

# Visual semiotics applied to the evolution process of cross-media adaptations

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*The concept of visual semiotics seems to have been framed in the field of static images, such as publicity or photography; however, this branch of semiotics offers an undeniable range of approaches to be applied to other media, such as the comic book or the cinema. Both products share a number of factors proper to their own features and origins, of which we highlight the adaptation processes they both present; in this sense, the concept of cross-media adaptation seeks to reflect how some features from one specific medium are adapted to another, even if they are alike in form and/or content. The process of adapting both images and text from a comic book to a film could involve the use of semiotics to explain how these processes take place. Thus, by the application of Peircean theories on semiotics to these two cross-media adaptations, we will try to analyse, in the present article, to what extent these theories provide the appropriate tools to carry out an extensive analysis of both comic book and film adaptations. To do so, a number of comic books and their adaptations to the cinema will be the corpus of the analysis. Finally, as a result, we will arrive at conclusions showing how the theories on visual semiotics could be applied to the audiovisual media and what repercussions this process of adaptation has had throughout the history of both the comic book and the cinema.*

**KEYWORDS**            visual semiotics, comic book, cinema, adaptation,  
cross-media productions

## **Introduction**

The concept of visual semiotics seems to have been applied to a wide range of both visual and audiovisual media, such as photography, comics, cinema and publicity; in a way, this branch of semiotic studies has always been present in the analysis of these kinds of me-

dia. However, there seem to be few studies of how this approach could become a useful tool for the analysis of an audiovisual corpus, especially regarding the process of adaptation from the comic book to the cinema; in this sense, the concept of *cross-media adaptation* seeks to reflect how some features from one specific medium are adapted to another, even if they are alike in form and/or content.

As Linda Hutcheon points out, 'when we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works' (2006: 6). According to her research on adaptations, there are many ways of analysing adaptations, however, the opposition between fidelity and creativity seems to have been the 'criterion of judgment' to analyse an adapted work. One of the main points of this scholar is the development of the sense of recognition of an adaptation, that is, the feeling triggered in the audience when they realize the work they are consuming is an adaptation, which could entail changes and evident differences from the original source: 'recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change' (Hutcheon 2006: 4).

This sense of recognition is also visible when adapting comic books to the cinema. One of the first adaptation studies that took into account the comic book as a source was carried out by Thomas Leitch, who analysed not only the style of the adaptation, but also the content and the medium of the adaptations: 'Comic book adaptations' performative styles depend less on any medium-specific comic-book look than on the individual style of their particular source and the relation they seek to establish to that source' (2007: 199). In his research on adaptations, Leitch bases his theories on the connection between intertextuality and hypertextuality, and how the 'hypertextual relations [...] shade off to the intertextual' (2007: 94). According to this view, the basic conception of adaptation should not be based on the degree of fidelity, but on the textual relations triggered by the process of the adaptation itself, that is, the links created within the work and how it is connected to other works, whether they are original sources or adaptations as well.

A range of theories have appeared mainly based on the adaptations from literature to film; on the other hand, very few of them focus on comic books as the main source for adaptations: 'the most commonly considered adaptations are those that move from the telling to the showing mode' (Hutcheon 2006: 38). In this paper, we are going to select one of the theories based on the adaptation of literature to the cinema and try to apply it to the area of the comic book, basing our research on the process of adaptation regarding the degree of fidelity and/or creativity and following the criteria presented by the previous scholars: Linda Hutcheon and Thomas Leitch.

In addition, since the comic book is a visual medium, it seems necessary to find an additional point of view when analysing adaptation from the comic book to the cinema. In this paper, we will demonstrate that visual semiotics based on Peircean theories, with the sign as the core element, would serve as a useful tool to carry out an extensive analysis of the adaptations of visual

and audiovisual media, the comic book and the cinema. To do so, a number of comic books and their adaptations to the cinema will be the corpus of the analysis, mainly focusing on the characters created by DC and Marvel, currently the two major publishers of comic books in the world.

