SHAPING THE MAXX: ADAPTING THE COMIC BOOK FRAME TO TELEVISION

by Greg M. Smith

One of the primary sources of aesthetic innovation is adaptation from other media. As media historians have noted, film gained new formal devices when practitioners tried to find formal equivalents for devices in the realistic novel or the 19th century stage melodrama. When a medium borrows an effect from other existing media, the borrowing medium often evolves and gains expressivity.

Adaptation across media is necessarily a process of translation, since one cannot merely import forms from one medium to another. The work of adaptation transforms the original content because the new medium cannot simply duplicate the old. Producers adapting works from other media make choices about how to translate formal elements into their functional equivalents in the other medium. By examining this translation process, we can potentially gain insight into the aesthetic assumptions shaping both media, and we can use this insight to reshape the expressive norms themselves.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the formal innovations of MTV’s “The Maxx,” an animated adaptation of the first 11 issues of Sam Kieth’s comic book (published by Image Comics), relying on both close textual analysis of the animated series and information gathered through phone interviews with the series producer, Claudia Katz. Examining this inventive adaptation helps provide insight into the formal differences between contemporary comics and television.

This article points out how the animated version of “The Maxx” reveals rarely used capabilities of the television medium, such as the use of multiple frames. This analysis illustrates what comics can do easily that television has traditionally had difficulty doing, and vice versa. An innovative adaptation such as “The Maxx” helps us sharpen our understanding of both the original and the adapted media.

Faithfulness to the Comic

Of course not every film or television adaptation of comic books takes advantage of the richness of both media. When film (or video) producers adapt comics, they tend to import a set of character relationships and a recognizable iconography. When Warner Bros. adapted Batman for the big screen, they adopted a set of characters (Batman, Bruce Wayne, butler Alfred, the Joker, etc.) whose traits and interrelationships are well established, as well as a set of familiar icons (the Batmobile, the Bat-signal, utility belts, etc.). Character relationships and iconography are some of the easiest qualities to import across media because they appear to be the properties of a diegetic world and not characteristics distinct to a medium. There is nothing which specifically ties the story of how young Bruce Wayne became Batman to the comic book medium. This story can be told using the techniques of several different media, yielding great potential for cross-marketing.

Finding functional equivalents for comic aesthetic devices is a much harder process than merely importing established comics characters. Film and television producers only occasionally attempt to transfer narrational or stylistic properties of the comics they are adapting; for example, the film version of Dick Tracy (Warren Beatty, 1990) borrows the primary color scheme from the comic. Acknowledging the ‘comicness’ of its sources often merely means a broader, tongue-in-cheek tone, such as in the 1960s “Batman” television series.

Not so for director Gregg Vanzo and the Rough Draft animation studio, which adapted The Maxx comic for MTV. Before the animated series aired, The Maxx comic’s creator/artist/writer Sam Kieth said, “I don’t think there’s ever been a cartoon that’s going to be as close to the comic.” Although creators are known for their hyperbole, this statement seems to be borne out in the finished product. “The Maxx” animated series is as literal an adaptation of the comic book as is imaginable. Claudia Katz, producer of “The Maxx” television series, called the comic book their “roadmap,” and the metaphor is fitting. One can watch the animated series with the comics in hand and read along virtually page by page with the animation. Katz contends that Rough Draft wanted to “duplicate the panel layout” of the comic as a kind of “challenge” to see if such a faithful rendering of a comic could be done. Also, they wanted to be faithful to The Maxx’s comic origins because of their respect for Kieth’s artistry, both in his drawing and his framings. With precious few exceptions, deletions, and additions, “The Maxx” television series duplicates the story of The Maxx comic to a degree unprecedented in mainstream media.

