

# On Media Combinations and Identity (De)construction in Paul Auster's *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*

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## Abstract

In my essay I will look at Paul Auster's first novella from *The New York Trilogy* adapted into graphic novel: *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* (1994) by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, and I will analyze the ways in which the graphic novel (re)presents Auster's prevalent themes in new, unique ways, through utilizing comics' conventions and graphic storytelling methods. I will argue that visual/literal intertextuality and/or intermediality are thematized in the graphic novel's text through character doublings and (narrative) identity shifts. My intention is to discuss the ways in which one medial component interprets or even imitates the elements of another medium, making use of the concepts of plurimediality and of media combination.

**Keywords:** intermediality, adaptation theory, comics, graphic novel, American culture, literature, narrative, identity.

Comic books, graphic novels, or illustrated novels can be interpreted as media combinations, using media components that interpret and/or imitate the elements of another media. In this sense, *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* is a media combination, since it is a visual narrative that combines showing and telling, but it is also an adaptation, a transposition of the original literary text into a different medium.

*City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* came into being as a result of the collaboration between Paul Auster and Art Spiegelman, the producer of the Neon Lit series. Neon Lit was a project that aimed to realize comic book versions of urban crime fictions. Initially Spiegelman's plan was to approach contemporary novelists to write scenarios for skilled artists in the field of comics. After nearly all of the writers turned down his proposal, Paul Auster came up with the idea to simply adapt his already published novella, *City of Glass*, in spite of the fact that several attempts to turn it into a cinematic version had failed.

Obviously, every adaptation is a "repetition without replication" as Hutcheon states (7), that is a text that works in a very close connection and also separate from its prior material. Therefore, *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* is not just a retelling of Auster's story and being a mere illustration of it, but it is a new, independent text, that re-uses the *original's* themes in unique ways.

Besides the fact, that *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* as an adaptation has to face the common conception regarding adaptations, that is they are always labelled to be secondary works and weighed by their fidelity to the source text—a method that has been challenged today (Hutcheon 7)<sup>1</sup>, it also has to abandon the mainstream comics conventions to bring about something unusual, more precisely to become a breakthrough in the graphic field too.

Even the name, *comics*, seems to be problematic to define a genre so peculiar in its combination of text and visual art. According to Spiegelman "comics may no longer be the 'real name' for a narrative medium that intimately intertwines words and pictures but isn't necessarily comic in tone" (i). He doesn't like the term graphic novel either, as he ironically notes "since 'graphics' were respectable and 'novels' were respectable (though that hadn't always been the case), surely 'graphic novels' must be doubly respectable!" (i). This is

perhaps the reason why comics are still regarded as “low” art, part of popular culture, and cannot become the centre of academic interest. Cara Williams argues, that comics and graphic novels have been stigmatized because pictorial storytelling, a concept often linked to cave paintings, is seen as regressive and subliterate” (10). Despite *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* was doubly marginalized (as an adaptation and as a comics), it managed to introduce “new directions in comics criticism” (Kuhlman 4).

Daniel Quinn is a writer of detective novels under the pseudonym of William Wilson. He creates and is doubled with his own fictional character, Max Work. One day, by accident, he receives a phone call, meant for the private detective Paul Auster, and decides to impersonate him, focusing on the case of Peter Stillman, a young man, who feels threatened by his father, recently released from prison.

Quinn’s preoccupation with the Stillman case ends with the disappearance of the two Stillmans (the old Stillman committing suicide, the young Peter Stillman leaving the town). After this, Quinn isolates himself in an alley, reduces his food intake, then his need for sleep and shelter; regressing into a homeless “no-body”, who reaches the climax of his madness, and finally slowly disappears.

