2012

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"What's That Noise?": Paying Attention to Perception, Excess, and Meta-Art in
David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

English Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

May, 2012

"What's That Noise?": Paying Attention to Perception, Excess, and Meta-Art in David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the thesis committee.

Dr. Matthew Sewell, Advisor

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Abstract

In his graphic novel *Asterios Polyp* David Mazzucchelli is concerned with the nature of human perception. He highlights the limitations of perception through his title character's struggle to find a new way to filter information from the world around him. Mazzucchelli reminds us that no matter which method a person uses to look at the world there will always be excess details that he or she will ignore or simply not notice due to perceptual blind spots. I argue that, while Asterios gains a new method for perceiving the world, his true victory is in his acknowledgement that all perceptions are limited. The acknowledgment of his inherent blind spots prepares Asterios to accept excess details when they appear. Through meta-art, Mazzucchelli uses this lesson to also teach the reader how to approach interpreting his graphic novel. He draws the reader's attention to a variety of analytical frameworks by referencing each one through a different character's perspective on art. By creating a grid of interpretive approaches, I argue that Mazzucchelli does not encourage the reader to use one approach over another, but instead he wants the reader to realize that no approach will provide a complete reading of his work. The acknowledgement that all interpretive approaches have limitations, just like all methods of perception, prepares the reader to accept when excess details reveal something lacking in his or her analysis.

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Introduction

Born September 21st, 1960, David Mazzucchelli is a comics writer and illustrator with critically acclaimed work in both mainstream and art comics. He started drawing professionally in 1982 while attending the Rhode Island School of Design, where his main interest was the movement of solid forms in space (Nadel "Space Odyssey"). After a couple years of illustrating a mishmash of different comic books for Marvel Comics, he became well known in the world of mainstream comics for his collaborations with writer Frank Miller. Together they worked on *Daredevil: Born Again* (1985–86) and *Batman: Year One* (1986–87). Miller's fame as the writer of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (a graphic novel about an aging Bruce Wayne who returns to crime fighting after a long hiatus), which came out while he and Mazzucchelli worked on *Daredevil*, helped gain attention for their run on *Batman*. Mazzucchelli's formal artistic training at RISD helped him develop a style that incorporated a sense of realism into the typically flamboyant superhero genre. For example, Mazzucchelli's composition of the characters in figure 1 (a panel from *Batman: Year One*) reveals his ability to depict the human form moving through space in a way that conveys a realistic sense of weight and gravity. His understated design of Batman's costume and detailed visual style give the characters a physical presence in the gritty texture of their urban environment. In "Space Odyssey," an article that provides a short and concise review of Mazzucchelli's career, Dan Nadel says, "Mazzucchelli's work was revolutionary. He brought to the [superhero] genre a sense of space, mood, and human scale it had not seen since the midcentury work of artists like Alex Toth and Jesse Marsh."

Figure 1. *A panel from Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's Batman: Year One (31)*

Despite these successful collaborations with Miller, which likely would have guaranteed Mazzucchelli steady work in mainstream comics, he soon left the industry behind in order to start creating comics where he was in full control of both the illustrating and the writing. In an interview with Dash Shaw (a former student of Mazzucchelli and a professional comics creator) Mazzucchelli reflects on his reason for leaving the mainstream comics industry: "Once I had achieved those comics with Frank Miller, I had gotten to a point where I doubted I could go any further in that genre in a satisfying way" ("TCJ 300 Conversations: David Mazzucchelli & Dash Shaw"). He spent a year searching for a new and gratifying direction for his art. During this time of exploration, he took a printmaking class at New York's School of Visual Arts (Nadel). Eventually, he created an annual comics anthology called *Rubber Blanket*. As Nadel explains, the name of the anthology derives from the tool used in printmaking "to transfer

ink from printing plate to paper," and thus reflects Mazzucchelli's interest in exploring the fundamental tools of his art. The three volumes published between 1991 and 1993 feature comics in which Mazzucchelli experiments with drawing styles that are wildly different from his realistic work in *Daredevil* and *Batman*. Furthermore, his stories feature protagonists who are ordinary people dealing with internal struggles, instead of superheroes battling villains.