The first thirteen issues of the comic The Maxx tells a narratively complex story that gives us a glimpse of the ‘real’ and ‘fantasy’ worlds of several fictional characters who have been emotionally scarred by abuse and violent trauma. The story revolves around Julie, a “freelance social worker” who dresses like a prostitute, and Maxx, whom she befriends. In the

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real world of New York City, Maxx is a homeless man dressed in purple tights. Without warning, he sometimes finds himself transported into the ‘Outback,’ a hyperreal version of Australia in which he has superhuman powers to defend the Jungle Queen (who strongly resembles Julie) from monsters. The ‘real’ and ‘fantasy’ worlds become increasingly intertwined as the story proceeds, and it becomes clearer that the Outback is a creation of Julie’s mind to help her keep a childhood trauma deeply repressed. In both worlds Julie and Maxx struggle against Mr. Gone, a serial rapist/murderer with the magical ability to mastermind evil schemes (even after Julie beheads him). These thirteen issues detail Julie’s process of slowly uncovering her repressed trauma and coming to a limited version of psychic healing.

The animated series version of “The Maxx” is notable not only for its fidelity to the gristy, complex, and psychoanalytically-rooted story presented by the comic book, but also for its attempt to translate the modern comic book’s aesthetic to television. “The Maxx” animated series constantly reminds us that this is an adaptation of a comic book and that the comic medium is governed by different set of aesthetic limitations and potentialities.

Perhaps the most noticeable expressive advantage comics have over television is a variably sized and shaped frame. When I rediscovered comics in the 1980s during my early graduate studies in film and television, I was struck by how much expressivity film and television relinquish by maintaining a constant frame size. Film generally employs only a few possible frame sizes ranging from the Academy aspect ratio (1.33 times as wide as it is high) up to the widest widescreen ratios (up to 2.66:1), and once the film uses a particular aspect ratio, it rarely varies from that established norm during projection. For most of its history, television has been limited to a single aspect ratio (1.33:1). After I spent some time reading modern comics, this fixed frame size began to resemble aesthetic tyranny. Why can’t we have frames taller than they are wide? Why are we limited to rectilinear frames? Why not circular frames, irregularly shaped frames, overlapping frames? Why not multiple frames?

Comics can accentuate a leap from a great height by using a tall, thin frame. They can show complex interconnections among different actions by arranging single frames into an overall page layout. Actions in comics can extend past the frame boundary and intrude into other frames on the page. In comics, decorative graphic patterning is not limited to the area within the frame. The frame itself can convey meaning, taking on jagged shapes for violent action or incorporating motifs (such as the jungle-decorated frames in The Maxx comic that cue the audience that action is taking place in the fantasy land of the ‘Outback’) Through ‘splash pages’ (frames which occupy one or two entire pages), comics have the distinctive potential to convey in purely graphic terms the importance of a (literally ‘big’ moment in the story. Creating a new frame shape in comics is as easy as drawing a new outline. Television’s and film’s seemingly fixed, invisible frame creates a restriction on expressivity in comparison with the comic frame.

Of course there are exceptions to the filmic/television norm of the fixed frame. The silent era regularly used a wide range of graphic mattes, irises, etc. to frame the onscreen action, and the practice continued into the sound era, although this practice began to decline in the 1930s and is now considered rare and antiquated. Certain mainstream and art films have used multiple frames, although this device is quite unusual. Recent television commercials advertising Hollywood films tend to use ‘letterboxing’ (showing the ‘film’ image as a wide band across the screen with black space above and below) to emphasize that the cinema offers a widescreen experience which differs from the standard television screen. Television news consistently uses a convention of simple overlapping frames during onscreen anchors’ broadcast (showing a graphic inset in a corner box over the anchor’s shoulder to convey visually whether the current story is about a local fire or a White House controversy).

These limited exceptions do not overturn the filmic and televsional norm of a standard frame that is wider than it is tall, keeping the expressive capacity of the television/film frame relatively unexplored. While staying within the institutional standards for broadcast television (at no point are we instructed to set our TV sets on their sides to create a taller, narrower frame), “The Maxx” animated series uses a variety of devices to simulate the effects of the more expressive comic frame.

Simple Translations

Translating an expressive device to another medium is not always difficult. Before moving on to more complex examples, I will briefly describe simpler techniques used to adapt The Maxx comic to television.

