeague* (1899), is a turning point for film adaptation. Originally around nine hours long, the film was considered a literal adaptation of the original novel, though Stroheim's script included new and extended scenes not in the novel

(Finler). However, Metro Goldwyn Mayer's final cut was released at only two hours, resulting in a loss of over seven hours from the storyline. These massive cuts change the story significantly from even the original four-hour cut Stroheim had originally presented to the studio (later released by Turner Entertainment in 1999). Early films would adapt certain scenes to tell only part of a story, but *Greed* was an example of when film adaptations become too long and tell too much story. This instance began the trend of elision, or purposely omitting things, in film adaptations, which remains an ongoing trend in cinema, even with epic adaptations such as Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) trilogy.

Film Adaptation as Translation Theory

According to Linda Hutcheon, when viewing film adaptations, audiences often fall into the trap of fidelity, assuming and critiquing the film based on the original work. While the Netflix series *The Umbrella Academy* (2019) had almost ten hours to adapt the original graphic novel into episodic television, elisions still occurred that the critics and fans of the original work noted in their reviews (Hernandez). Such considerations of fidelity become even more pronounced in films that only last from one to three hours. More elision needs to occur, as well as interpolation—additions of characters and plots—to help the coherence of the film. Instead of seeing the film for its own merits, fidelity distracts audiences from the true art of film adaptations. Much like engaging with the original work elicits individual interpretations, film adaptations become the director and screenwriter's interpretations of that work. Films do not need to stay true to the original work to become their own products of individual interpretations.

According to Hutcheon, film adaptations are more closely related to translation theory (16). Films can be seen as more translations of a work, as filmmakers understand the various facets (e.g., mise-en-scene, editing, sound) that are required to convey the meaning from text to film. This perspective is similar to how cultural and language barriers prevent literature translations to uphold the true nature of the original work in its native language. The film and the original work are similar to texts translated into other languages and become "an act of both inter-cultural and inter-temporal communication" (Bassnet 9). Hutcheon notes that film adaptations are actually translations, or "re-mediations…in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images)" (16). These "re-mediations" pull adaptation theory away from thinking

through a purely fidelity-based lens. Instead, seeing adaptation as translation refocuses audience interpretation and criticism on the media differences while simultaneously celebrating and acknowledging the elisions from the original work to the film adaptation.

However, according to Karen Kline, translation is one paradigm of film adaptation that privileges the original work, “while the film exists to ‘serve’ its literary precursor” (71). Kline notes that translation is based around fidelity and how closely the film matches the original work. Hutcheon expands the concept of translation to consider the recoding elements required between mediums, which breaks Kline’s translation paradigm away from pure fidelity-based critiques. Works on translation theory focus on print-to-film adaptations more, while *Sin City* translates from one visual medium to another. Therefore, this article expands translation theory by looking more closely at graphic novel adaptation. While Rodriguez does use the graphic novel frames as his storyboards in *Sin City*, he still uses the digital application of color to shift the original narratives. Considering these additions of color, this article focuses on the film as translation-style adaptation through a Hutcheon-based theoretical lens.

Film Adaptation and Graphic Novels

Comic book and graphic novel adaptations face some issues with translation from the print medium to the film medium. Fans of the original works often criticize the infidelity within the adaptations, but directors of the adaptations are faced with the additional shift from the semiotics of a print medium to the cinematographic language of film. Nico Dicecco states, “Audiences come to understand the intertextual meaning of an adaptation only by actively recognizing the relationship between the source and adapted texts” (69). The problem is, then, that comic book films already have a fan-based audience, especially for larger franchises following characters like Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man. Despite this potential problem (if it really is a problem) the early 21st century saw an influx of comic book adaptations. Marvel Comics and DC Comics even intertextually weave their narratives together across several films, creating shared cinematic universes. For example, Marvel Studios released the Marvel Cinematic Universe, an amalgamation of various comic book characters and storylines within the Marvel Universe from the comic books that have been translated onto films, starting with *Iron Man* (2008) and continuing to release at least two films a year since. Upon the

success of this formula, Marvel Comics rival DC Comics began its own cinematic universe with its characters, starting with *Man of Steel* (2013) and presenting the first female blockbuster superhero film of this new generation of comic book adaptations, *Wonder Woman* (2017). However, major comic book characters and storyworlds are not the only comic book and graphic novel adaptations.

