

Will Eisner's *The Spirit* re-signified by Frank Miller in the iniquitous spaces of fictional dark cities

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Abstract

The article takes as objects of study Will Eisner's graphic narratives, originating in the 1940s, and their adaptation, which Frank Miller scripted and directed, in the film *The Spirit* (2008). Methodologically, we developed a comparative aesthetic analysis, with a contribution to the intersemiotic processes observed in the passage from print media to cinema. We started from the observation of spatial coordinates in fictional dark cities, which present themselves as iniquitous and violent symbolic scenarios, conducive to the actions of villains and problematic detectives. Next, we point out the reverberations coming from the German expressionist cinema and from cinema *noir* in the represented urban spaces; highlighting the atmosphere of sexualization linked to the *femmes fatales*. To conclude, we detailed techno-aesthetic aspects of the translation option of Eisner's work, inserting it into Miller's graphic-cinematic project; with an emphasis on stylization as evocation and as metamorphosis.

Keywords: Sequential Art. Film adaptation. Will Eisner. Frank Miller.

Introduction

In today's world, we are always confronted with ethical conflicts and social maladjustments, exacerbated by restlessness facing *dark cities'* nights in the *urbes'* immediacy that roar. In this sense, the fatalistic tone and the cruelty, beyond the paranoid and claustrophobic atmosphere of numerous recent film productions, would be manifestations of an emblematic and or allegorical scheme of representation.

The phenomenon can be observed in the dialogue between comic books and cinema (GUIMARÃES, 2012), that had already been occurring in the last decades of the twentieth century and that has multiplied exponentially, with the moment of a generous and productive branch of the Hollywood industry. It consists in numerous adaptations that appropriate characters and scenarios from the printed media, more specifically from the Ninth Art. It is a kind of genre, not yet theoretically delimited, which explores a successful formula that radically affected the relationship between the comics, the cinema and the crowd – in which, as a rule, uses a set of references, reformulations and reinterpretations, within the limits of fidelity's *aporias*. In conformity to Hutcheon (2006, p. 20), “[...] the rhetoric of ‘fidelity’ is less than adequate to discuss the process of adaptation. Whatever the motive, adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new.”

If the cinema showed caution regarding the comic adaptations to the screens as a possible source of B-movies, from the late 1970s, such a posture has been gradually overcome, with super-productions that have become great public success, such as *Superman* (1978), screenplay directed by Richard Donner, and *Batman* (1989), by Tim Burton, among others. The trend has widened with the recent *boom* of filmic adaptations from comics, that Bordwell (2006) denominates *comic book movie*, considered by him as a major segment in the present-day film industry.

In this article, we cut-off the theme, choosing as object of study the film *The Spirit* (2008), an adaptation of Will Eisner's graphical narratives, originating in the late 1940s, which Frank Miller scripted and directed.

Methodologically, we have developed a comparative aesthetic analysis, with input in the inter-semiotic processes observed in the passage from the printed media to the cinema. We started from the observation of the spatial coordinates in fictional dark cities, that were presented as violent and iniquitous symbolic scenarios propitious to villains and troubled detectives. In the sequence, we pointed out the reverberations of German expressionist cinema and noir cinema in the urban spaces represented; highlighting the atmosphere of eroticism linked to the perverse enchantment of the *femmes fatales*. To conclude, we detailed the techno-aesthetic aspects of Eisner's oeuvre translational option, inserting it into Miller's graphic-cinematic design, with emphasis on stylization as evocation and as metamorphosis.

We aim to elaborate reflections on certain peculiarities of the techno-aesthetic option of narratives originally diverse and chronologically distant; as well, we intend to emphasize certain peculiarities of immoral plots and of armed conflicts that are the thematic core of the works at hand.

Our theoretical contribution focuses on the theories of adaptation and inter-textuality as well as in the research of recognized authors on Comics and Cinema.