The first simple solution is to find an existing televisual convention that conveys roughly the same effect elicited by the comics device. For tall, thin comics frames, one can substitute vertical camera movements. “The Maxx” animation often
translates wide frames in the comic into horizontal camera movements. Camera movements also provide the translation for more complex comics devices. Usually a change of comics frames signals a new spatial perspective on the action, but sometimes comics maintain continuous space across frames, and these frames serve as adjacent ‘windows’ on the action. “The Maxx” animation uses a pan to render a multi-frame image of Julie looking out a window.

These functionally equivalent camera movements assume that the size of these comics frames makes the comics reader glance back and forth (or up and down) to parse the information in the frame. The camera movement in the animation simply does the glancing for us. There is an important phenomenological argument to be waged over how well these camera movements translate the comics frame. The comics reader is free to interact with the frame at an order and pace of her own choosing, but the broadcast television viewer is bound by the order and duration of the camera movement, leading one to question to what extent these camera movements are indeed equivalent to the comics framing. For the moment, we will simply note that these televisual aesthetic strategies do intuitively seem to be functionally equivalent to the comics devices they are attempting to translate.

Some comics devices designed to convey a sense of movement in a static medium are expressed as normal figure movement in the animation. Animation is by definition ‘moving pictures,’ so it can show a continuous action onscreen with little effort. Comics, however, must convey a continuous series of actions using still pictures (for instance, by chopping the action into multiple slices of frozen time). Comics can use these multiple frames to depict figure movements or even a kind of ‘camera movement’; in the words of producer Claudia Katz, “No matter how beautiful a frame is, [in animation] it has to move.” “The Maxx” animation exploits video’s facility for depicting movement and substitutes actual camera/figure movements for the comics equivalent.
Reshaping Television

I have briefly noted a few of the simpler ways "The Maxx" animation translates The Maxx comic book's different frames. Each of these translations attempts a seemingly transparent substitution of one conventional device for another. For example, a pan, in general, does not necessarily remind the viewer of a wide frame in a comic book. Pans are a convention of film and television animation; by themselves, they usually do not point us toward another medium to explain their function. "The Maxx" animation, however, frequently reminds us that we are watching material which originated as a comic book, and it does so largely by using explicit frames within the television frame. Tall, thin frames in the comic may become tall, thin frames against a neutral black background in the animated series. Wide comics frames may be depicted as wide frames-within-the-frame in the animation. Irregularly shaped frames with overtly drawn borders appear against a neutral background, or are superimposed over other images. Add a touch of animation, and the frames themselves can float across the screen in a complex intermarriage of animation and comics capabilities. Frames can grow and shrink against the background. A frame can shrink to make room for another frame pushing its way onto the television screen.

Cel animation has long had the technological capability to reconceptualize the animated frame along these lines. Similarly, television has had much of the same potential for over a decade, with wipes, pushes, and mattes being standard features of television switching equipment (although recent technologies such as computer animation and digital video effects make "The Maxx" animation significantly slicker). The limitation which kept television from exploring the broader use of frames-within-the-frame was not a technical one but a conceptual one.

The assumption which has shaped decades of television practice is that the 1.33:1 frame given by the technology is the invariant frame. Practitioners have long known how to make tall, thin frames within the basic frame, but they have lacked a conceptual model for how and why they should use this capability. Television's primary visual model comes from film, which uses a similarly constant frame. The rich medium such as comics reawakens a dormant sense of possibility for the televisual frame, which has long been dependent on its aesthetic inheritance from film.

When film and television use frames-within-the-frame, they generally are reliant on diegetic opportunities provided by...
windows, doors, etc. Shooting through a window or door can make a striking composition, but “The Maxx” animation uses a more innovative approach. “The Maxx”’s television framings do not need to be justified in diegetic terms. Round frames do not have to be motivated by a character using a telescope or looking through a porthole, for example—a frame can be round simply as an expressive means of conveying diegetic action. “The Maxx” animation overtly acknowledges the frame, and in so doing acknowledges its roots in comics.

Nonetheless, “The Maxx” animation does retain some of television’s tendency toward diegetically motivating its innovative framings. For example, a thin frame might be used when the Maxx chases an Isz (an Outback pest shaped like a sperm with legs) down a tight alley way. A passing car headlight creates an animated round frame. The most common diegetic elements used in framing are sharply defined areas of shadow and light. For example, when Mr. Gone kidnaps Julie, we see his apartment as a collection of pools of light, distinctive doorways, and strangely shaped shadows. Realistically, the diegetic element cannot provide enough contrast to make a sharp graphic frame. Headlights or shadows cannot make perfectly distinct frame boundaries separating lighted areas from pitch black, but they can provide a diegetic motivation which justifies using a more explicitly delineated graphic frame.