Interestingly, the difference between major blockbuster adaptations of high-profile characters and more art house-style graphic novels differs in how critics respond to the film adaptations. Matthew McAllister, Ian Gordon, and Mark Janovich note:

> Modern comic book-based films have helped establish the industrial formula of the Hollywood popcorn blockbuster: fantastic action movie as cultural event. Comic book materials attract a youthful moviegoing demographic, appeal to nostalgic older audiences, and offer thrills and well-defined archetype characters, especially heroes who also have well-established track records for popularity, licensing, and sequel potential. (110)

This adaptation formula has seemed to work in recent years, following the Marvel formula of intertextuality among its comic adaptation films. Even obscure comics within the Marvel universe, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and *Ant-Man* (2015), which present lesser known characters than those of Captain America or Iron Man, have still proven successful film adaptations at the box office. The more Hollywood-ized adaptations seem to be pulled from already mainstream comic labels, most notably Marvel Comics and DC Comics, who dominate the majority of the comic audience. However, any close association with infidelity to the original texts presents a falsity for the viewers, who may not understand or recognize the differences in the media's differing languages. This is where translation theory's shift away from pure fidelity to instead focus on medium comparisons becomes important. As Pascal Lefevre notes, "The dilemma is, then, that a film that too 'faithfully' follows a comic will seldom be a good film. Since it is another medium with other characteristics and rules, the director has to modify the original work" (5). The problem is that comic book creators risk their narratives changing too much for the filmic adaptation.

This challenge is especially true for more art-house style or one-shot stories or characters, since they are placed within one diegetic storyworld, as opposed to

Marvel or DC Comics characters who have undergone many redirections or reimaginings over the decades. For example, the Batman franchise has undergone three filmic redirections since 1989, starting with Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), and Zach Snyder's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016)—and a fourth is in the works at the time of this article's publication. This character is popular and has already undergone narrative reloads in its comics, so the infidelity issue is not as prevalent in the more art house works. Zach Snyder's less mainstream adaptation of Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (2009), on the other hand, closely follows the original text, but familiarity with the original would allow viewers to notice the absence of the comic's framing through the newspaper stand, which promotes the theme of "who watches the watchmen" throughout the film adaptation. These elisions become key components to the film. The inclusion of these newspaper stand characters would not only expand the narrative's already long length, but also feel unnecessary considering that film can highlight this comics-based concept in a short reel of newspaper clippings with Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A'Changin" playing in the background. The film does not need the narrative exposition that the graphic novel needs, so these changes make sense when considering the different needs from medium to medium. Thus, critics may be more accepting of the elisions in the mainstream comic adaptations, which already have more fluidity in the original text, than art-house style adaptations, which come from a singular or limited-run graphic novel.

Similarly, Robert Rodriguez claims he wanted to closely follow Frank Miller's original story when he adapted *Sin City* to film, even forgoing the traditional storyboards and using the original graphic novels' frames as his storyboard ("How It Went Down").[2] However, this translation from comic medium to film medium still shifts meanings because the use of filmic technology changes the language being used to tell the story. This shift is most noticeable in the film's use of color; therefore, it is important to consider some uses of color in film history to better understand how color is part of the cinematographic language and how Rodriguez uses this language to adapt Miller's graphic novels.

Cinematic History of Color

[2] Rodriguez convinced Miller to make the film through a proof of concept clip (the "Customer is Always Right" sequence) to demonstrate the direct panel-to-screen format he was going to use throughout the entire film.

When the moving image was invented, critics immediately noted the lack of color, and filmmakers from the 1890s to 1920s used colorization techniques including hand painting, spray painting, and dying the film. However, color fades with time, so most of the original color on these early films has since disappeared. Some early films, such as Méliès's *Gulliver's Travels* (1902), show some of the preserved color, but these cases are rare and faded across the frames from their originals. In the 1930s, Technicolor revealed a more natural colorization process by reproducing color frequencies of light and transferring them onto film. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) features perhaps the most notable use of early Technicolor, signifying a cinematic trend of using color in opposition to black and white to tell a narrative between two opposing forces: waking/dreaming, sanity/insanity, life/art, heaven/earth, and past/present (Misek). For example, in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), Technicolor was used to differentiate between Earth and Heaven. The film even included a moment where the character Conductor 71 transitions from these two planes and directly addresses the shift to Technicolor through diegetic monologue. These early technologies highlight how color from its earliest inception into the cinematographic language has been used to signify specific narrative qualities and focus on the opposing forces and shifts in meaning to tell a story.

