

Opening Gambits: Staging Comics & Television in Serial Film, 1936-2008

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In one way or another, serial narratives always reflect on the parameters and conditions of their own serialization—through devices like the ‘previously on...’-segment featured in many contemporary TV series and the recapitulation of past events through expository dialogue, for example, or by foreshadowing future events (which has become conventionalized in post-credits announcements that promise the return of iconic figures like James Bond or Iron Man). Individual installments of a series thus place themselves in the context of other episodes or films. Once the serialization of popular narratives, properties, and figures crosses media platforms, their latest incarnations by necessity situate themselves in relation to other media as well. On such occasions, the thematization of storytelling parameters frequently takes a decidedly medially self-reflexive turn. Our paper examines the ways in which serial film adaptations of graphic narratives from three decades across the 20th and 21st centuries negotiate their relationship to the materials on which they are based, and discusses instances of medial self-reflexivity in the film serials *Ace Drummond* (Universal, 1936; adapting the comic strip of the same name) and *Radio Patrol* (Universal 1937; also based on an eponymous comic strip), as well as in the superhero blockbusters *Superman* (Warner Bros., 1978, Dir. Richard Donner) and *The Incredible Hulk* (Universal, 2008, Dir. Louis Leterrier).

Focusing on the medially self-reflexive opening sequences of these productions, we argue that all four examples of serial film exhibit a comparable preoccupation with their own prehistory in other medial contexts, and that all of them thematize the qualities and affordances of other media—comic strips and comic books in the case of *Ace Drummond*, *Radio Patrol*, and *Superman*, and television the case of *The Incredible Hulk*—in a similar fashion. By arranging comic panels on the film screen, the opening sequences of *Ace Drummond*, *Radio Patrol*, and *Superman*, for example, comment on the affinity between serial storytelling and the sequential art of comics, while simultaneously presenting themselves as worthy filmic successors to their respective source materials. *The Incredible Hulk*’s title sequence, by contrast, evokes the aesthetics of the 1970s television show of the same name by offering a virtual remake of the earlier program’s opening credits. Our examples, in other words, all pit the aesthetics of film against those of other media. In doing so, they evoke a self-conscious mode of reception that is cognizant of the differences and similarities between film and other media. Our paper argues that such a medial self-reflexivity is a recurring interest of serial film, and that the study of such moments can serve as a useful starting point for an inquiry into its shifting position within a broader media environment—from the co-existence with competing serial mass media of the 1930s (like daily comic strips and early comic books), to its integration into the ‘transmedia universes’ of the 21st-century.

Working Bibliography

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Bios

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