Following the Marvel box office success of *The Avengers* (Whedon) in 2012, and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon) in 2015, DC in 2017 launched *Justice League* (Snyder) in an attempt to reorganize its superhero universe, which Marvel had previously done with its own universe. Regarding these Marvel films, the main heroes presented in the plot are Ironman, Spider-Man, Hulk, Captain America, Thor, Hawkeye and Black Widow. Meanwhile, the main characters forming the Justice League are Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, Flash and Ciborg. As they form a large group of characters to be analysed, we have taken into account two major selection criteria: box office success and the number of most recent adaptations produced from the comic book to the cinema. Considering these two aspects, we have chosen Ironman and Spider-Man as the main representatives of Marvel; due to the three recent adaptations to the cinema of the character of Ironman and the main role he has in the films where The Avengers are assembled, playing an important part in all of them, this character involves new changing elements to be analysed from a semiotic point of view. On the other hand, we have chosen the case of Spider-Man due to the large amount of films focused on this character in the last fifteen years (six in total) but performed by different actors: the Spider-Man in *Spider-Man* (Raimi 2002) is different from the *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Webb 2012) and from *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Watts 2017). Regarding the DC characters, Superman and Batman have been chosen due to the release of the film *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Snyder 2016) and their appearance in the film *Justice League* (Snyder 2017). Moreover, they are the DC characters that have been most often adapted to the cinema, so this entails a highlighted aspect to be taken into account for our analysis.

Finally, as a result of our analysis, we will arrive at conclusions showing how the theories on visual semiotics presented by Peirce could entail analytical tools to study the process of audiovisual adaptations and the final products deriving from it.

## Peirce's semiotic theories

Peirce reworded his studies on logic and adapted them in order to create his semiotic theories, so we can deduce that this author falls within the field of the pragmatic semiotic tradition. His core idea is based on the universality of thinking, that is, the idea that states that human thinking should be unified and supported by a scientific approach. In turn, the semiotic theories developed by Peirce were created under the concept of *semiosis*. This concept involves a process that takes place in the mind of the interpreter of a sign, which likewise makes the sign to be formed as a sign. Thereafter, the sign fulfils its function of triggering an effect in

the person interpreting it. However, Peirce also developed the concept of *unlimited semiosis* (Karam 2014: 3), which states that the effect a sign has, and its subsequent interpretation, will lead to the manifestation of other processes in which another sign will have to fulfil its function of triggering an effect and of being interpreted. Thus, his doctrines of signs are closely related with visual semiotics and the representation of images.

The semiotic model of Peirce is based on triadic divisions and subdivisions, mainly due to their former background in logic. As a first approximation to the categorization of the sign, and on the basis of the remarks presented by Karam in his article *Introducción a la semiótica de la imagen* (2014), Peirce develops a triadic division about the process by which the construction of the representation of a sign in relation with the interpretant is formed in terms of *firstness*, *secondness* and *thirdness*. Within this division, we find another three subdivisions according to the analytical approach involved in the process of interpretation; thus, if the sign is considered as a bearer of simple qualities or general laws, Peirce divides the sign into *qualisign*, *sinsign* and *legisign*. The second subdivision is based in the relation that a sign maintains with the object it represents or with the interpretant of this sign and the terms proposed by the author are *icon*, *index* and *symbol*. Finally, signs can be divided according to the representation that an interpretant makes of the sign and the terms presented by Peirce are *rheme*, *dicent* and *argument*.<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, we are going to take into account the subdivision based on the relation between a sign and the object it represents and also how the sign is defined and structured in direct relation with cross-adaptation between the media of comic books and films.

## The sign and its application to the audiovisual media

Peirce applies his research in mathematical logic to the conception of the sign and from this process, therefore, a number of categorizations and divisions are derived. Initially, his semiotics defined the sign as an element 'that is in place of another one under any aspect or capacity' (Zecchetto 1999: 52). However, in later years he reformulated this definition to understand the sign as 'an object which is in relation to its object, on the one hand, and to an interpretant, on the other, in such a way as to bring the interpretant into a relation to the object, corresponding to its own relation to the object' (Zecchetto 1999: 34). According to this last definition, any sign would be composed by a *representamen*, understood as the idea of the object being represented or the sign itself; by the *object*, the concept referred to by the sign, and, finally, by the *interpretant*, that is, the information interpreted by any person according to the intentionality of the sign. Nevertheless, these three elements constitute a complex relationship when they are applied to the field of the media, as we will see below.

If we analyse this triadic relation, we could observe that the elements composing it share a number of functions to categorize reality. Thus, Peirce states that signs create other signs,

called *interpretants*, as they are formed after the process of interpretation of a sign, in this case, a *representamen*. Due to this fact, an interpretant 'can be constituted by the development of one or more signs' (Zecchetto 1999: 52).