As Hollywood began to utilize color more, art film directors had two competing opinions on the use of color. Some were opposed to it, as it presented a cacophony to the message being sent by distracting the viewer. Others felt the color could be used to help them send their message (Misek). Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) is shot in black-and-white, giving the message of the simplicity of war-torn feudal Japan, along with the consuming grayness of the mist that surrounds the settings. However, Kurosawa's later film, *High and Low* (1963), is a black and white film that brings in the use of red smoke to signal for the police to locate a kidnapper; as Richard Misek claims, "Had the red smoke appeared in a color film, it would have had to compete for our attention with other colors" (61). This addition of specific colors allows viewers to focus and see the importance of moments, making these additions a specific linguistic element in the narrative. The focus on colors such as these challenge visual literacy by forcing focus on elements within the frame, so that cognitive interpretation of a scene is further molded during film production. This ties to David Bordwell's work on cognitive film studies, which posits that viewers are actively interpreting films as "mental representations

functioning in a context of social action" (17). Color works in these films to guide the viewer's cognitive processing as they actively discern these codified cues.

Another example of color used as characterization is the absence of color. Adding color to monochrome film moments has the ability for directors to showcase something specific. The telling moments are just as much in the color moments as those moments where they are absent, which serve to signify more focus on the colored moments. Misek notes:

> Natural color can usefully order perception as well as confuse it—the redness of red apples in green trees help us see them, and so pick them, eat them, and spread their seeds. However, for the film-maker, whose intentions typically diverge from nature's, the natural superabundance of color is always a potential threat. (61)

This absence indicates that filmmakers are quite aware of their use of color and what they want it to signify. For example, *Schindler's List* (1993) is shot in black-and-white but Spielberg added contrast by making one young girl's red coat indicate both pathos for the viewer and for Oscar Schindler's character. The audience can recognize the red coat among the victims, providing a moment for Schindler to realize the depth of the atrocities being committed. Interestingly, this moment was adapted from the original text, Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*, which highlights a moment where Schindler and his mistress are discussing a young girl wearing a red coat. This manipulation is exactly what Rodriquez does in *Sin City* by adding and subtracting color moments throughout the film. The audience is forced to focus on these colors because the rest of the diegetic space mimics the original black-and-white world of the graphic novels. The absence of color is just as telling in contrast to the moments when color is added.

Adding or subtracting color via digital editing is a relatively new technology introduced into the filmmaker's visionary toolbox, allowing for more autonomy and technical capabilities of telling a story in several ways. Digital intermediacy (DI), introduced in 1989 and popularized in the 1990s, allows filmmakers to manipulate their color post-production, enabling them to add, enhance, diminish, or even remove color from their original digital productions (Wood). Filmmakers can even present two different versions of their own films, as was the case with Frank Darabont's adaptation of Stephen King's *The Mist* (2007), where the original theatrical release was in color but Darabont released the director's cut in black-and-

white, shifting the overall tone of the film to one more reminiscent of 1950s and 1960s horror films. Meanwhile, Snyder's *300* adaptation used a DI in post-production to help match the original graphic novel's tones and colors. The majority of the film was shot in front of a blue screen, and Misek notes how Snyder and cinematographer Larry Fong created this "comic book aesthetic by clipping highlights, crushing shadows, and desaturating colors" (152). This usage of DI displays how the manipulation of not just the color but the depth and brightness of the color shifts meaning.