In the midst of working on *Rubber Blanket,* he also collaborated with the artist Paul Karasik on a comics adaptation of Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass,* which was published in 1994. Describing his shift in artistic focus in an interview with Bill Kartalopoulos about *City of Glass*, Mazzucchelli says, "What I arrived at was also informed by my growing interest in comic book drawing as cartooning…as a system of mark-making that creates its own credible reality." He had mastered the strategies of realistic representation in his superhero comics and wanted to investigate and deconstruct the basic formal qualities of the medium. While some of the comics in *Rubber Blanket* are more cartoon-like than others, the comic strip series *Mope & Grope*, which appears in all three volumes of *Rubber Blanket*, is an extreme example of Mazzucchelli's experiments in "mark-making*"* (Figure 2). The newfound focus on the printing process, writing stories about ordinary people dealing with internal struggles, and drawing in a cartoon-like style would carry into Mazzucchelli's biggest and most ambitious project— the graphic novel *Asterios Polyp.*
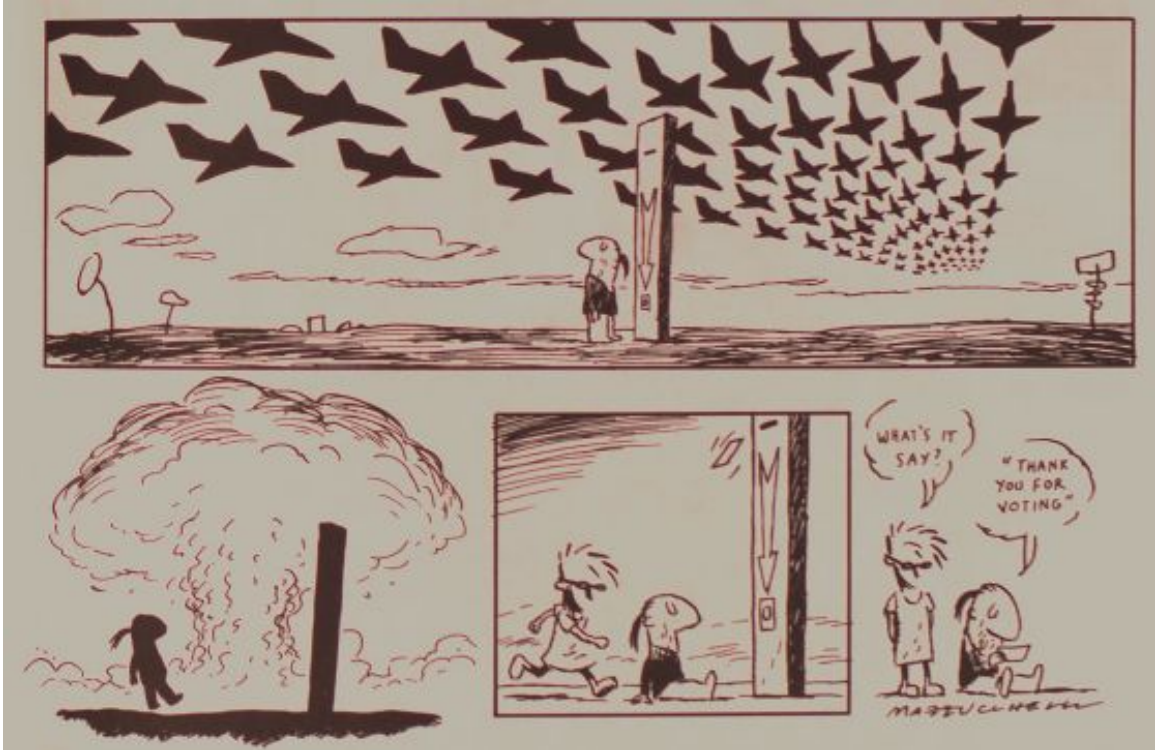
Figure 2. *An excerpt from Mazzucchelli's "Mope & Grope" in Rubber Blanket vol.1 (31)*

After *Asterios Polyp*'s publication in 2009, the Museum of Comics and Cartoon Art in New York City hosted an exhibition of his work called *Sounds and Pauses: The Comics of David Mazzucchelli*. In an interview at the exhibition, Mazzucchelli explains that after publishing the third issue of *Rubber Blanket* he realized that the story he wanted to tell in the fourth volume was too long to fit into the format of the anthology (Showers "David Mazzucchelli at MoCCA"). The fourth volume of *Rubber Blanket* turned into *Asterios Polyp*, a 338 page graphic novel.

In the following thesis project I argue that in *Asterios Polyp* Mazzucchelli highlights the limitations of human perception through his narrative and his visual style, and he asserts that by acknowledging these limitations we can prepare ourselves for when excess details prove our initial perception to be lacking.