All these mental processes bear the interpretation of an idea, allowing us to communicate with the reality surrounding us, as Peirce considers the perception of signs as a way of directly relating to the world around us. For this reason, this factor of perceiving and interpreting a sign denotes a complex process because each entity could create a completely different interpretation of the same sign. As Zecchetto points out, 'the function of the interpretant in a determinate sign can change value and become a representamen of another sign' (1999: 54); that is, the interpretation made of a sign could constitute the representation of another sign, which would be different from the previous one. As an example, we can take the function of the 'Bat-Signal' in the Batman comic books, which appears in the night sky when Commissioner Gordon asks for help. The superhero interprets this sign as a warning, letting him know that someone is in trouble and needs his help; however, to any inhabitant in Gotham, it may simply represent a meeting between Batman and the Commissioner or just the fact that the vigilante is around in the city at night.

This new approach, based on the linking of signs with the perception of reality and the triadic divisions of the sign, was adopted by different semioticians to become the foundation of their studies referring to the analysis of the image from a semiotic point of view. These triadic divisions will develop the possibility of considering the sign not only as a linguistic or visual element in isolation, but of considering a sign as a linguistic-visual element in conjunction; that is, a sign that adopts both areas and coalesces into studies in which the word and the images are linked homogeneously. This new conception of sign, defended and backed by semioticians such as Metz (1974) and Eco (1977), will lay the foundations for the studies of two major audiovisual media: the comic book and the cinema.

In addition, Peircean triadic divisions provide a useful tool to analyse visual elements, as they entail an approach to analyse how information, such as characters, situations, settings, colors, etc., is adapted from the comic book to the film. As stated above, this paper will consider only the relation matching the sign with the object it represents, as images are clear examples of visual elements that refer to a certain entity. In this sense, the icon, the index and the symbol will represent something to be interpreted by a receiver, something bearing meaning.

*Icon*: the sign is linked with the object due to their similarities and common attributes. Peirce defines the icon as a *mental image* (Zecchetto 1999: 57), as the interpretant of the sign creates an image in his/her mind that is related with the sign perceived. Thus, it is perceived as a relation of resemblance between the sign and the object it represents. A clear example of an icon would be a photograph or a piece of art in a museum, as both of them represent a sign reflecting a reality based on similarity. In this sense, any element, either real or fictional, could be considered as an icon. In this particular case, relating this theoretical point with audiovisual

media, a clear example of an icon would be a frame in a film that adapts a vignette from a comic book, as they both create a relationship of visual similarity.

*Index*: this sign represents directly the object, so it is considered the neutral representation of any sign. The index is, thus, an indicator of the represented object because it links a physical object with another one, showing a clear connection. One of the most common examples used to explain an index is smoke, as it is an index that indicates the presence of fire. So, in a way, the index denotes a factual connection to its object. Relating this aspect to the area of comics and films, the Bat-Signal would be an example of an index, as it means that someone is in danger in Gotham city and needs the help of Batman.

*Symbol*: it is a sign that bears an arbitrary meaning, either because of a law or a previously established convention. In this sense, Peirce called symbolic signs the signs that consist in a rule, norm or habit. A symbol denotes by virtue of its interpretant. Examples of symbols would be the emblems of Superman (an S in capital letter) and Batman (a bat), as any interpretant of these signs would recognize that they are referring to the two superheroes.

## **A categorization based on the fidelity of adaptations**

Nowadays, there are a number of categorizations of literary adaptations to the cinema; however, there are very few categorizations that are based on adaptation from the comic book to the screen. Taking into account this factor, we have opted to present one of the categorizations dealing with literature and we have adapted it to fit, as much as possible, the function of serving as a structural model to analyse the comic book adaptation to the cinema. Thus, in the following lines, the typology of adaptations of literature created by José Luís Sánchez Noriega in his work *De la literatura al cine* (2000) will be presented and we will analyse it as a conventional representation suitable for the media of the sequential arts, which involve both the comic book and the film.