> It was also in post-production that they settled on yellow as the film's chromatic major and blue as its minor. Every shot reeks of late nights spent in visual effects and color grading suites. Though the intensity of the film's digital color is unusual within mainstream cinema, the extent to which color (and, indeed, film as a whole) has now become dependent on extensive post-production. (Misek 152-153)

The use of a DI in post-production allows filmmakers more ability to manipulate their use of color as signifiers. Much like *300*, this technology was a prevalent part of Rodriquez's production and post-production when he adapted Frank Miller's *Sin City*. Therefore, this article now explores how Rodriquez's *Sin City* adaptation utilized the digital intermediacy technology and how color was used as a semiotic process in characterization.

Sin City, Digital Intermediacy, and Communicating Character through Color

The original *Sin City* graphic novels each tell a standalone story within the gritty, neo-noir of Basin City's seemingly immoral storyworld. In this world, Miller created a narrative that presents a reality showcasing humanity's darker tendencies and desires. No traditional heroes exist in the texts, and the protagonists relate more as anti-heroes who are motivated by their human flaws. For example, Marv in *The Hard Goodbye* is quite aware of his brute presence and mentality, stating that his parole officer's girlfriend, who is a psychiatrist, "tried to analyze me once but got too scared" (Miller 37). Still, he returns to his parole officer for the medicine her girlfriend prescribes him for some sense of normality, at least normal for Basin City. Marv is an anti-hero character, who eventually uses his flaws and brute

presence to avenge his lover's death, for which he was being framed. When Rodriguez translated these anti-heroes onto screen, he does so through DI post-production.

When *Sin City* was in production, Rodriguez collaborated quite closely with Miller while shooting the film to help him "translate" more than adapt the novel. This translation included keeping with the original's monochrome schematic, comic framing style, and extradiegetic narration. Aylish Wood notes:

> Rodriguez separated out different layers of the image and re-grouped them according to the aesthetic of the comic books. Such a logic allows for a different kind of expressive practice in which many conventions of cinematic *mise en scene* are deformed in order to accommodate a comic book aesthetic. (87)

Using a green screen and digital technology, Rodriguez could capture the feel of the original graphic novels, but his use of color post-production is most notable.

Despite filming in color, the post-production DI process allowed Rodriguez to completely strip the colors from the film and later add specific shades, lighting, and colors to his various shots. Lisa Purse notes that despite the film relying "on heavily stylized visuals and computer-generated backdrops, the various planes of the image are carefully arranged to create the requisite depth of field, constructing a much stronger sense of a three-dimensional diegetic space" (21). Additionally, Misek states:

> By lighting actors with low-key light, desaturating the results and increasing the contrast, Rodriguez transformed color into black and white. Adulterating the film's pure blacks and whites are occasional spot colors: a red pool of blood, a blue car, blonde hair, a red dress. Color, removed, is again selectively added, though the colors added are not the same colors as those that were removed. (166-167)

While Rodriguez does claim to "translate" the film, by adding this color through semiotic coding, he shifts the meaning of the narrative to one driven more by the characters' individual motivations. Whereas Miller's original graphic novels were mostly in black and white (save for the yellow bastard and a few female characters throughout the other novels not adapted in this film), Rodriguez's vision for the

film included adding these color moments to serve as semiotic clues into the characters' psyches. The diegetic narration serves its purpose through narrative cinematographic language to be faithful to the graphic novel format and the original graphic novel narrations, but these narrations are still restricted and only focus on the narrator. Therefore, color surrounding these anti-heroes and their femme fatales and villains place more insight into the psyche that the restricted narration cannot fully accomplish.

Although he did not choose to adapt the other stories that did incorporate color, Rodriguez stayed true to the use of color as characterization that Miller utilized in the original series, albeit with subtle and not-so-subtle shifts. Therefore, this article analyzes the four adapted sequences from graphic novel to film to examine the use of color either translated, added, or transformed. For clarity purposes, when discussing the graphic novel, titles will be in italics, and when discussing the matching film sequence, the titles will be in quotation marks. One exception is made when discussing the short stories included in the seventh graphic novel in the series, *Booze, Broads, and Bullets.*

"The Customer is Always Right"