From the trajectory of the Spirit to the graphic-cinematic project of Frank Miller

Initially, it is necessary to return to the original text, more specifically to the creation of detective Spirit, by Will Eisner, in 1940. Eisner's sequential narratives were printed during the past decades, having all these versions until nowadays; and the artist's name was integrated inextricably to Sequential Art, that Eisner raised to the level of Ninth Art. As theorized by Eisner himself:

The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit. [...] In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language – a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of Sequential Art (EISNER, W. 1989, p. 8).

The graphic artist resized the traditional comics using visual strategies, like the absence of frame, an effect that can become part of the narrative, because the freer arrangement of scenes on the page will promote the disposition of the psychological climate, besides defining the emotional atmosphere of that part of the plot. The non-compliance to the page division in vignettes was used by the graphic artist a way to strengthen the contrast between visible zones and shadows, in specific game for defining the picture's totality, configuring a dramatic space full of folds and ruled by obscure and antagonistic forces.

According to Moya (1996, p.142), *The Spirit* is comparable to *Citizen Kane* (1941) in the trajectory of the cinema: "Anthological work. Takes, fusions, cuts, unusual angles, use of sound and shadows, in a visually revolutionary language". *The Spirit* is undeniably a watershed in the history of Comics and it was published from 1940 until 1952. There were more than 600 stories during twelve years of this hero's first phase, in addition to a daily comic strip that last from December 8th 1941 to March 11th 1974. All these narratives had seven pages each, conglobing a wide variety of situations, with a touch of acid humor.

Shortly after the Second World War, the extremely commercial atmosphere forced Eisner to put his hero aside. Only in 1966, the Spirit reappeared in a *New York Magazine's* special edition, and in two Harvey Comics' publications. Thereafter, the narratives of the Spirit's adventures were reprinted in several editions and series for collectors¹.

1 After 1973, this series turned to be edited by Kitchen Sink Enterprise, that published all the post-war narratives, a selection of the first stories (*The Spirit: The Origin Years*) and new adventures (*The Spirit: The New Adventures*) written and illustrated by renowned authors like Alan Moore, Eddie Campbell, Dave Gibbons and Paul Chadwick. Since 1990, DC Comics started printing all the original series in luxurious editions with the title: *Will Eisner's The Spirit Archives*. (Source: www.moebiusgraphics.com. Access on: April 20th, 2019).

Particularly, concerning the protagonist, we believe that the problematic hero revealed by Eisner's work anticipates the way the mass media has begun to incorporate new temporalities and expressive spaces, where they do not fit polarities. Thus, while comic book superheroes represent the overestimation of the Greek concept of the hero – as someone willing to sacrifice, destined to protect and serve the group to which he belongs –, Eisner's urban hero mixes universal characteristics; being someone who grows in the experience of the journey, a being in transformation.

The 1940's front-cover image (Figure 1), allow to observe as the masked knight rider (or masked punisher), different from the other protagonists of contemporary fiction, came to break paradigms preserved by comics during the first four decades of the twentieth century (GUIMARÃES, 2012):

1) Eisner's character moves away from the super-heroes figures and from their fancy dressings, and take on a more sober appearance: regular suit and tie, a hat and a mask covering only the eyes.

2) Different from the other comic characters, Spirit does not represent a regular law agent, as he is defeated by villains when he is unable to face urban evils, therefore not solving the problems. He emphasizes the irony of his own existence (sometimes, using acid humor), as being another victim of social maladies and of life's incoherencies.

Figure 1 – 1940's Front-cover



Source: http://www.devir.com.br/hqs/will_eisner. Access on: 15 feb. 2019.

The loss of the sacred aura, that surrounded the heroes since antiquity, is typical of 20th century. However, even in Eisner's works, as symbolic beings, the heroes continue supplying a psychological need of human being. Times change and propitiate the appearance of heroes who are the fruit of certain contexts or eras, which visibility becomes extremely shocking, suggestive or aesthetic, thanks to neo-technologies of images' creation. Although in contrast to the malevolent appearance of the bad guys, contemporary heroes also endowed with physical attributes, typical of the classical heroism or of "good guys" from romantic narratives. According to Campbell (2007), modernity allowed the creation of ambiguous or problematic heroes that are established in the space of difference.