Mazzucchelli's protagonist, Asterios, a "paper architect" renowned for his innovative designs that never get built, views life through a filter that divides complex concepts into dualities. And among dualities, Asterios values the utilitarian over the expressive. This method proves fruitful for his career at the university, but inadequate once Hana, an artist who makes sculptures out of found materials, catches his eye. Her ability to see the value in discarded things contrasts sharply with his passion for functionality. While at first it seems as if their differences complement one another, over time Asterios's unwillingness to open his mind causes their relationship to stall out.

The plot focuses on Asterios's journey to broaden his narrow perception of life so that he can piece back together his shattered marriage. On this journey, he wanders into the town of Apogee and meets the mechanic Stiffly Major, his hippie wife Ursula, and their son Jackson. Between scenes of Asterios in Apogee, Mazzucchelli includes flashbacks of Hana and Asterios's relationship before the divorce. These scenes include encounters with artists such as Willy Ilium, a self-obsessed choreographer, and Kalvin Kohoutek, a polyphonic musical composer. The narrator of the story is Asterios's twin brother Ignazio, whose death represents the origin of Asterios's fascination with dualities. Convinced his brother is the missing half in his life, Asterios strives to make his presence felt by finding solace in symmetrical designs. Unfortunately, in the process, he overlooks the potential for Hana to fill the void in his life. After learning the value of keeping an open mind in Apogee, Asterios drives a solar powered Cadillac across the country to reunite with Hana in her rural Minnesota cabin. Just as they are about to re-embrace as a couple, an asteroid aimed at the cabin hurtles down from the night sky. This abrupt and violent ending leaves little doubt as to the couple's fate.

In my thesis project, the review of literature provides a survey of four different analytical approaches to reading comics (the dichotomous, the interdependent, the stylistic, and the braided) that help build a vocabulary for how to identify and analyze the formal techniques Mazzucchelli uses in his work. It also provides an overview of Kristin Thompson's theory of excess, which serves as a key concept throughout my subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 1, I argue that Mazzucchelli uses the story of Asterios's journey to change his perception in order to demonstrate that no single perceptual framework will provide a complete understanding of the world. Asterios's triumph at the end of the book is not in his newfound method of perception, but his acknowledgement that all perceptual frameworks necessarily allow excess details to slip by. The acknowledgement that all methods of perception have inherent limitations prepares a person to accept when an excess detail proves his or her initial assumptions to be inadequate.

In Chapter 2, I argue that Mazzucchelli, paralleling his plot-level meaning, also constructs his graphic novel as a guide for different ways to read his work through meta-artistic references to the different approaches a reader can use to analyze his work. Each analytical approach is referenced through a different character's approach to art in the story. In creating this grid of different analytical frameworks, Mazzucchelli asserts that no approach will provide a complete reading of his book, but that the acknowledgement of the limitations of all analytical frameworks prepares the reader to accept when an excess detail reveals an inadequacy or brings new light to his or her reading. Finally, the conclusion of the thesis project suggests future research projects that could be explored in order to gain further insight into Mazzucchelli's body of work.

While Mazzucchelli is highly regarded among critics for his work in both mainstream and art comics, there's a severe lack of sustained critical analysis of his work—especially *Asterios Polyp*. To date, only one academic article has been published on this graphic novel ("Image Functions: Shape and Color as Hermeneutic Images in *Asterios Polyp*" by Randy Duncan). My thesis project is meant to help enrich the discourse that's barely begun and to open avenues for further exploration of Mazzucchelli's work and the comics creators that experiment with the concept of perception and the formal qualities of comics.

Review of Literature

In *Asterios Polyp* David Mazzucchelli explores the subject of human perception through his title character's struggle to modify his outlook on the world. Asterios's choice to perceive everything through a lens that splits concepts into dualities leads to the end of his marriage and the loss of his job. In order to set things right, he goes on a journey to try to change his way of perceiving things. Throughout the graphic novel, Mazzucchelli portrays each of his characters as possessing a unique outlook on the world. Many of the characters are artists: Asterios is an architect, Hana makes sculptures, Willy Illium is a choreographer, and Kalvin Kohoutek composes music. By giving each character a unique way of approaching his or her art, Mazzucchelli draws parallels to his own craft and the variety of ways it can be analyzed.