As mentioned in the introduction, Rodriguez's "The Customer is Always Right" adds a red dress, red lipstick, and green eyes to the original short story from Miller's *Booze, Broads, and Bullets*. Interestingly, this sequence opens the framing for the entire theatrical release, when a hired assassin comes to kill a woman overlooking Basin City. The end of the film is the only other time he appears, when he is hired to kill another character Becky (discussed in more detail in the Rodriguez "Big Fat Kill" sequence). Through this beginning sequence, viewers are given a semiotic clue when the woman's eyes glow green. The other times when eye color is shown throughout the film feature corrupt figures who are waiting to be killed, as with Rourke in "The Hard Goodbye" and Becky in "The Big Fat Kill." John Belton notes, "When the man lights her cigarette and tells her that what particularly attracts him to her are her eyes, her eyes slowly change color from black-and-white to pale green" (62). By addressing the eye color directly in dialogue and having the eye color added, the film adds the importance of eye color as a potential signifying clue to something within the rest of the narrative.

While Rodriguez added the red dress and lipstick to this sequence, he did not forego Miller's original graphic novel universe. In Miller's "The Babe Wore Red"

in the same book, another character identified as Mary is seen in a red dress and lipstick. Her fate is different from Rodriguez's murdered woman, though, as she returns to a nunnery after being saved by the unidentified anti-hero. By taking the color from another sequence and placing it into this film sequence, Rodriguez uses color as a semiotic marker that shifts the original graphic novel's narrative meanings. In the original story where color appears, the woman is mysterious and claims to be a prostitute, but the anti-hero immediately recognizes she is lying. Red in this story is supposed to indicate passion and sin, but it is a false characterization (as the woman is a nun), which is why the anti-hero finds the woman's lipstick and her dress without her in it when she returns to her black-and-white habit in the end. In contrast, the woman in Rodriguez's "The Customer is Always Right" represents true passion and sin, as she represents exactly what the woman in Miller's "The Babe Wore Red" was trying to mimic. By borrowing the color schematic from the other story, Rodriguez opens the idea of passion and sin for the character in the opening sequence of the film, discounting the original meaning and use of those colors.

That Yellow Bastard

While "The Customer is Always Right" borrows its coloring from "The Babe Wore Red," only one sequence in the film follows the same color pattern from the original. In the graphic novel series, *That Yellow Bastard* is the only novel that was adapted for this film that includes the use of established coloring. Specifically, the titular character is yellow. Interestingly, the "That Yellow Bastard" sequence in the film stays true to this colorization, where color added to the DI grayscale is for the titular character again. When Hartigan gets Junior's (that yellow bastard) blood on him, even the blood is shown in yellow, indicating the putrid level of corruption that Junior exhibits throughout the sequence. In the story, Hartigan hunts Junior so that he can save a young girl named Nancy Callahan from being molested by Junior. Despite his heart condition and his closeness to retirement, Hartigan pursues Junior and manages to save Nancy, though he is shot by his partner and recovers only to be placed in jail, having been framed for molesting Nancy and Junior's other victims. Only Nancy believes him and sends him letters during his imprisonment. Unfortunately, Junior survived Hartigan's beating and is now a putrid yellow man, intent on finishing what he started by finding Nancy several years later. The rest of

the sequence follows Hartigan as he attempts to save Nancy, only to finally kill Junior and in turn kill himself once he knows Nancy is safe again.

However, it is important to note that the yellow blood and the yellow skin of Junior are the only moments of color throughout this sequence. Hartigan is the closest to being a traditional hero character in this story, as he is the foil to the other corrupt cops in Basin City, including his partner. The absence of added color in this sequence is significant and contrasts the other sequences adapted in the film because Hartigan's motivation is to save and protect Nancy. He does not seek revenge, though Junior does. In contrast to anti-hero Marv in "The Hard Goodbye," whose blood is red and who also seeks revenge, Junior's blood being a putrid yellow signifies him as more sickeningly corrupt through his motivation. Marv's red blood signifies his passion for revenge, and the lack of such coloring for Hartigan suggests his more noble motivations. Here, Hartigan's character is considered, while Marv will be discussed in the following section.

Another moment to discuss here is the prominent use of Kadie's bar in this sequence, where the grayscale lightens and adds some light colorization to the girls working there. The colors are never predominant, but every time the interior of Kadie's appears on screen, this shift in the DI also appears. Since Kadie's is a central location in the film and novel, the color indicates the bar's purpose as a safe haven. The girls inside this space have this light colorization to indicate a softness in comparison to the harsh world outside the walls, where everything is in black and white. However, it is important to note the color is never as intense as in the other moments throughout the film. Instead, it is soft and subtle, almost like Kadie's represents a safe space where color exists but does not blind anyone with its intensity.