The task of the hero to be employed today is not the same of Galileo's century. Where, then had darkness, today it has light; but is also true that where had light, today has darkness. The hero's modern task ought to configure itself as a search aimed to bring light again to the lost Atlantis of the coordinated soul (CAMPBELL, 2007, p. 373).

If Will Eisner's recognized genius remodeled significantly the sequential art, it is also correct that Frank Miller's graphic proposal pointed out a difference in relation to conventional comics. It should not be forgotten that Miller, as well as the master Eisner, was also responsible for a revolution in sequential art, with his *Batman – The Dark Knight* (1986). Created by Bob Kane and successively designed by different artists, the batman had already existed since 1939. However, Miller redesigned him, imprinting his own mark of innovative style to DC Comics' hero, in a much darker and stylized universe.

Even the comic's format was different from those used in past days. *The Dark Knight* has a cinematographic narrative structure that has revolutionized the comics in terms of blueprints, in its composition, in framework, in shots and in terms of perspective. Some pages even show the pictorial result in black and white, with rare chromatic events. Something very similar to what happens in the printed and filmic versions of *Sin City* (2005, 2013), and in the movie *The Spirit* (2008). In this aspect, Miller has been notable by how he makes his printed vignettes, in the alternation between figure and background, between positive and negative, as expressive resources of his visual language, thing that he tries to reaffirm in the filmic adaptation of Eisner's work.

Concerning Batman comics, it is necessary to emphasize the image of Gotham City resignified by Miller in the late 1980s (Figure 2), whose reverberations become present in the most recent Batman films (Figure 2) as well as in *The Spirit*, here studied. The metropolis became more lugubrious and angular, with its accumulated spaces of light and shadows that recall the concept developed by Deleuze about "Gothic geometry" in German Expressionism, when talking about Fritz Lang's cinema.

It is a violent perspective geometry, that works by projections and somber shores, with oblique perspectives. The diagonals and counter-diagonals tend to replace the horizontal and the vertical, the cone replaces the circle and the sphere, the acute angles the pointed triangles replace the rectangle or curve lines [...] (DELEUZE, 2009, p. 85).

Figure 2 – Gotham City stylized from Frank Miller



Source: <https://www.amazon.com.br/Batman-Dark-Knight-Returns>. Access on: 10 apr. 2019.

As similar to Gotham City, Spirit's actions in Will Eisner's work take place in a trap-infested city, a noir emulation of a certain New York valued by a game of light and shadows, a recognized brand of the master of Graphic Novels (GN). The author explains about his fictional cities (EISNER, 2009, p.19): "Growing up in New York, its internal architecture and its street goals are inevitably contemplated. But I also know many other big cities, and what I show is intended to be common to all of them".

Later in the same work, poetically, the creator of Spirit philosophically asks:

Is there a city without walls to shelter your soul, or drown out your screams and choreograph the dance of your life? If walls exist to protect and exclude, don't

they also contain and imprison? Would they serve, then, to love or to hate? After all, walls are not made by nature... (EISNER, W. 2009, p. 125).

The graphic artist's refined visual memory reveals a city in decay, set against the backdrop of the Great Depression. His biographer, Michael Schumacher, states:

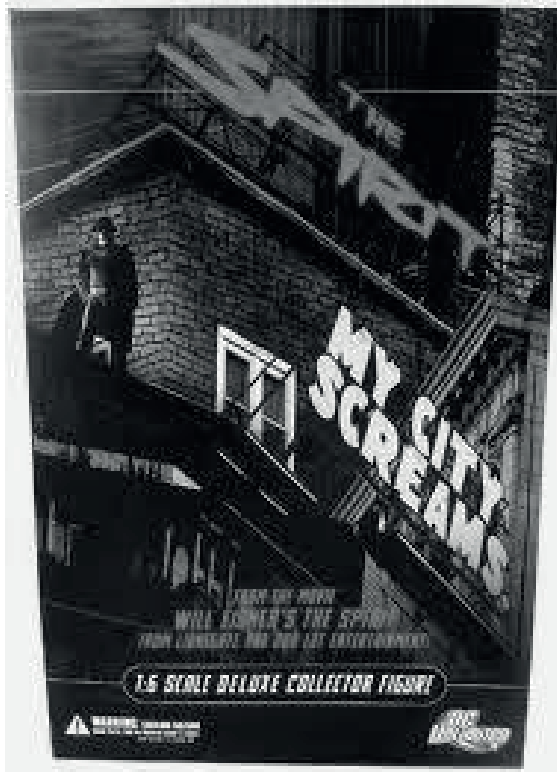
Will Eisner boasted of being able to draw from memory the New York of his childhood, of not having to consult old photographs or research to conjure up images of large tenements with cast-iron fire escapes, clothes hanging on clotheslines between buildings and broken steps in the entrance stairs; fire hydrants and subway grates, endless rows of filthy windows, kids playing stickball in the street while their parents struggled prodigiously to stretch out the last few dollars from Tuesday to Friday, screaming frustration at each other and, if the time was right and the curtains were closed, surrendering to tenderness to restore certainties and, at most, exchange promises (SCHUMACHER, 2013. p. 11).

It is perceived that the nocturnal urban space of the fictional metropolis conceived by Miller is close to expressionist artworks, like those treated by Lotte Eisner, in a study about German cinema of the 1920s:

The construction of space with shadows and lights abrupt contrasts, luminous corners, which decompose or bind certain architectonic elements [...] or the plane of one of those stairs that share lights and darkness, already made classics in German cinema, where the spectral flash of a gas lantern is shed [...] (EISNER, L. 1985, p. 171).

The comparison of the images from both graphic artists permits to assure that Miller had imprinted his designer's conception, in the filmic version of the master's work, which he had adapted and directed. In this part of the study, we can exemplify with a 2008 movie poster (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Poster of the movie *The Spirit* (2008)



Source: <http://www.aficionados.com.br/13-obras-de-frank-miller>. Access on: 10 apr. 2019.

The poster's letters iconize the city itself, in voluminous size, configuring a dynamic verb-visual image, with its forms that search for the tri-dimensionality. At the top of the piece, in stylized letters, in red color, appears the title of the film. The distribution of other letters, which form the phrase "MY CITY SCREAMS", forms the city's violent image. The shot from the bottom up accentuates the fictional architectural ensemble. Shapes of buildings are suggested through the letters, representing a space intensified by signs and specific scenes, with the intention of emphasizing the dramatic quality of visual effects' elements. Undoubtedly, the visibility is much stylized, because of the use of black-and-white that creates a cold and obscure urban atmosphere. In accordance to Guimarães (2014, p. 309), "[...] Miller's style, highly stylized, is projected indelibly in present-day universe of graphic narratives, as well as in his filmic adaptations". In this inter-textual dialogue, shadows highly stressed punctuate a deep visual mystery, related to degraded environments of the metropolis in their limits: beyond good and evil.

In Miller's movie, Central City is a vague city, whose only residents seem to be policemen and gangsters. It is possible to identify a visual continuity in comparison to *Sin City* (2005), aspect that is emphasized soon in the film's beginning images, with the iconic red and flowing tie of the character, standing out ostensibly from dark grey of his clothes, and the absence of colors on the set. In both Eisner and Miller styles, images escape from the classical and static standard in the creation of the masked character. His graphic works are formatted by cinematographic language, for example, just by paying attention to the camera angles, presented in the vignettes of both graphic artists, in noir cinema style.