According to the opposition fidelity–creativity, Sánchez (2000: 63-66) highlights four different kinds of adaptations. In the following categorization, based on the proposal offered by Sánchez, we assess the degree of difference and similarity between the original work (in our specific case, the comic book) and its adaptation to film. The categories given by Sánchez provide a gradation, so that we can find in one end the faithful adaptation from the comic book to the cinema and, in the other, an adaptation completely different from the original piece. Between these degrees of fidelity, we find two other categories that depend on the kind of adaptation according to the nuances emphasized. Thus, the categorization we propose is the following one:

*Adaptation as illustration*: this is a kind of adaptation that retells the story, characters and situations almost exactly as they appear in the comic book. In this sense, ‘the commentary

aspects are given, the dialogues are completely transcribed and figurative and visual elements are used' (Sánchez 2000: 64). We can find a clear example of this kind of adaptation in the graphic novel *Watchmen* (1986), created by Alan Moore and its later homonymous adaptation to the screen in 2009, directed by Zack Snyder. If we analyse both works, we would find some vignettes that seem to have been captured in the frames presented in the film. Something similar appears when the settings are taken into account, as they are recreated the same way they appear in the comic book; as a result, this novel seems to have been created in order to be adapted to the cinema. In the words of Liam Burke, this kind of adaptation as illustration can be defined as an 'intersection' which happens 'when the uniqueness of the original text is preserved to such an extent that it is intentionally left unassimilated in adaptation' (2015: 14).

*Adaptation as transposition:* in this case, both the form and the content of the story from a comic book are translated into film, highlighting the cinematographic strategies of this medium, so that there is a transposition from the world appearing in the vignettes to filmic language and cinematographic aesthetics. In a way, it is based on the equivalence between the content in the comic book and in the film. A vast number of the films adapted from comics would belong to this category, especially the superhero genre, as all the action, sequences and scenarios of these kinds of stories cannot easily be transferred to the screen; even though the use of special effects has allowed directors and producers to try to get close to comic books, there is a specific need for the vignettes' sequentiality to achieve the same effect that they produce in the reader of a comic. The comic books that narrate the origins of the superheroes are often excellent examples belonging to this category, as filmmakers, once they adapt the story and the content to the screen, try to keep as much of it as possible in order to maintain the continuity in both media. Some adaptations that will be analysed in the present article belong to this category, such as the adaptations of the comic books of Batman, Superman, Ironman or Spider-Man.

*Adaptation as interpretation:* this kind of adaptation is based on the change in the point of view of directors and producers of a film based on the story narrated in the comic book, so the audience will find the foundations of the comic along with a large number of nuances that will transform it into another story, different from the ones to be found in the published comic books. In this case, it could be said that these adaptations consist of an interpretation of what the comic book presents to its readers, as the emphasis in this category 'is based on highlighting the ideas, topics and feelings that determine the inner life of the work' (García 1990: 182). In the same way as the process of adaptation as transposition, a vast number of comic book adaptations would fit this category, especially the superhero, action and adventure genres; just the idea of having a main character in a comic book story is enough to produce some other stories where this character could maintain the status of the main character in the story shown in the film. As an example, we could point to the recent film *Suicide Squad* (2016) directed by David Ayer, as in this case, the aesthetic and background elements of the characters have been

kept but the story in the film is completely different from the rest of the stories published in the comic books.

*Free adaptation:* in this kind of adaptation, the cinematographic story is completely different from the original stories in the comic books, so the comic book only serves as an inspiration to create another story that would include, in all likelihood, a new setting, new situations and new characters, both main and minor ones. It is mainly about an influence that the comic book has on the film, but, when the final product is created, neither the content nor the interpretation have any relation with the original ones in the graphic novels. As Sánchez points out, this category 'does not work ordinarily on the text itself [...] but it responds to other interests and acts on different stages' (2000: 65), such as the structure of the action, the themes the characters deal with or the time and setting where the action takes place. The example we provide is the comic book series that served George Lucas to create the successful saga *Star Wars*, *Valérian and Laureline*, called initially *Valérian: Spatio-Temporal Agent* (Christin and Mezière 1967) created by Pierre Christin.<sup>2</sup> This sequential story narrates the adventures of two agents whose mission is to surf the universe keeping peace through time and space; this same idea was taken by George Lucas to create his adventures in outer space and it evolved until the appearance of the first film of the saga called *Star Wars: a New Hope* (Lucas 1977).