This contrast inside of Kadie's becomes particularly important for the character of Nancy. When Nancy dances at Kadie's, she is seen with this light colorization, but outside of this space she lives in the same monochrome world as the others. For the three anti-heroes in the three long sequences, Nancy's dancing on stage creates this ethereal creature throughout the original graphic novels and throughout the film. In Miller's *The Hard Goodbye*, Marv notes, "Plenty of nights I've drooled over Nancy, shoulder to shoulder with all the other losers like me" (54). However, in Rodriguez's "The Hard Goodbye" sequence, the film contains a moment not in the original novels where Dwight is introduced and addresses Marv and Nancy inside Kadie's, stating, "They'd've tossed them girls like Nancy back then" when discussing what Marv would have been like as a Roman warrior. In Miller's *A*

Dame to Kill For, and in the film sequel that adapts this particular graphic novel, Dwight states, "She may be showing off everything she's got in a joint filled with horny drunks, but Nancy's the safest gal in the world. Everybody keeps their hands to themselves. They know what happens to you if you don't" (Miller 85). She represents safety for the anti-heroes, so they in turn make sure she is safe.

In the sequel, *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For* (2014), co-directed by Rodriguez and Miller, Nancy's story continues after Hartigan's death. Like the male anti-heroes in the first film, Nancy becomes the anti-hero in the second film and is now shown without color inside Kadie's, a place where she once was safe. Not only does she physically change her appearance, but her color is stripped from her as well. This sequence parallels Marv's story for revenge in the first film, as Nancy teams up with Marv to take down the people responsible for Hartigan's death.

The Hard Goodbye

In Miller's *The Hard Goodbye*, Marv is motivated by revenge of a woman, Goldie, who showed him one night of passion in exchange for protection (he discovers her motivation after her death but is still moved by her act). His own negative self-confidence and awareness about his looks and personality showcase why he would feel strongly about Goldie, often referring to her as "my golden goddess." She can see past his exterior to appreciate what he really had to offer her: protection. So, when he wakes up to discover her dead body and that he was being framed for her murder, Marv seeks out revenge in a post-mortem "protection" of Goldie. When Rodriguez shot "The Hard Goodbye" sequence, he kept to the original's monochrome schematics, but he added Goldie's blonde hair color and the red satin sheets and lipstick to codify this passion and "golden" compass that seem to drive Marv.

This addition is equally contrasted in Marv's blood showing red, while the other anti-heroes throughout the film's sequences do not appear to bleed red. Discussing the aesthetics of color in *Sin City*, Philipp Schmerheim notes:

> Blood is an unremarkable element presented to the audience in a non-haptic way, which makes the isolated red-colored representations of blood all the more haptic. One instance is the The Hard Goodbye sequence, in which Marv's blood is sometimes represented in red. In these scenes, he is in the middle of seemingly dangerous situations and

> suffers injuries that for normal human beings would be life-threatening. Marv, however, is represented as an almost invincible character—and the red color of his wounds becomes a marker of his invincibility. (122)

However, this "invincibility" is not entirely accurate when viewing the use of red blood compared to the others, who could also appear as invincible in the diegetic storyworld Miller created. Hartigan is shot and left literally hanging by his neck in *That Yellow Bastard* but remains alive, and his blood is not shown as red. Instead, Marv's red blood in this sequence displays his character's motivation for revenge. He sees red, so he bleeds red, as do those he hurts and kills throughout the film sequence.

Another moment that clues the audience into this semiotic use of color to characterize Marv is during the opening sex scene in the sequence. While Goldie (alive) presents this colorful and lit presence, the still monochrome Marv completely contrasts her color. Marv stands as this dark, black and white character against Goldie's full color and light against the red sheets. Wood notes:

> While Goldie is a cliché, a prostitute wrapped in red satin sheet, the use of colour is not necessarily saying anything about her status as a sex worker. Rather the colour sets in play an alternative set of resonances that sit in relation to the emotive environment already established by the greyscale aesthetic. (291)

Adding the color here presents Goldie as a passionate figure, and Marv's descriptions of her as a "golden goddess" against his colorless presence allows viewers to see what Marv sees and feels in those moments. In the original, no colors exist to present this, so adding these colors signifies the passion and awe (i.e., "golden goddess") which he places upon this moment and upon Goldie.