In the opening scenes of the graphic novel, Quinn’s identity confusion is presented through a series of cinematic devices: zooming in/out and panoramic view. Panels at the bottom of the third page indicate a visual scanning of Quinn’s New York apartment from the left to the right. From the bookcase and the blurry picture on the wall (showing a once happy family life), the view moves to the window, through which the city space is revealed, full of bricks, buildings, rooftops, and more windows. In the next sequence this panoramic movement stops and gives ground to a zooming in on the large view of New York. This zooming in intensifies until the shapes and lines of the buildings loosen, become blurry, and then gradually transform into a maze. The zooming in finds closure again and suddenly pulls back, the labyrinth becomes smaller, and finally it takes the oval shape of a fingerprint smudge.

The window, a transparent barrier, symbolically holds together Quinn’s fractured self through the representation of his fingerprint’s integrity, but at the same time it demonstrates, that as the fingerprint lies next to the city and yet is disconnected from it, so is Quinn isolated and suffering from loss and solitude.

Although many pages of Auster’s novel were condensed, and some key sentences were eliminated, vital information regarding the main character was not lost, but substituted by visual motifs, thus the meaning of what they represent became amplified. There are two important sentences in Auster’s narrative that are missing from the panels’ captions:

[Quinn was] lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. (...)The world was outside of him, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long. (4)

The visual motifs that fill the space of the missing words are the images of the city transforming into a labyrinth, then into the fingerprint. Thus, this can be interpreted as a visual analogy to the source text, unifying both its form and content. Also, the images and the captions’ text are not necessarily connected: for example, the first pages *tell* a lot of information about Quinn, like “more than anything else, what Quinn liked to do was walk” (*The Graphic Novel* 4), but in the meantime the drawings *show* Quinn’s apartment with very static objects, and the view of the city through the window, and not Quinn walking on the streets, as the reader might expect. This tension between image and text is rather creative:

the reader must engage into a mental play, and *imagine* the character walking, while gradually forming an overall picture about Quinn's state of mind, with the help of the above analyzed visual motifs. Thus, the act of walking actually occurs, without being shown.

The same substitution with visual motifs occurs in the case of young Peter Stillman's monologue. When Quinn, meets his "client", Peter Stillman Jr, he notices that Stillman is "machine-like, fitful, alternating between slow and rapid gestures, rigid and yet expressive [...] It was like watching a marionette trying to walk without strings" (Auster 17). His mind is retarded, his communication is fragmented, arguing that he is the only one who can understand his own language. A series of strict and regular panels provide the visual equivalent to the above quoted description. At the end of his monologue, the panels suddenly become entirely black and the size of the entire page, the gutters transform into the white bars of a locked prison door, with Peter's speech balloon coming from the depth of the cell. The next image shows the image of a broken puppet boy, symbolically reflecting both on Peter's inner feelings (traumatized and broken by his father), and on his physical movements, that are machine-like and automatic. In Auster's text, he actually speaks about himself as a puppet: "I know that I am still the puppet boy" (26).

Throughout the panels presenting Peter talking, the speech balloons always come out from the mouth of different figures or out of various holes. For example, on the sixteenth and seventeenth pages a strange character appears, supposedly Charon, the boatman of the river Styx, who slowly arises from water. This mythological reference implies that now the reader will be taken to the other side, that is where Peter's tormented soul lies. This surreal image introduces a separate type of reality. With Charon's rising, as Karasik adds, "the truth is rising to the surface" (Kartalopoulos, *Coffee with*, 52).

A peculiar unit in this sequence of images is the sketchy drawing of a cave painting. The view is zooming in on it, as it grows bigger and bigger. Karasik argues:

It's a drawing that I got from a book of cave paintings from Lascaux, I wanted a primitive depiction of the very basic building blocks of language here, which is the pictogram, the cave drawing. And I searched for one that also looked to me like a large creature attacking or overpowering a human... (Kartalopoulos, *Coffee with*, 58)

I read this insertion of the pictogram as a highly self-reflexive tool, with which the graphic medium is reflecting on its own historical origins, and it also functions as an ironic protest against the scholarly opinion that doesn't recognize comics as a legitimate medium<sup>2</sup>. Hence one of the novelties *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* introduces: it abandons the standard drawing, the so-called "baseline-style", and employs "iconic representations" (Kartalopoulos, *Three Questions*, 7). For example, when Virginia Stillman recounts her husband's childhood experiences, her storytelling is constructed of stylized warning signs used in traffic sign system. I read these (usually prohibitory or danger warning) pictorial signs as a specific narrative strategy: they serve as means of warning the reader that a shocking story will be told, that of child abuse. But the most complex iconic representation appears in the case of another character: the old Peter Stillman.