## **Application of Peircean concepts to the analysis of comic-book film adaptations**

In this section of the article, we are going to put into practice the concepts presented in the theoretical section, using examples from the superhero comic books and their adaptations, with the aim of proving that the Peircean concepts described above would constitute useful tools for analysing the process of adaptation from the comic book to the film. At the same time, we will also prove that the categorization we have adapted proposed by Sánchez based on literature can work as a structural model for comic book adaptations, and that the categorization based on fidelity and the use of Peircean concepts as tools provide an approach to analyse cross-adaptation between comic book and film.

As mentioned above, Marvel and DC are the major publishers of comic books in the world; however, their approaches to the superheroes and their backgrounds are completely different. In the present paper, we will analyse comic books and films based on superheroes belonging to these two publishers as a way of framing and delimiting the scope of our research. We also must take into account that comic book films are products that absorb a wide range of influences, such as 'vigilante archetypes, urban crime, action sequences and heightened reality, coming together and evolving into a genre with conventions all of its own' (Burke 2015: 98). In this sense, different variations in the way of narrating comic book stories are expected, taking



into account several aspects such as the audience to which a story is addressed, the year and place of publication and also the kind of drawing that the comic book and the film presents. In a way, 'adaptations sought to emulate, even replicate, panel borders, transitions and layouts; they attempt to freeze motion pictures, visualize sound, and interpolate a host of codes that had previously been considered unique to comics. Furthermore, some filmmakers have used the malleability of digital tools to bring a measure of comic book "graphiation" to cinema' (Burke 2015: 221). The corpus of our research is based on three elements to be analysed and which will allow us to draw conclusions on whether or not the application of Peircean theories to the audiovisual media are likely to be successful. The first one relates to the setting of the action and the architecture, in regard to buildings and urban spaces. The second element is based on the emblems worn by the superheroes and what aspects we could infer from them. Finally, the last element to be analysed involves the costume of the superhero and how it triggers some effects on the reader and/or the audience.

### *The setting and the architecture*

The first aspect that we will analyse is based on the setting, the specific location where the story in both the superhero comic books and the films takes place. It is necessary at this point to highlight the different concepts of setting that Marvel and DC have, as the first one commonly uses real cities, such as New York, Washington or Tokyo, and DC mixes both real and imaginary cities, having as a result places such as Gotham or Metropolis (the cities where Batman and Superman live respectively). One of the main reasons for this 'may account for more recent DC comics adaptations returning to traditional large-scale action sequences' (Burke 2015: 43), which means that the current trend when creating superhero stories is that the stories are commonly based on settings that originated in the first comic books. In this sense, directors and producers of the film adaptations take into account where the action takes place in the comic book and how to translate it into the filmic language: 'In adaptations such as *Batman* (Burton 1989) [...] architecture and performers reinforce the depth of field by providing lines of perspective typically found in comics' (Burke 2015: 258). In order to analyse both the setting and the buildings in the adaptations from the comic book to the film as Peircean signs, we have chosen the stories of Batman and Ironman, as the narratives where these two superheroes appear are completely different in their specific settings, cities and also buildings.

The city of Gotham, where Batman acts as the night vigilante, is an amalgamation of Pittsburg (Pennsylvania) and New York, mainly due to its high skyscrapers and the dangerous neighborhoods to be avoided at night. The Gothic atmosphere gives the name to the city, so the *interpretant* of this element, which also is a sign, could probably deduce what this city would look like. Both in comics and films, Gotham is depicted as a dark place, with a high crime rate, where corruption and violence seem to have taken over the whole city. This gloomy envi-

ronment surrounding the city works as a sign, specifically as a symbol in Peircean terms, as the image that Gotham offers is not only descriptive, but also a reflection of what the black and grey tonalities in the image mean. In the same way, architecture in Gotham also has a meaning, as the skyscrapers, churches, manors and the Gothic style in the adaptations are icons of what the readers can find in the comic books; these icons provide a direct relation of resemblance between these elements in the two media, so we can note that the process of adapting the architecture in stories about Batman, apart from being adaptations as illustration in terms proposed by Sánchez, convey meaningful signs, which in this case are icons due to their representative nature. However, due to the fact that most of the buildings are not real and specific in these plots, we could also note that several key buildings are free adaptations, as in the case of Wayne Manor, which is sometimes depicted as a medieval castle and sometimes as a contemporary luxury construction. It all depends on what it is being narrated in the plot.