This representation is further contrasted with the red blood that consistently falls on Marv's body throughout the rest of the sequence, but only when he is driven for revenge. Purse notes that the film's

> violent, episodic narrative repeatedly returns to physical confrontation and its visceral bodily consequences, and the stylized visuals often work to emphasize these results of physical collision and penetration: blood,

> cuts, bandages, and scares glow red or a stark, fluorescent white against the monochrome articulation of the storyworld. (22)

However, his blood no longer shines red at the end of the sequence. His reason for revenge is complete, so his passion and motivation are gone. He returns completely to the monochrome existence he had before meeting Goldie.

Big Fat Kill

Perhaps the most interesting and challenging use of color for characterization in the adaptation is in Rodriguez's "Big Fat Kill" sequence. In this story, Dwight is interrupted by his liaison with Kadie's bartender Shellie (no longer in color now that she is outside of Kadie's) when her ex-boyfriend and his friends show up at her apartment. The rest of the story follows Dwight to Old Town, where he calls on Gail and attempts to help her after Jackie Boy, who is discovered to be a cop, is killed by one of the girls. A truce existed between Old Town and the police force, but killing a cop breaks this truce and Gail will no longer have control over the prostitutes in her jurisdiction. Lindop notes that "the women only become lethal when their autonomy is challenged," which is in direct contrast to the women inside Kadie's bar who represent safety for its male patrons (8). In a final massacre scene, Dwight and the girls stage a coup to ensure they do not fall prey to Basin City's corrupt leaders.

> Not for revenge. Not because they deserve it. Not because it'll make the world a better place. There's nothing righteous or noble about it. We gotta kill them because we need them dead. We need a heap of bloody bodies so when mob boss Wallenquist looks over his charts of profits and losses he'll see what it cost him to mess with the girls of Old Town. (Miller 166)

However, despite this massacre sequence, the blood does not flow red and instead remains in the monochrome world. Yet, when the frame pans around the girls of Old Town, especially of Gail and Dwight, the sky above is red as blood, indicating their primal need to maintain their autonomy. What makes this sequence so complicated regarding color and semantics is that this sequence utilizes the most

mixture of colors throughout, but those colors are not always consistent. There are two colors in this sequence worth noting: red and blue.

The first use of color in this sequence does not appear until Dwight finally gets dressed. Dwight is hiding, and several minutes into the sequence, he is finally seen fully dressed and walking across rooms in a shot emphasizing his red Converse sneakers. After he threatens Jackie Boy, he jumps from Shellie's balcony, and again the film emphasizes his red Converses. Throughout the original graphic novel, Dwight's Converse sneakers are often focused within specific frames, so by adding red to his sneakers in the film, Rodriguez stays true to this focus but shifts the meaning slightly. Additionally, Dwight's car is a bright red, but he is not seen in this car once he reaches Old Town. Much like Marv, Dwight is slightly motivated in the beginning to revenge Shellie, whose ex-boyfriend Jackie Boy belittles and essentially "steps all over her" character. By adding the red to Dwight's sneakers and his car, his motivation to revenge Shellie is noted, but it is not as intense as Marv's thirst for blood. This distinction makes the actual moments of color in this sequence stick out more because Dwight is not completely driven by revenge like Marv but more by a sense of protectiveness like Hartigan. Thus, while his sneakers remain red, he abandons his car in Old Town when he has a new mission to protect the girls of Old Town, and the red coloring no longer overlaps with his revenge.