The old Stillman is preoccupied with the nature of prelapsarian language, and writes a book entitled *The Garden and the Tower: Early Visions of the New World*. His ideas are presented visually in a style that imitates medieval woodcut engravings, and inserted reproductions of paintings: Albrecht Dürer's engraving "The Fall of Man (Adam and Eve)" from 1504, and Peter Bruegel the Elder's oil painting "The Tower of Babel" from 1563. Cinematic zooming is used in the sequence of these images, showing close-ups on specific

fragments of the paintings. In my reading this intermedial combination is also a multiple intertext: first of all, it is a literary intertext, as Stillman's work is reusing and summarizing ideas from a fictional pamphlet written by Henry Dark (a character invented by Stillman), and utilizing ideas from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and secondly it is a visual intertext of the above mentioned works of art. The painting and the woodcut engraving with their atmosphere of history and past cultural values serve as counterpoints to the modern urban world represented by maps of North America, stylized pictures of the "Big Apple" or "I love NY" inscribed objects in the surrounding panels.

Through the cinematic technique of cross-cutting several visual texts are brought together into the same aesthetic experience, intersecting and mutually relating to each other. As they constantly call attention to one another's status as cultural texts, they openly announce their overt relationship, and become what Robert Stam identifies as *hypertexts*. Stam, making use of Genette's term of *transtextuality*, claims, that a *hypertext* always "transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends" (25) the *hypotext*. In this sense, not only the combined elements within the comics' (already mixed) medium (drawings and paintings' reproductions) work as hypertexts to one another, but also, in a broader sense, the graphic novel uses the source material, Auster's novel, as a hypotext, extending and amplifying it through its visual motifs, thus becoming the hypertext<sup>3</sup>.

### **(Narrative) Identities and Visual Motifs**

For Quinn, the sense of order is lost with the death of his family, and he desperately tries to make order out of his own decentred world. In such circumstances he becomes uncertain towards his own sense of selfhood. He gradually distances himself from his identity as Daniel Quinn, and adopts many other identities. Thus, an intertextual play begins with characters' names and double identities, and the novel's fictional world becomes populated with doppelgängers and versions of the same character.

Struggling to find his own identity Quinn in fact is split into a triad of selves: he writes his detective fiction under the pseudonym of William Wilson<sup>4</sup>, but he would like to live his life as his own fictional character, Max Work, a "private eye narrator" (Auster 6). In the hierarchy of these identities or triple selves "Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist, Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise" (Auster 6).

In the graphic novel the motif of the doppelgänger is presented in parallel panels: Quinn is shown side-by-side with his creation, Max Work, and they appear to be equally real. Work is truly presented as more animated, more active, compared to the lifeless, static, dummy-Quinn. Alex Shakar also observes that

there is a hierarchy of sketchiness at work in the renderings of characters. Quinn's face, for example, is less detailed than that of his own fictional creation, the detective Max Work.[...] If Quinn's self pales before his Work, it pales still further when juxtaposed with the character Paul Auster, who possesses the liveliest face in the book<sup>5</sup>. (Shakar 9)

Subsequently, in a panel showing Quinn mechanically writing on a typewriter, the figure of William Wilson grows behind him as a giant shadow, representing a controlling (narrative) force (the ventriloquist, or symbolically a father figure).

All characters function as duplicates of each other, and their relationship can be of two kinds: hierarchical and that of mirroring.

Quinn steps out of his static and silent attitude, when he receives a telephone call, intended to the detective named "Paul Auster"<sup>6</sup>. Quinn quickly decides to take this new role. He immediately abandons the role of the dummy, and becomes a speaking-acting agent.