In the same way, the city depicted in the stories of Ironman is New York, however, the meaning of this city and its appearance in the comic books and films of Ironman is completely different to the Batman ones. Most of the action takes place during the day, when the sun shines over the high skyscrapers. What this fact implies is that there is no room for crime and violence, that it is a safe place to live and that the problems will be solved outside the city. This is also a symbol, as the meaning of the light, the bright colours and the blue sky represent not only a sense of peace and tranquility, but also the physical environment of a safe city, and that is what the creators of the Ironman stories want to convey when depicting the city of New York.

As we can observe in the above analysis, the setting and the architecture are signs easily adaptable as illustration or transposition, as the characteristics of a city could be easily adapted to different media. They can also be icons or symbols, depending on the process of adaptation and on the inner features and possibilities of each medium: if the city is shown as it is, this sign will be an icon reflecting the similarities between them; on the contrary, if the city is depicted as a way of conveying a different meaning apart from its physical appearance, it will be considered a symbol. Nevertheless, adaptation as interpretation also fits in this category, as the directors and producers of the film could take any specific building from the comic books and adapt them to the screen in several ways, enlarging them or making them look brighter or darker depending on the scene. We note that adaptation as interpretation is also a key concept in superhero films, where there is enough room for producers to 'interpret' the information exposed in the original source, that is, the comic book.

### *The emblems*

Another important aspect to be highlighted and which is closely related with the theoretical part of this article is the use of 'superhero emblems'. If we think about any famous superhero, recognizable imagery comes to mind: for example, the yellow capital letter S for

Superman, the black bat over a yellow oval background for Batman, or a black spider over a red background for Spider-Man. Consequently, we can see these emblems in a vast number of merchandising products, such as t-shirts, school bags, pencil cases, mugs, etc. The key point here is that these emblems are forged long ago, as the origins of these signs are to be found at the same time as the superheroes they represent were born. 'Even before these characters are adapted to cinema, they have already achieved the iconic status central to merchandising' (Burke 2015: 68). Therefore, not only has the representation of the superheroes changed, but so have the emblems they are linked to. For example, the bat in the emblem of Batman has changed since its creation, showing a bat in different forms and with a different background: sometimes it changes from yellow to white.

All these superhero emblems, in the same way as the comic books as a whole, provide visual content along with the written text, developing a concise medium of communication. This aspect of offering the readers clear and concise messages has been analysed by Burke, who states that comics, and emblems as an extension, 'rely on readily identifiable signs that leave little room for ambiguity. Thus, in the same way a clock must look like a clock, character types in comics tend to be explicit' (2015: 248). As a result, emblems embody a distinguishable element of specific visual signification for the readers, understood with no need of further clarification. In this sense, emblems are usually cases of adaptation as illustration or transposition, maintaining their design, colours and general meaning. We also find some cases of emblem adaptation as interpretation, as they can also appear not in their original form in the costume of the superhero, but painted on the wall of a building with different colours or with their shape modified to fulfil a cinematic purpose. However, it is difficult to adapt emblems through free adaptation, as the adapters need to stick to the emblems that have been used since their creation. Changing them will entail changing their whole meaning and what they represent.

Moreover, some emblems could trigger different reactions in the audience, as some of them contain more than a single meaning. As an example, below we will analyse the emblems representing Superman and Batman.

The emblem for Superman has always been characterized by a capital S in red over a yellow background; we can mainly see it in the costume of the superhero, but this element, as a sign, conveys different meanings. For example, the emblem of the S would be an icon if the model of the emblem that appears in the comic book is the same as that in the adaptation for the cinema, showing the same size, colour and even design. On the other hand, this emblem will be considered as a symbol because it represents Superman himself; that is, any comic book reader will easily relate this emblem with Superman, as a strong link has been created between these two elements since their first appearance, so, most certainly, Superman will also be represented by this emblem for the years to come.

The black bat presented in the emblem of Batman over a yellow background also leads to the analysis of this element as a triadic Peircean sign, as we have pointed out in the previous

paragraph about the emblem of Superman. In the same manner as the red S in Superman has been kept in the adaptation from the comic book to the film, the emblem of Batman still preserves the same colours and design, so we can state that this emblem in the films is also an icon of the emblem in the comic books; the key point in these signs is the fact that the representation of emblems in films adapted from comics commonly entails the idea of an icon. However, the emblem is a symbol since the figure of the bat over the yellow background is directly related with Batman and all the ideas and conceptions surrounding it, both in comic books and films. We could also say that, if Superman will always be represented with the capital red S, Batman will always be represented by a bat with its wings uplifted.