“The Maxx” animation not only uses frames-within-the-frame more overtly than television usually does, but it also fundamentally reconceptualizes the basic assumptions about what is outside the frame. In television and film, the frame acts as a ‘window’ onto a diegetic world.12 The frame divides offscreen from onscreen space, and these spaces are continuous with each other. If the camera moves, it uncovers another part of that continuous world. People and objects can enter and leave the shot into offscreen space because they still ‘exist’ in the diegesis once they cross the frame boundary. The television/film frame does not call attention to itself because it conceptualized as a transparent, permeable boundary which selects some part of diegetic space to be onscreen.

Comics to a certain extent share this understanding of the frame. In comics it is acceptable for a pie from offscreen space to hit an onscreen character. But comics are not dependent on this conception of the frame as a window onto a continuous diegetic world. Comics also can show an awareness that what is outside the frame is the ‘gutter,’ the white or black area between frames. The gutter is not diegetic space; it is a neutral area outside of the world of characters and plots.

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assembled. In comics the component pieces (frames) remain distinct graphic elements framed by the gutter.

One could argue that film also has a black ‘gutter,’ the area around the projected image. But this blackness acts differently from the black gutter of The Maxx comic book. The black comics gutter intrudes into the diegetic world and becomes a graphic element in its own right. Because the frame can be shaped in different ways, the blackness surrounding it can take on different shapes. Modern comics such as The Maxx have the capacity to show a dance between two partners: the frames and the neutral space of the gutter. As one partner moves, the other retreats, intertwining both into complex graphic expression.

“The Maxx” animation is distinctive for the way it incorporates this alternate conception of the frame into television. By frequently showing us an overt frame-within-the-frame outlined against a black background, the animation calls attention to these frames instead of disguising the frame as a transparent window on the diegetic world. The animation emphasizes that beyond the frame there is black. A ‘camera’ movement is as likely to show us the black space outside the frame as it is to show us more of the diegetic world. “The Maxx” animation relies on this concept of the black outside the frame and turns it into a central aesthetic element. Over and over the animation camera moves across an image into the black gutter, often using a pan to ‘offscreen’ black as a means of making a transition to another scene. In “The Maxx” animation, not only are the diegetic characters animated but the black gutter is also, thus emphasizing the graphic expressivity of the black space.13

Once the animation artists rethought the television frame using a comics-influenced notion of the black gutter, they seem to have latched onto this aesthetic principle in earnest. Even more than The Maxx comic, “The Maxx” animation is full of unusual graphic shadows which intrude into the frame. As noted earlier, the animation makes more of an attempt to justify its framings in diegetic terms, and so the animation is filled with even more numerous sharply defined shadows creating notable graphic effects. This quality reflects the difference between translation and mere mimicry. The animators rethought the original comics material in light of the different conception of the comics frame, and they found moments to exploit this aesthetic principle that the comic only suggests.

After the adaptation process hits upon a central principle for translating an effect across media, that principle can be applied throughout the adaptation. Once “The Maxx”’s animators discovered the expressive power of the overt frame-

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The black gutter in “The Maxx” comic becomes a graphic element intruding into the story space.

within-the-frame, this principle revolutionized their entire project, not just those moments which could be slavishly copied from the original comic. An innovative aesthetic translation produces not merely an interesting adaptation but also a set of principles for rethinking a medium’s aesthetic.

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One Thing after Another

We have seen how "The Maxx" animation can help us understand our assumptions about what lies outside the frame. In addition, "The Maxx" animation also can remind us of other important (but potentially limiting) assumptions about the practice of television.