The shadows play a narrative role or contribute extravagantly in the space making, besides all the mystery aura created by the use of illumination. This strategy makes urban settings marked by a photography full of contrasts between black and white, by the employment of angled camera, and the use of *plongée* and *contre-plongée*, composing the image of sadness and stagnant place. McLoud (2005, p. 132) explains the process:

Background can be another valuable tool to indicate invisible ideas, above all, the world of emotions. Even when there is few or none character's distortion in a scene, a disruptive background or expressionist may affect our interpretation of the character's inner state. Some standards may produce an almost physiological effect in the spectator's mind, although they will perceive these sensations, not to themselves, but to the characters with whom they identify themselves.

One of the intersection points between Comics and the Cinema is the *storyboard*, whose structure is much similar to the comics. This similarity is explored, particularly, by GN' authors. It was after Will Eisner that vignettes clearly incorporated the photographic camera strategies, which is observed in Frank Miller's work, whose GN are true *storyboards*. That means, they have been thought to be filmed.

Many of the images refer to "audio-visual" pre-figurations still present and elaborated in those printed frameworks. Miller varies the layout, using numerous resources that could correspond to the standards classified by McLoud (2005, p. 79) as: *moment-to-moment* (few differences between the comic frames), *action-to-action* (actions in the same theme), *subject-to-subject* (themes inside the same scene or idea), *scene-to-scene* (change time and space), *point-to-point* (show isolated parts of a scene), and *non-sequitor* (apparent lack of logic between frames). These are details to be noted, as many other links between the different codes, such as the emphasis given to the white soles of the shoes, both in the film *The Spirit* (Figure 4), and in Miller's GN.

Figure 4 – Image of the movie *The Spirit* (2008)



Source : Fonte: <https://www.filmaffinity.com/us/movieimage.php?imageId=635978765>. Access on: 10 June 2022.

This kind of plane detail provokes an identification with elements of our daily routine, making us believe that the genre of graphical narratives, still little studied by the academy², enables the appropriation of massive communication elements to accomplish, for example, the emblematic proposals of Pop Art; that is to bring the art of life closer together, and make the museum dialogue with the pages of popular publications and its cinematographic adaptations.

The *femmes fatales* in noir movie tracks

It is not surprising that Eisner's protagonist is always surrounded by beautiful women, with voluptuous body curves that dominates in the world created by the illustrator, in the noir cinema track, where the protagonist is frequently a smooth-talker detective and rarely gentle, that becomes emotionally involved with different fatal women.

² About the critical heritage: Even though Will Eisner is worldly known as the “master of Comics”, there are almost no books or academic articles about his style in particular, except for the ones he wrote by his own. The majority of references, national and international, are dedicated to Eisner's biography, or to historical elements of the Comics development, in addition to the vast number of interviews given by the artist. Brief research in the internet concluded that in fact there are many references to the artist in blogs, sites and similar media, but nothing on the field of academic research. With regard to Frank Miller, it is even worse, since there are many “lay” things on the internet, but rare academic texts about his work involving comics and cinema. USP's Nona Arte journal is an exception, but its publications focus on Brazilian productions of comics and GNs, with very few articles dealing with North American GN and their creators.

The stylization of the actors' performance is determined by the deliberately artificial setting by chromatic nuances. In the feminine figure everything is substantially sensual: the heavy make-up and the exotic figurine show the voluptuous forms of those who, due to their body language and facial expression, may kill or be killed. Such shocking paradox constitutes the adequate scenario for the affair (and betraying), the seduction, the falsehood, and the mortal game that impregnate this genre's typical atmosphere.

Figures 5 and 6 – Front-cover V.13 (1946) and Front-cover V.14 (1947)



Source: http://www.devir.com.br/hqs/will_eisner. Access on: 15 feb. 2019.

The front-covers of the genuine GN exemplify the relevance given to the feminine figure, with the evil charming; and their comparison with the film poster makes it possible to realize the similarities of the strong stylization.