Additionally, if we analyse the evolution of the emblems within the adaptation from the comic book to the cinema, we can point out the fact that these emblems are tightly linked with the evolution of the costumes the superheroes wear, as most costumes show an emblem. In the next section we will focus on the costumes as a semiotic element and their analysis from a Peircean semiotic perspective and Sánchez's theory on adaptation fidelity.

### *The costumes*

Costumes are an unavoidable and important element to be discussed in this article, as they bring colour, personality and a mark of distinction to the superheroes wearing them. The costumes worn can be analysed from two points of view: the first by analysing the colour and its effect on the reader, the second relating to the superhero and his interaction with the costume.

On the one hand, the colours in the superhero costumes are not a matter of coincidence or something happening by chance. Creators, writers and comic book artists choose the colours of the suits for a specific reason. In order to offer some examples, in this section we are going to analyse the costumes worn by superheroes such as Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man, using the Peircean terminology detailed above.

To begin with, the costumes of Superman and Spider-Man present the same colours (red and blue) but combined in a different way: in Spider-Man's costume, the colour blue is found around his legs and tights and the colour red covers the rest of the suit; Superman, in turn, originally wears a light blue costume and the colour red is found in his accessories: boots, trunks and cape. The colour red, among some other interpretations, is mostly used in clothes to disguise blood, which is in fact suitable for superheroes, who are used to fighting and being injured in daily quarrels. Blue offers contrast with red, which seems to match chromatically. The use of these two bright colours, especially in Superman, serves as an indicator that the superhero is close to the people, means that he will be visible for the citizens whenever needed. It is a way of showing transparency and a clean attitude towards the people who may need to be saved. In opposition to these bright colours, Batman's costume offers a dark version of the suit, using mainly grey and black. The reason for the use of these colours seems obvious, as this superhero is considered the

dark knight, the night vigilante of Gotham. The tonalities of grey and black allow him to hide in the shadows and also give him a terrifying and imposing appearance towards the villains in the city. So, in theoretical terms, the use of superhero costumes and their colours to create meaningful content would be related with the Peircean concept of symbol, as they are an indicator of the concepts represented. In the same way as the Bat-Signal has a meaning, both in the diegetic and extra-diegetic space, the red cape over a blue spandex costume triggers in the minds of the audience the image of Superman, and this fact is mainly due to the features and characteristics of the costume referring to the superhero; namely, the costume is a sign that represents the superhero. If the colours of the costumes entail symbols, their adaptation from the comics to the cinema will also entail, in most cases, adaptation as illustration, since the colours of the superhero and their meaning would be kept. However, when considering the process of adaptation, there will be some cases when the colours are altered in the costumes for cinematic purposes; thus, adaptation as interpretation and free adaptation are likely to appear. We find one major example of these changes in the adaptation of the colour of costumes when the superhero appears in films where special effects are a key aspect. The use of special effects is increasingly gaining ground in the cinematic business, especially in the superhero genre, so these two kinds of adaptation are becoming more popular in relation to the use of colours in films.

On the other hand, the costume in comic books not only acts as a symbol for the reader, but also as a defining element of the superhero wearing it. Changes in the adaptation of costumes could thus also bring new points of view on the character and could possibly affect the story and the situations narrated in the comic book. Such adaptations could entail a minimal change, which would be considered an adaptation as transposition, or, if the change is major and makes a notable difference, it could lead to a free adaptation. These changes may be analysed by using the concepts presented by Peirce in his theories on visual semiotics. If we compare Batman's costume in the comics and in the films, we can find a good example of this. Batman's costume is one of the suits in the history of comics that changes the most, from the fabric costume worn in the first film in 1966, to the armoured suit appearing in the film *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Snyder 2016): 'it should be noted that *Batman Begins* displays the fidelity flux of other adaptations of episodic texts, with the film inspiring an armour-like redesign of Batman's costume in the comics. [...] *Batman Begins* is more greatly inflected by its comic book source(s) than previous adaptations of the character' (Burke 2015: 166). In using different kinds of costumes, the directors and producers of films can choose between changing their fabric, design or even colours, or try to adapt them as illustration, which is, according to the categorization given above, the intention of adapting them in the same way as they appear in the comic book. Due to this kind of adaptation, we could see different on-screen versions of Batman's costumes. The important change to be highlighted is the one accounting for the use of armour-like costumes instead of the traditional fabric suits. And the reason seems quite obvious: this kind of costume offers the superhero better protection and, at the

same time, gives him/her the body shape expected of a hero. As an example, 'Michael Keaton, Val Kilmer, and George Clooney may have lacked the muscularity of action stars, but their moulded rubber suits ensured Batman still had "musclebound anatomy' (Burke 2015: 253).