Dwight is like a quiet anti-hero on the move, which is further showcased by his long scenes in cars. After Miho kills Jackie Boy, Dwight goes on a mission to dump the body and the car in the tar pits. Quentin Tarantino directed this car sequence, and his vision matches that of the rest of the film, using color to show internalization that the restricted narration does not directly allow. Jackie Boy's car is a bright blue, which contrasts with Becky's blue eyes within the sequence, but once he is dead and Dwight begins to drive it, the car loses exterior color completely. Throughout this long dialogue with a dead Jackie Boy, the car's interior pulses with blues, reds, greens, and yellows, indicating the discord within Dwight's mind, despite his outwardly calm and focused exterior. This colorization matches the hallucinatory dialogue Dwight has with the dead Jackie Boy. Once they reach the tar pits, the colors fade back into the black-and-white.

While blue traditionally signifies depression or even stability, the film suggests new meaning here. Instead, blue is used as a challenge to that stability. Jackie Boy is a cop, who is supposed to be a hero figure, but the film presents him as both corrupt and violent. Additionally, the film depicts Becky as a timid young woman (played by a young Alexis Bledel, whose image adds to this character even more),

who should represent hope and naiveté. However, the use of blue here signifies that not everything is what is appears. A cop and a naïve young girl can be bad, just like much of Basin City. This world has shifted the traditional meaning of blue into something more somber and corrupt.

In the original graphic novels, one place occurs where blue plays a predominant role: with the character of Delia in “Blue Eyes,” “Wrong Turn,” and “Wrong Track” in the *Booze, Broads, and Bullets* short story collection. However, this character and these short stories (much like “The Babe in Red” color parallels in “The Customer is Always Right” sequence) are not included in the film adaptation, but the bright blue eyes are transferred to another character, who is revealed as corrupt. Becky’s bright blue eyes throughout the film mirror the consistency of Delia in the graphic novel short stories. Delia is later revealed to be corrupt, just like Becky is at the end of the *Big Fat Kill*. Becky is a victim of circumstance, though, whereas Delia is a trained assassin. Therefore, Rodriguez’s translation manages to shift the meaning here with Becky’s blue eyes, which serve as a foreshadowing of her corruption. However, the shift in the adaptation is through the connection with the other moments where eye color is shown, most notably the connection to the *Booze, Broads, and Bullets* sequence in the film, “The Customer is Always Right.” Not in the original graphic novels, the ending sequence frames the entire film with the hired assassin from this short story. Becky tells her mother she loves her on the phone and hangs up, knowing that death has come for her. This action is similar to the woman in the red dress at the beginning, who dialogues with the assassin, who may be aware of his intentions but seemingly ignores her fate. Just as the woman in red’s eyes shine green in the beginning sequence, Becky’s blue eyes at the end of the film (and throughout) help viewers understand why the assassin has returned to frame and close out the film.

Conclusion

While Robert Rodriguez added color to the original graphic novels he adapted for the *Sin City* film, he managed to place himself in the conversation about the use of color and meaning, specifically as it relates to adapting graphic novels. Color as a signifier for characterization tells a more complex story and adds character depth that can be difficult to achieve in films with a large ensemble cast. However, color and their intended meanings can fail if the codified meaning does not match with the other elements in the cinematographic language. Price states:

> A red car appears red precisely because it is the only color of the spectrum that the object itself cannot absorb. All of this should raise serious doubts about the possibility of an intersubjectively verifiable interpretation of works of art in color, as it points to the inescapable fact that despite our best intentions we will all experience it in slightly different ways. In this sense, language becomes a way of regulation perception. (79)

While people may experience color differently, adding specific colors to black and white films focuses the meanings through the cinematographic language the directors utilize. Without other colors to distract, the viewer can interpret these colors with more precision than other films. This is precisely what Robert Rodriguez does with his adaptation of *Sin City*.

While there are moments of color within the film that are not addressed here, such as Manute's golden eye, this article's main purpose was to dissect how color added complexity to the anti-heroes, femme fatales, and main villains throughout four sequences in the film. Specifically, the use of color throughout as semiotic markers for these characters' psyches during particular shots was explored. Adaptation's infidelity to the comic book is often the biggest criticism in comic film adaptations, but Rodriguez's *Sin City* actually does something remarkable through its moments of creative departures and additions to the texts. By adding this color, viewers are given stronger insights into Basin City and can connect on a deeper level cognitively with these characters. His translation demonstrates his own interpretation of these characters. Even though these characters do not fit into a perfect model of good versus evil, Rodriguez's use of color shows the audience that there is more to Basin City than just black and white.

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