While Quinn occupied the position of the dummy in the hierarchic structure of the Wilson-Quinn-Work triad, in what follows, he will encounter perfect doubles in the persona of the two Stillmans. This next triad of character doubles, Quinn/"Auster"-Peter Stillman-old Stillman, forms a rather mirroring structure, often based on father-son relations.

The first instance of this mirroring-doubling occurs, when Quinn meets the young Peter Stillman and is overwhelmed by the uncanny atmosphere of their interview. In the graphic novel Peter Stillman's doll-like figure exactly mirrors Quinn's "dummy"-existence: they are both reduced to immobility, with mind and body out of control.

The next manifestation of the doppelgänger appears, when Quinn tries to locate Peter Stillman Sr. at the railway station. Suddenly, another similar man appears, and Quinn cannot decide between the two Stillmans, he cannot say whether it is an illusion or not. He is hesitating, but finally he chooses "this shabby creature, so broken down and disconnected from his surroundings" (Auster 68) convinced that he must be the "mad Stillman" (Auster 68). He chooses him, because he resembles Quinn very much, representing the same isolation, the same madness. Quinn begins to follow the old man, and the more he follows the old Stillman the more he loses his selfhood. The rhyming and mirroring of visual motifs is clearest in the representations of the old Stillman's wanderings, and Quinn's following of him. Thus, the the second triad of the selves (the two Stillmans and Quinn) are powerfully linked through the visual motif of the puppet or automaton, and that of the crying child's face. The graphic novel's entire narrative is intricately structured via the series of these repeating images: the crying child's face, the automaton, the nine-paned window, and the fingerprint.

At first, Quinn's resemblance to Peter Stillman is represented through transforming both of them into puppets (Peter as a broken marionette, Quinn as William Wilson's ventriloquist dummy). To this mirroring structure the image of the old Stillman is added, rendered as a wind-up toy man, who walks endlessly on the streets of New York (the repeated images appear at the right bottom of page 56 and 57). Coughlan states that these rhyming panels can be read as a visual similitude, suggesting Stillman is like a mechanical man (846). Hence a reference to a literary medium, to a literary figure of speech. These mirroring images also serve as punctuation marks in the visual narrative, either as means of framing or providing continuity, stopping or directing the pace of reading. I also interpret, for example, the repeatedly occurring completely black panels as elements that refer to the literary and/or cinematic medium: they are the counterparts of the blank/white page in a book, or the black or blank screen in film. At first, the presence of the black panels refers to the medium of literature, as the very first page of the graphic novel is entirely black and the text "It was a wrong number that started it..." is typed with white courier fonts. Williams states, that "the simple design of white font on the black background is a reversal from a conventional novel, which has black font on a white page" (44). This media combination already introduces the idea, that nothing will go on as expected in this graphic novel. The black and white inked images however, integrate a cultural code regarding both form and content: film noir of the 40' and 50', and traditional crime dramas, elements, that serve to "prepare the reader for a complex mystery—relying on the cultural notion of good and evil

represented as white and black” (Williams 44). The black panels that appear occasionally inserted among the other panels function, in my view, as the image of the absence of image. Gilles Deleuze, interpreting Noël Bruch’s similar ideas, claims that “‘the absence of image’, the black screen or the white screen, have a decisive importance in contemporary cinema. [...] They no longer have a simple function of punctuation, as if they marked a change, but enter into a dialectical relation between the image and its absence, and assume a properly structural value” (200). Thus, as Deleuze argues, the interstice between two images is the most important rather than association, and this *cut* in a sequence of images becomes an irrational one, neither belonging to one image nor to the other, but sets out to be valid for itself (200). In my reading, the black panels not only get the reader out of his/her aesthetic perception, but are also inserted among the other panels as covering devices, that conceal the ruptures caused by the media elements’ intrusion into each other’s spaces. In spite of the fact, that the graphic narrative is occasionally interrupted, it paradoxically maintains the continuity of those *stories*, which *happen* in-between the frames/panels. Sometimes, the black panels are not entirely black: captions are inserted at their bottom containing a text as for a normal panel—just the image is missing. These captions (similarly to the filmic subtitles), do not function as mere dividers between intercut frames, but become new extensions of those *irrational gaps* that signify the intersecting media borders. They get the reader out of the visual narrative, precisely through embedding the medium of written text. The black panels become the sites for the readers’ imagination, common spaces in which the different media elements can exist together. Thus, they can be interpreted as heterotopias of pure mediality, that is a space, which needs to be filled in with images and/or words, bringing about what Blanchot calls “the fullness of the void, something one cannot silence, occupying all of space” (qtd in Foucault, *Thought of the Outside*, 152). The graphic novel gives a new dimension to this intermedial gap, because pictures, words, pictograms have an equal value in the moment of filling in this in-between space.