As we pointed out above, a costume entails a specific relation with the superhero wearing it, but costumes also highlight one aspect to be discussed: the face. The three characters we have chosen convey three different attitudes towards wearing a mask to be in disguise. The first one is Superman, who does not wear any mask, as he prefers to show his face to the world. We can find a sense of transparency in this action, as people regard Superman as a superhero that has nothing to hide, a crystal clear person. Also, the fact of showing his face could be considered as a sign, due to the interpretation we could derive from it: this superhero has nothing to hide, so people can trust him. The next superhero would be Batman, who is in the middle between Superman and Spider-Man, as he only covers half of his face. This trend of having the face half-covered plays a role as a complement of the costume: 'This feature is regularly emphasized by the hero's costume, with the lower part of their face often the only feature visible' (Burke 2015: 254). This highlights a semiotic element in comic books: the square jaw. This element could entail what, in Peircean terms, is called a symbol, as it reflects the idea of a strong and self-confident man. 'Not only do classic heroes such as Batman and Daredevil display a square jaw line beneath their masks, but characters such as the X-Men and Judge Dredd [...] also conform to this convention' (Burke 2015: 254). As we can observe, this trend has been kept throughout the years, as the validity of the symbol remains in the audience's mind. If the mask becomes an element to hide the identity of the superhero, the face being exposed, as we have seen with Superman, has a meaning: just as superheroes, defenders of good and enemies of evil, possess physiological elements such as the square jaw or the light face, villains, on the contrary, show their evil in their face. Features such as the diabolical smile, a furious stare or some scars also convey symbols, in Peircean terms, which represent the evil in the villains' faces and show a relation between the sign and its representation: 'Villains should be larger than life, and preferably grotesque. The Joker and Two-Face are perfect examples of Batman bad guys; they wear their villainy on their faces' (Burke 2015: 255).

## Conclusions

Taking into account the previous study based on the application of Peircean concepts to the analysis of some comic books and film elements, such as the setting, the emblems and the costumes of the superheroes, we can draw two main conclusions in order to prove the validity of the Peircean theories on the sign as tools for the analysis of audiovisual material, having as a support the theories of Sánchez regarding the degree of fidelity of the adaptations from comics to film.

The first conclusion is related to the application of visual semiotics to the audiovisual media. It has been proved that the theories developed by Peirce could act as a tool in order to

analyse audiovisual elements, in this case, both comic books and films. The visual nature of these products leads to the perspective of considering them as signs; as a result, they can be observed and studied by applying a semiotic approach. We can conclude from this analysis that, taking into account the large number of differences of these media, both the comic book and its adaptation to the screen can be studied with the proposed semiotic tools. Moreover, the fact that both media convey different kinds of signs has to be highlighted, as in some cases, for example, one sign will be considered as an icon in one medium and as an index in respect to the other medium. As a consequence, we can state that each medium works with a range of signs, which, on some occasions, can share a number of similarities in both media.

The second conclusion is based on the relationship between the Peircean sign and the theory of adaptation proposed by Sánchez. Fidelity in the process of adapting from comic book to film plays an important role when analysing these products, as the readers and the general audience seek faithful representations of the superheroes from the comics in the film. The issue of fidelity in adaptation, as tested above, can also be analysed from a visual semiotic perspective using Pierce's theories as a basis. Thus, the degree of fidelity will also be reflected in terms of icons, indices and symbols, which have proved to serve as a useful tool for this kind of analysis.

## NOTES

1 This division is related to the speech acts proposed by Searle (1976), who divides these acts into three elements: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary.

2 This information has been found on the following web page: <https://es.gizmodo.com/el-mar-avilloso-comic-frances-en-el-que-george-lucas-se-1748135394>

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