Figure 7 – Miller's movie poster (2008)



Source: http://www.impawards.com/2008/spirit_ver17.html. Access on: 10 June 2022.

This masculine figure, different from the current cinematographic standard in the United States of America (USA), introduces the anti-hero concept, so relevant in the composition of a dubious and lugubrious time, in which appear the *femme fatales*: voluptuous women, sagacious, and with complex personalities. In original comics' narrative, as it happens in noir movies, the encounter between each femme fatale and the anti-hero generates an intense sexual tension that, in those days, pointed to the ruin of some US family values.

In the movie *The Spirit* (2008), except for the physician Ellen Dolan, performed by Sarah Paulson, the chosen actors pretentiously represent the sensuous and dangerous women, as exemplifies Eva Mendes performing Sand Saref, and Scarlett Johansson as Silken Floss.

On the other hand, the image of Death is composed by the feminine figure of the actress Lorelei Rox, in an evanescent and seductive way, presenting blue-like chromatic nuances, in a movement of intensification prominent by sparkling reflexes. In her encounter with Spirit, her omnipotent appearance creates phosphorescent moments that punctuates the limits of infinite.

Similar proceedings can be observed in the protagonist's appearances, performed by Gabriel Match, in a nocturnal space, strategically illuminated, as happens in noir cinema, with its games of lights and shadows.

Figure 8 – Frame from the movie *The Spirit* (2008)

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZA3kQoZjkU>. Access on: 10 June 2022.

In the shots, each plane and each angular is calculated so they can effectively participate in the actions. Each scenic element performs a well-determined role in the plot, resulting in a game of oppositions and silhouettes, in a sliding of textures in black and white, with rare insertions in other colors, which reveal and alternatively pilfer the characters' presence. It is precisely in moments like these that the aesthetic dimensions integrates itself to the cinematographic language, giving it remarkable artistic values.

Faced with these unusual and extremely fleeting images, as had already occurred in relation to the film *Sin City* (2005), the spectator could have their attention diverted and pass to an aesthetic experience of perception to which they are not used to having. Thus, the emphasis given to forms, which come to be a predominant part over content, would provoke, at least in the most sophisticated spectator, an aesthetic experience similar to that experienced in front of what is considered "art cinema". With regard to this question, we will inquire about the director's proposal and the paths that certain films point out in relation to the genre in which they are inscribed, seeking transversal references to certain works considered emblematic.

The stylization as evocation and metamorphosis: an iconic translation process

The mediations between culture and history, as well as the artistic practices, cannot be underestimated in its dialogical interfaces. Past texts are rewritten or re-imagined in other forms of art, frequently revealing a critical perspective about the relations between tradition and individual talent.

In discussions situated in the communicational context, the theme about comic industry stands out, in its increased expansion, and well succeeded interface with other media, mainly with the cinema. Each product indicates a popularity from others with it dialogues and vice-versa, in a way that the mutual interactions work in a synergistic way.

However, only recently the theories of adaptation have been understood as a promise capable of filling the methodological gaps, in the context of the dialogue between narratives in different supports – which we consider relevant in the so-called the media convergence era (JENKINS, 2008). According to Stam (2008, p. 225-226), “the filmic adaptations fall in the continuous whirlpool of transformations and inter-textual references, from texts which generates other texts in an endless recycling process, transformation and transmutation”.

We believe that both urban narrative filled with violence of *Sin City* (2005) and the poetic quality from the epic *300* (2006) dialogue inventively with *The Spirit* (2008), because the latter one has a differential configured after the visual commitment with printed images. Despite the marked differences, in terms of contexts and genres, these films are not mere Comic byproducts. On the contrary, they point to a language dialogue, in which only the equilibrium can produce adequate fruits, and configure what can be understood as a process of aesthetic or iconic translation.

The adequacy of technological resources requires the investment of an effort to creatively explore new media so that a work can establish itself as a significant aesthetic object. It is a question of attitude towards what the new tools can offer and the recognition of the creative role of technique in relation to the imaginary.