Film and television are conceptualized as a succession of images which result in various shots. The process of editing a film or television program is to arrange the basic 'shot' units into a linear array so that the audience sees them one at a time. Of course film taken advantage of its capacity to superimpose multiple images simultaneously since its earliest days (e.g., Georges Méliès), but these multiple images are generally for special purposes (supernatural effects, trick films, etc.). Once these superimpositions are created, filmmakers treat these combined images as single shots which then can be arranged into linear order just as any other shot can, thus preserving the normative understanding of film as a succession of individual shots.

Comics provide yet another model for understanding an arrangement of multiple images. Narrative comics can be read as a succession of images, one after another, telling a linear story much as film and television do. But this is not the only way to conceptualize reading a comic book. Comic books also function as pages, as compositional arrangements of individually framed compositions. When they turn to a new page, comics readers first see the page as a whole before they then parse through the individual frames in narrative succession. The comics page is first understood as a unit, and then the reader fits the component frames into that overall structure.

Film and television cannot duplicate this method of reading exactly. By definition film and television control the flow of images presented to the reader, and there is no way for the reader to get a sense of the overall structure other than by watching the linear succession of images. This seems obvious, but like so many obvious assumptions about a medium, this conception contains a blind spot. Conceptualizing the screen as a succession of shots makes practitioners less likely to treat the screen like a page, which can contain multiple component images. Once "The Maxx"'s animation artists understood the value of using frames-within-the-frame, they then recognized that one need not present frames one at a time as television tends to do. They realized that they can present multiple frames on the same screen, treating that screen more like a comics page. They could arrange frames on that page-screen to lend their animation some of the expressive capability of comics, a possibility seldom taken even by other animators. By using multiple frames-within-the-frame, "The Maxx" animation creates an alternate mode of presenting simultaneously occurring actions. The dominant way for film and television to depict simultaneity is through cross-cutting. Cross-cutting is based on the assumption that film screen displays a succession of individual shots, making it impossible to show two different places at the same time. "The Maxx" animators treat the screen more like the comics page, which easily can show simultaneous action in different frames.

"The Maxx" animation also uses multiple frames to serve other purposes which normally would be served by editing. If one wants to emphasize the importance of a small object in a conversation scene, normal film/television practice would

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suggest that the film/videomaker cut to a closeup of that object, replacing a broader perspective on the scene with a detail view. "The Maxx" animation is able to highlight a detail within the scene while still showing us the overall scene's action. For instance, when teenagers Glorie and Tommy hang out at the laundromat, the animation shows us Tommy's groping hand in an overt frame-within-the-frame which overlays the larger image of him sitting together. "The Maxx" also is able to show internal, subjective imagery (memories, fantasies, etc.) in one frame while still showing us external action. This capability becomes extremely useful in telling a story about repressed traumas and fantasy-created worlds, as in the scene where Julie's friend Sarah remembers a humiliating moment.

Once the animation artists open up the possibility of using multiple frames-within-the-frame, they can explore different configurations of these frames. Sometimes multiple frames exist side by side against a black background. At other times one image fills the television frame, creating a background against which to set other framed images. This gives the television screen a sense of overlapping images, of one frame placed on top of another. The animation artists then can take advantage of their medium's capacity for movement, causing frames in "The Maxx" animation to float across other images. "Maxx" producer Claudia Katz says that the Rough Draft adaptation attempts to "bring the comic book to life," creating a sense that you are "looking at a comic page animated." At their most elegant moments, frames in "The Maxx" animation engage in an elaborate choreography, emphasizing one action and subordinating another by enlarging one frame while shrinking another. The result is a blend of comics and television aesthetics which creates a work that uses both media's strengths.

For instance, when "The Maxx" animation depicts the Maxx intervening in a woman's mugging, it uses a bravura display of frames-within-the-frame whose sizes and shapes change rapidly. A jagged frame around the woman's head twists when she is grabbed from behind. When her purse spills, a coin breaks out of the jagged frame and rolls across a neutral black background, followed by a small round frame. The coin bumps into the Maxx's cardboard home, and the animated series uses two tall thin frames to show simultaneously one mugger chasing the coin and the Maxx waiting for him. As the mugger approaches, the frame showing his movement widens until it overlaps the Maxx's frame, and then this frame is swept away as the Maxx wallops the mugger. The mugger's partner then approaches the Maxx's lair, and we see his approach and the waiting Maxx in two interlocking frames-within-the-frame that expand and shrink in relation to each other. Such elaborate choreography demonstrates the expressive capacities of animated and explicit frames-within-the-frame. In "The Maxx" animation the multiple frames of comics do what they could never do on the printed page. Not only do the drawings move but also the frames themselves are animated.