If the black panels function as intermedial gaps, the crying child’s face drawn in crayon serves as suturing these intermedial cuts. The rudimentary drawing is repeated many times, and, as each recurring image in the graphic novel, it becomes more powerful, more amplified. Shakar attaches many interpretations to this image: “it will come to signify [Quinn’s] dead child; Peter Stillman, his anger at Stillman Sr. ... Quinn’s own childhood, a generalized sense of lost innocence” (12). It appears first between two panels showing Quinn sleeping, perhaps this is the reason why Williams states it can be linked to “the workings of Quinn’s unconscious mind” (54). Previously, I also analyzed the sketchy face as an uncanny element, which signifies the “eternal return of the same” in the case of Quinn (Bökös 3), but its function in the graphic novel’s narrative structure is far more complex. Its most important role is to suture the *medial breaks*. Dragon Zoltán in his alternative approach to adaptations speaks about the juxtaposition and interaction of different media which he calls the *intermedial dialogue*. He argues, that there is a *medial break* between two (or more) media, that is the intrusion of an intermedial space into a text, which is veiled over in order to secure the smooth operation of the different modes of representation (Dragon 188-89). In this sense, the crying child’s face functions as assuring narrative continuity, while paradoxically, it also disrupts the narrative. It is an element that simply does not fit into the linearity of the visual narrative, always sticking out of it. It is invisible for the intradiegetic characters, but surprises the reader repeatedly. Stunningly, during its first appearance the caption reads as it follows: “Everything becomes essence: the center of the book shifts, is everywhere...” (*The Graphic Novel*, 7). One of the key sentences of Auster’s original text, that

gave ground to many critical interpretations, is adapted to another visual motif, that also shifts the center, but now that of the graphic medium: this image will become the central, the bearer of meaning, appearing relentlessly throughout the graphic novel. Shakar observes: "If the center of the book is everywhere, so is this crude image, the repressed unconscious of graphical representation" (12). This quote from the source text and its unusual attachment to the crayon drawing fills the gap opened up by the interconnection of the different media, or more broadly speaking between source text and its adaptation. It is precisely the over-presence of the crude face that positions it in the center of attention, uncannily reinforcing something that is hidden and/or not present in the source text. It fills a void then, inherent in the adapted text. Thus, it serves as a means of suturing, of concealing the intermedial gap, which in turn brings about the interconnectedness of the two media (visual and literal). On the level of content, the crying face appears inserted in the midst of visual sequences regarding the relationship between the two Stillmans and Quinn's position in this second triad of selves, thus it can be read as a visual tool that creates links between the characters and identity triads (pages 50, 52, 104, 119). But what is the relationship between these triads of selves and how do they thematize intermedial as well as intertextual references?