In this sense, Guimarães (2015, p.102), seeks to “demonstrate that the preservation of the traditional cinematographic illusion is not a priority of productions linked to Frank Miller. On the contrary, it is possible to verify an extrapolation or a refusal of the imagery codes referring to the representation of actions”, used to exhaustion in the cinema of ‘transparency’. The question is discussed by Xavier (2008, p. 100), on referring to anti-illusionism in the cinema of ‘opacity’: “The frontal attack to the realistic of the cinematographic image comes, initially, from a specific trend marked by an ostensibly pre-stylization of the material put in front of the camera: the expressionist trend”.

In view of the rereading/transcription of the work of Will Eisner carried out by Frank Miller, we believe it is pertinent to affirm that in it there is the act of harvesting, taking, recognizing traces of the previous text, in order to re-signify them, which is evidenced in the proposal of the film, in its dual orientation: evocation and transformation. We emphasize the poetic concept of two simultaneous activities: the reminiscence of the previous writing/narrative and its transformation, thinking about its applicability to the approach of the project of the adaptation of the graphic narrative of Will Eisner for the cinema, which would prove how the texts complete and if interrelate. We hypothesize that the film adaptation made by Miller from the work of Will Eisner is based on the Bakhtinian concept of stylization. According to

the Russian thinker, the form that most characterizes the “inwardly dialogized clarification” in linguistic systems is stylization:

Necessarily, here are presented two individualized linguistic consciousness: The one which represents (the stylist’s linguistics consciousness) and the other one that is to be represented stylistically. The stylization differs from the direct style, precisely by this presence of the linguistic consciousness (of the contemporaneous linguistics and of its audience), in the light of which the stylized style is recreated and, having it as a background, gains relevance and new meaning (BAKHTIN, 2002, p. 159).

We could consider that Miller makes, therefore, an author’s movie, because he overlaps his style to the original creation of Eisner. His conception of a GN aesthetically embodied in the expressive film’s strategies and in the processing of the narrative and of the screenplay, as well as in the posters and in all the marketing material of the cinematographic artworks (Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 9 – Eisner’s graphical style (1940)



Source: <https://downloaddehq.blogspot.com/2020/04/spirit-1985-will-eisner.html>. Access on: 10 june 2022

Figure 10 – Eisner stylized by Miller (2008)



Source: <https://www.filmaffinity.com/us/movieimage.php?imageId=635978765>. Access on: 10 June 2022.

We consider pertinent to talk about stylization, a procedure in which the idea is not necessarily to eliminate the information, but to concentrate on the relevant information of images. For Bakhtin (2002), the concept of parody and of stylization work as elements of inter-textual tension and are related not only to verbal texts, but also are repeated in other artistic domains. Stylizing is about to create a graphic code that represents its own object, and so giving it a new form. In order to reach these visual solutions it is necessary to create a universe in which graphic forms are under control, with rules that give unity and some logic to this world. Therefore, it configures the stylization as evocation and metamorphosis, in an iconic translation process.

The film's masked detective (played by Gabriel Match) is very similar to the one originally created by Eisner; as for the antagonist, there is a radical transformation, perhaps due to the casting of actor Samuel L. Jackson for the role. In the comics, the villain never shows his face, while in the film, he assumes a strong role (Figure 11).

Figure 11 – Frame of *The Spirit* (2008)

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZA3kQoZjkU>. Access on: 10 June 2022.

In the scenes where the villain, Dr. Octopus, and the detective appear, it is observed the photographic option of the narrative space suspension in several moments, as well as the sharp cut out of black and red colors, becoming next of gothic and expressionist geometry. Responsible for an unexpected art direction and for visual effects that imitate the comics' aesthetic, as done in the movie *Sin City* (2005) that was co-directed with Robert Rodriguez, Frank Miller tried again to explore, in screen, the visual essence of graphic narratives in his movie of 2008.