Further Explorations

The justification for using these striking aesthetic devices in "The Maxx" animated series lies in its origins as a comic book, and I have argued that this animation consistently reminds you of its 'comics-ness' by foregrounding its distinctive conception of the frame. Oddly enough, this constant reminder of the comics medium provides the animators with an interesting justification for one of the drawbacks of the animation as practiced in the modern media industry.

In an effort to economize, much animation tends to cut down on movement by figures or in the background, using a form of 'limited animation' that is strangely unanimated. This style encourages animators to draw a single unmoving background and then place minimally moving characters in front of that background. Such animated characters frequently deliver lines with only small body movements such as an opening-and-closing mouth, occasionally engaging in repetitive actions which are easily drawn and cycled (such as running). This creates an alternative universe where people either are running or are very, very still.

"The Maxx" television series is an industrially produced animation product for mainstream media, and so it shares some of this aesthetic of stillness which characterizes such animation. Interestingly, this stillness seems less out of place in "The Maxx" series because this animation so frequently reminds us of its origins in the still medium of comics. It becomes possible to justify certain figures' stillness as yet another consciously chosen strategy to point out that "The Maxx" television series is based on a comic, rather than an awkward byproduct of industrial animation.

In fact, at numerous points "The Maxx" animation emphasizes the stillness of images. For example, when Maxx walks along a sidewalk, he passes figures who seem artificially frozen in midstride. Certain characters' hairdos are blown by the wind (assumedly) into strange configurations, and these hairstyles do not move, even though at times they seem to defy gravity. These figures look more like still comics images of a
"The Maxx" animation certainly demonstrates the potential value of cross-fertilizing one medium's aesthetic with another, and yet there are potentially useful comics devices which this animation does not exploit. In particular, the animation stays away from The Maxx comic's tendency toward highly decorative frames.

Sam Kieth uses many different ornamental figures to call attention to his frames and to comment on the story. For example, he uses jungle motifs to alert the reader that a portion of the story is taking place in the wilds of the Outback. The animated series does not attempt to duplicate Kieth's more fanciful frames. The animation avoids excessively ornamental frames-within-the-frame, although it overtly emphasizes that these frames are to be noticed (unlike the more transparent frames of normal television). Although "The Maxx" animation does not actualize this comics potential, the added expressivity of ornamental frames is still an option to be considered by future mediamakers.

"The Maxx" animation also translates several of Kieth's most intricate pages into a more straightforwardly linear presentation, which robs them of some of their reading complexity. For example, the animation renders the layout printed on the opposite page as a montage of the various component images, requiring a significantly less vigilant and participational reading stance.

At times Kieth interweaves various story spaces into an elaborate compositional whole that is not duplicated in the animated series. An example is provided by a single layout combining 'still imagery' (Julie leaning against a pole) and images suggesting movement (Sarah and her mother descending a staircase). The animated series uses still images and moving images, but it rarely juxtaposes the two in the same frame for long periods of time, as if the animation artists believed that the juxtaposition might call too much attention to the discrepancy in motion. The point is not to criticize the animation for the comics potential it leaves unexplored. Instead I wish to point out unexplored possibilities for future mediamakers to examine. They may find these expressive devices to be as enriching as the ones which "The Maxx" animation does explore.

This article examines one particular adaptation of source material from a modern comic book into an inventive animation, pointing out the ways in which different assumptions about the frame in comics can reshape the aesthetics of animation. By not limiting themselves to the normal conceptions of the television frame (as transparent and
invariably sized) and the television screen (as presenting a succession of individual shots), "The Maxx"'s animation artists uncovered relatively unexplored means for expression in television. The normative conception of the frame in television limits the ways practitioners produce texts, and an exercise in translating media can provide useful perspective for recognizing such limiting assumptions. Any innovative adaptation across media provides a vista from which the critic can examine both media. From this vista we can make explicit what the long history of media practice has kept implicit, and we can use this knowledge to broaden the expressive capacities of the media.