One of the most intriguing contributions of the graphic novel to the Auster oeuvre is the presentation of a very unusual aspect of Quinn's character. The plasticity with which Quinn is depicted transforms him into a *performing* character (he is also referred to as the ventriloquist's dummy), who re-enacts the many narratives. He can take a variety of other selves, imitating gestures, speech, rhythms of the other characters. If Linda Hutcheon calls adaptations as "palimpsestuous works, haunted all the times by their adapted texts" (6), on a thematic level Daniel Quinn is the purest manifestation of the palimpsest, onto whom several other identities can be ascribed, while being haunted by his previous identities all the time. He is following and trying to get to the others, and has the ability to be all of them. Hence the thematization of the theatrical medium both in Auster's original text, and in the graphic novel's visual world. However, Quinn's performance always remains on the level of mimikri. He can act and speak like his doubles, but can never truly become *them*, similarly to the relation between the different media: they can reflect on and mirror each other, but cannot *become the other*. These never completely fulfilled roles in the case of Quinn bring about the gradual deconstruction of his identity, narrated in his notebook.

The narrative/medial shifts in the story are propelled by the various forms of interconnectedness among the triads of selves. It is precisely the identity of "Paul Auster" that serves as a gateway towards other doublings and iterations of stories and characters. It is Virginia Stillman's story that determines Quinn to inhabit his "Work-identity" through the role of the private detective "Paul Auster". Therefore, the identity of "Paul Auster" functions as a means of mobility and maneuvering between the triads of the selves: from the Wilson-Quinn-Work trinity to the Quinn-Peter Stillman Jr.-Peter Stillman Sr. After his discussion with Virginia, Quinn feels an unusual euphoria:

He was warming up now. Something told him that he had captured the right tone, and a sudden sense of pleasure surged through him, as though he had just managed to cross some internal border within himself. (Auster 29)

As an immediate response to this new role Quinn re-connects with the medium of literature. He remembers works, which deal with issues similar with the Stillman mystery. He inserts the case into a web of intertextual references—Herodotus, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift,

Kaspar Hauser, etc. (Auster 40-41)—a reconnection, that, according to Herzogenrath “inevitably leads Quinn’s thoughts back once more to his ‘inner world’ which he has been so hard trying to repress” (34).

Karasik and Mazzucchelli’s graphic novel, precisely through subverting the conventions of the comics’ genre<sup>7</sup> emphasizes the interweaving of the two media forms (image and language). Using different visual styles for each embedded narrative, introducing visual motifs and iconic representations a unique plurimedial work of art is created, in which image and text do not illustrate/accompany each other, but exist in an in-between, heterotopic space. Their elements are intertwined, bringing about a new graphic language, that is open both towards the “inside” of the genre, that is related to self-thematization and self-reflexivity, and towards the “outside”: in the direction of the oscillation of the media elements that come in contact within the genre of the comics.

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<sup>1</sup> Discussing the fidelity principle Brian McFarlane also claims that in terms of more modern approaches to adaptation, the original novel is always seen as a “resource” (10).

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<sup>2</sup> Both Eisner and McCloud attempt to find a historical grounding for the graphic medium in the historical tradition of Medieval inscriptions/engravings, Chinese and Japanese pictographs, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and early cave drawings (Eisner 13-15, 101; McCloud 9-23), that are obviously bearers of cultural meanings.

<sup>3</sup> Lehtonen states that intermediality is developed from intertextuality, and defines two types of intertextual relationships: horizontal and vertical, the former viewing explicit relationships between primary texts, thus inevitably containing intermedial dimensions, the latter prevails in between the primary text and other texts that explicitly refer to it (75-76).

<sup>4</sup> An intertextual reference to E. A. Poe's short story with the same title, that introduces the theme of the doppelgänger par excellence.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, Paul Auster's face is the most detailed, since it takes after the "real" Paul Auster. I also interpret this inclusion of Paul Auster as a *cameo experience*, a term used in film criticism, denoting the short appearance of the director/writer in a minor role, in his own work.

<sup>6</sup> I will refer to the character Paul Auster in quotation marks ("Paul Auster"), to distinguish him from Paul Auster, the author.

<sup>7</sup> See previous analysis on the fingerprint-window-identity visual motif, and in what follows the grid-like/window panel structure, as standing for decomposition and deconstruction (on both levels of form and content).