When it comes to the urban scenery, generally rainy or snowy, we understand the translational process done by Miller as a manifestation of that quality feeling mentioned by Peirce (1990), that is the *qualis* of the signal process: that semiotic dimension which focuses on sensitive aspects (concrete or material) of the signs and what give relief to its supports. Based on the peircean semiosis, Deleuze (2007) associates what he calls image-affection to a *quali-sign*, and exemplifies:

Some movies of Joris Ivens give us an idea of what is a *quali-sign*: 'The Rain' is not a specific rain, concrete, fallen somewhere. These visual impressions are not unified by temporal or spatial representations. [...] it is a number of singularities that presents a rain as if it is in itself, pure power or quality that combines without abstraction all the rains possible and make up any corresponding space.

We believe the same could be said for the ubiquitous fog or snowflakes in both *Sin City* (2005) and *The Spirit* (2008). What matters is semiotically perceiving the *qualis* of the images in these films as an iconic potentiality, as a quali-sign. According to Plaza (2001, p. 90-91), “The iconic translation is able to produce meanings under the form of qualities and appearances, similarly. [...] From the point of view of semiotics assembly, the iconic translation works in syntactic assemblage, because it privileges the quality structure”. *The Spirit* (2008), in terms of translation and adaptation, is related to what the author denominates by iconic inter-semiotics translation, that is, the one guided by analogy and by equivalencies. According to Plaza (2001, p. 98), “[...] the formative depth of the sign puts into play those aspects of similarity that provide aesthetic effects”.

We are interested in pointing out Miller’s graphical-cinematic option, while keeping the focus on the stylized reconstruction of the original Eisner’s GN scenes. They are cunning mimetic strategies that we could characterize as enablers of specific aesthetic affects.

Returning to Bakhtin’s (2002, p. 161) line of thought, we can consider that Eisner’s re-reading made by Miller “[...] is not only the social forces dialogue in the static of their coexistences, but also the dialogue of times, of the epochs, of days, of what that dies, of lives, of born”. The novel makes individuals and ideological universes represented in their texture in their texture become, assented by Bakhtin (2002, p. 162), to recognize “one’s proper vision in the world’s vision by the other. In it, it is possible to operate the language ideological translation, the overcoming of the one’s strange character – that is only apparent and fortuitous”.

Final considerations

Our reflections are directed towards affirming that the unusual look of the filmic narrative *The Spirit* derives from another type of *mimesis*, whose objective is not to represent the city, the people and the actions as if they were real. What is wanted is to represent the narrative as it is printed, that is, graphically, with all its expressive power linked to the visual arts. In this sense, Miller’s film, unlike films that seek to represent the most delirious fantasies, with increasingly surprising effects - as in the case of 3D works - goes in the opposite direction to the special effects of mainstream productions, as usually happens in vast and recent filmography linked to the universe of comics.

Understanding the polemical film, not only in its subject, but above all in its iconic subtleties, embraces the contextualization of various effects, that goes from completely emotional to symbolical and metaphorical elaborations.

The deliberate blurring of the images of the city on the canvas contributes to the desired anti-illusionist effect, by emphasizing the relationship between art and technique (*techné*); enabling the film to be created in the light of an “artificial” thought. Artifice reigns. We could infer that, when graphic or cinematographic images are obscured or deformed, bordering on virtuosity and implausibility, it is not important to try to recognize in them the images of the

world. Its function is not to make the images closer to our understanding. It does not matter whether such characters or scenarios are feasible or not, what matters is their proposal to transform the tangible real, in favor of the fantasy of simulacra simulations, characteristic of the iniquitous spaces of fictional dark cities.

Since the publication of Eisner's GN, during the Second World War, decades have passed; now there are multiple wars, in addition to the ubiquitous urban guerrillas. Contexts, texts and inter-texts reaffirm the similar anxieties, still present in the film of 2008, with its violent and lugubrious urban spaces that nourish remain our imaginary.

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