"The Maxx" aired on MTV in United States during the 1995-1996 season as part of an anthology show entitled "Oddities." The animation was done by Rough Draft Studios (Gregg Vanzo, director; Claudia Katz, producer). Thirty-five issues of The Maxx comic have been released by Image Comics from 1993 to 1998 (story and art, Sam Kieth; additional dialogue, William Messner-Loebs).

1 The Maxx animated series was presented in alternating format (along with "The Head") as part of a series entitled "Oddities" (1995). The series also contains material adapted from a Maxx story in the anthology comic Darker Image. All references to Claudia Katz refer to a telephone interview with the author which took place 6 November 1998.

2 I do not wish to suggest that either television or comics have a single aesthetic. Television presents an amalgam of various aesthetic systems, as a brief stint of channel-surfing from music videos to soap operas will demonstrate. Aesthetic properties of a medium are not entirely technologically determined but are produced through the history of practice. Aesthetics are necessarily historical, defined by the practices of the period. In this article I concentrate on the aesthetics of the 'modern' (1980s and beyond) comic book, which has a more flexible use of the frame than earlier Golden or Silver Age norms (although there are inklings of the modern aesthetic in those earlier periods). For brevity's sake, I refer to the 'television aesthetic' or the 'comic aesthetic,' but I do not wish to imply that these are somehow ahistorical properties of the physical medium itself. However, there are broad normative assumptions about the nature of the television frame which are foundational to all these aesthetics, and this article is primarily concerned with these norms, which have remained fairly stable throughout television's history (with certain exceptions noted later).

3 Donald Crafton has noted that from its earliest days, cinema has tended to borrow the content (characters, stories, etc.) of comics rather than to incorporate its formal strategies. See Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), 251-256.


5 Katz further noted that part of the rationale for Rough Draft Studios remaining so faithful to the original material was for cost-cutting reasons, since it obviously costs more to recontextualize an animation adaptation than to use the source comic as a "Bible." And yet this cost-cutting faithfulness is rarely done, which I believe reveals how most animation producers consider a comic book to be a source of diegetic material and not an aesthetic "roadmap," to use Katz's term.
"this thing on MTV looks just like some of those the comics you read" as she called me into the room.

There has been some discussion over whether the film frame best described metaphorically as a window or a picture frame. Charles F. Altman notes that this argument reflects the tension between realistic and formalist approaches to film. See "Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Discourse," *Movies and Methods* vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: U California P, 1985), 517-530. I am using the frame-as-window concept for several reasons. First, I am dealing with mainstream media which tend to operate within the broad confines of realism. Second, I believe that Eisenstein’s formalist assertion of the frame-as-picture-frame was more prescriptive of the kind of cinema he advocated than descriptive of dominant cinematic practice (with the exception of his own highly pictorial films). Third, after having taught film criticism to undergraduates for several years, I find that it is most difficult to get them to treat the frame pictorially: as a composition with balance, weight, and harmony. They seem to ‘get’ the window conception quite readily, allowing them to discuss the tension between offscreen and onscreen space. The difficulty I have experienced in encouraging a more pictorial understanding of the film frame makes me doubt that the frame-as-picture-frame conception is very widely held.

Katz noted that the “dark” storyline of The Maxx comic (involving beheadings and childhood traumas) matches the strong use of black in the comic’s art and suggested that both senses of “darkness” are important to the animated adaptation.

Nonlinear editing has now made it easier for television to display multiple simultaneous images. Following the lead of print advertising (which has long recognized that images can be made into a collage), television (particularly in commercials) is now beginning to investigate alternatives to the dominant conception of the screen as presenting a series of individual shots. Digital video makes it easier to layer still images, moving pictures, and graphics into a complex juxtaposition which resembles a photo collage.

Related animation examples (although not direct influences on Rough Draft) can be found in the work of Paul Diessen—for example, *The End of the World in Four Seasons* (1995), which uses multiple frames to depict several actions onscreen at the same time. Diessen’s career is discussed in Gianfranco Pedrazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 399-11.


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