In the field of comics studies, scholars put forth a variety of approaches that may be used to analyze comics. Much of the scholarship is based on semiotics and narratology. In semiotics, both words and images are considered cultural codes, or signs, that a reader interprets to find meaning. In narratology, scholars investigate the shared techniques that writers use to create narratives and how these techniques affect the reading experience. Scholars of the comics medium combine the theories from both fields in an attempt to investigate the different codes of signification in the medium and to support their arguments regarding how someone should approach comics analysis. Each approach emphasizes that the reader should pay attention to certain qualities in the medium, such as the combination of words and images or the specific artistic style that the creator of the comic uses to compose their drawings. These diverse approaches

provide the reader of the comic with different options for how he or she may analyze a creator's work.

While the analytical approaches have no official titles agreed upon by the scholars, titles are needed to help separate one approach from another. In the following review of literature, four main approaches are discussed: (1) the dichotomous approach, (2) the interdependent approach, (3) the stylistic approach, and (4) the braided approach. I explain each approach using evidence from the scholars that have contributed to its formation. In order to illustrate how the approaches work, I then apply each to an excerpt from Mazzuchelli's graphic novel. Following this discussion, I evaluate the critical reception of Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp* and its relation to the overall argument of the thesis, which centers on Kristin Thompson's theory of excess in critical analysis.

1. **The Dichotomous Approach**

The dichotomous approach asks the reader to treat the words and images in a comic as two separate narrative threads. This separation is based on the assumption that words and images are two separate modes of representation that cannot be assimilated into a single representational mode. In their introduction to the winter 2006 issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven describe this dichotomous relationship between words and images in comics as rooted in the "cross-discursive" quality of the medium:

> In comics, the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a
> separate narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way
> than the prose text, which also moves the reader forward in time. The
> medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal

and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified

whole, but rather remain distinct. (769)

By emphasizing that a comic is split between its visual and verbal narrative threads,

Chute and DeKoven assert that the reader should analyze each thread as representing a

separate piece of the narrative. Each thread remains distinct from the other based on their

dichotomous relationship as two modes of representation that the reader switches

between. With this in mind, a reader using the dichotomous approach focuses on how the

creator of a comic composes the visual and verbal narrative threads. Later in the review

of literature, I discuss another group of scholars who assert that the visual and verbal

narrative threads should not be considered as separate modes of representation.

The scholars who employ the dichotomous approach point out what they perceive

as the fundamental differences between words versus images. For instance, in

Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (1993) Scott McCloud says that a gap in time

exists between how we read words and how we look at images. The gap lies within how

these two codes present information: "Pictures are received information. We need no

formal education to 'get the message.' The message is instantaneous. Writing is

perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract

symbols of language" (49). The "message" that McCloud refers to is the meaning that the

word or image conveys through its recognition as a code by the reader. He distinguishes

between the two by how much time it takes for someone to register the meaning

presented by each thread. As I will discuss later, Charles Hatfield rallies against

McCloud's argument regarding the duration in time separating words and images.

However, there are also scholars who support McCloud's assertion. In their introduction

to *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (2007) Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons base the difference in the duration in word and image comprehension on the way the codes are arranged: "While words must be spoken or written one after the other in time and are apprehended sequentially, the elements of an image are arranged side by side in space and are apprehended all at once" (xi). The linear arrangement of a word versus the non-linear composition of an image causes slower comprehension of the words than the images.

Along with their difference in duration regarding reader comprehension, scholars claim that words and images possess different constraints in terms of signification. Using the semiotic theories of Roland Barthes, Barbara Postema claims in "Draw a Thousand Words: Signification and Narration in Comics Images" (2007) that words and images differ in their signification because images are based on forms that exist in reality, while words are not: "Representations of a cat are not arbitrary, as semiotic signs are assumed to be, since they usually show some resemblance to actual cats. Pictures of cats are not arbitrary signs that we recognize as a cat by convention; they are mimetic, referring to a real shape and form" (488). She uses the term "arbitrary" to indicate that words possess meaning based on our shared agreement that a word like "cat" signifies the real life form of a cat. However, as Postema points out, the image of a cat is mimetic, which means that the form of the image imitates the form of a cat we might see in reality. In *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (2007) Douglas Wolk elaborates on the difference in signification that Postema puts forth. He claims that the domain of poetry, as he calls it, is constrained by vocabulary, while the domain of painting is constrained by the inability to signify things outside the realm of the visual:

"If you want to describe a particular shade of yellow, poetry will get you as close as a modifier or two, but no closer, and painting will get it exactly; if you want to describe a particular psychological state, poetry will get you very close indeed…and painting will do its best by way of visual association or metaphor" (128). In this distinction between what words and images can do, Wolk demonstrates that words are constrained by their inability to mimic the form of the subject they are describing. Images, on the other hand, are composed to show the reader exactly what he or she is supposed to see. Alternatively, Wolk claims that words can more accurately describe mental processes outside the visual, such as emotions and physical sensations. Scholars claim that the creator of the comic uses the constraints presented by both codes to form the visual and verbal narrative threads for the reader.

The differences between words and images described by Chute and DeKoven, McCloud, Postema, and Wolk are the backbone of the dichotomous approach. By characterizing words and images as deviating from one another, these scholars are able to analyze comics in terms of what the visual thread of images show the reader and the verbal thread of words tell the reader. The following section provides an example of how to analyze an excerpt from a comic using the dichotomous approach.

Applying the Dichotomous Approach

The dichotomous approach requires that the reader separate the verbal and visual narrative threads in a comic to analyze how the creator uses each to compose the story. In figure 3 (a page selected from *Asterios Polyp*) Mazzucchelli's words start at the top of the page with a caption of narration from Ignazio. This is one of several sections in the graphic novel where Asterios's dead twin provides context for the scenes taking place in

the narrative. His comment that their father "thought little about religion" introduces one of the main themes of this section, which is the exploration of how religion affects how we view life. Ignazio's narration continues two pages later: "Our mother, on the other hand, had been a practicing Catholic" (146). The contrast between Asterios's parents' beliefs parallels the vast differences between how Hana and Asterios view life.

The dialogue in figure 3 serves as an example of Asterios applying his obsession with twins and duality onto religion. He argues that Eve is a clone of Adam because, according to the Bible, she was created from his rib, which means she had the same DNA. The conversation ends with Asterios claiming that this makes them twins. This is one of several moments where Asterios lectures Hana on how to look at the world. On the next page, figure 4, the toll of Asterios's lectures is made clear when Hana describes her dream of someone smothering her to death with a pillow. The attacker says, "Stop making so much noise. Someone will hear you." Living with Asterios has clearly had a stifling effect on Hana's self-worth. His tendency to push his opinions onto her without taking into account the damage that he's done is one of the reasons Hana eventually leaves Asterios.

Figure 3. *Asterios Polyp (144)*

Figure 4. *Asterios Polyp (145)*

Mazzucchelli makes the same point through the structure of the images in figure 3 by overlaying two panels across a splash page. The panels provide two different views inside Asterios's car. The top left panel shows Hana sitting in the passenger seat petting her cat Noguchi. Hana's wide-eyed gaze is turned to the right. In the next panel, Mazzucchelli reveals Asterios sitting in the driver's seat. The splash page reveals the exterior of the car traveling through wilderness. Mazzucchelli composes the images in figure 4 using a square panel and a panel in the shape of a large violet word balloon. The square panel shows Hana gazing away from Asterios as she reflects on her dream. Mazzucchelli draws Hana's dream in a sequence of five images within the violet word balloon showing a figure smothering Hana to death. While the figure's face is in shadow, the silhouette of his head has the same distinct half-circle shape as Asterios.

The preceding analysis demonstrates how it looks if the reader focuses exclusively on either the creator's writing or drawing. By treating them as separate modes of representation that never cross-pollinate, the interpretation of the comic is split between what is told and what is shown.

2. **The Interdependent Approach**

Scholars who follow the interdependent approach stand in stark contrast to the scholars in the dichotomous approach. Instead of existing as two narrative threads, as Chute and DeKoven claim, they argue that the words and images in a comic form one overall narrative. In *The Art of the Funnies* (1994) Robert C. Harvey is avidly against the separation of word and image. He says a work of comics must be interpreted through negotiating the meaning that's created between taking in the visual and the verbal: "Comics are a blend of word and picture—not a simple coupling of the verbal and the

visual, but a blend, a true mixture" (9). His use of the word "blend" and the phrase "a true mixture" implies the inseparability of the words and images in the reader's mind, like two different kinds of sand poured together that can never be taken apart. Harvey uses comic strips where a joke makes no sense without the reader comprehending both the words and the images as his prime example of how words and images are interdependent upon one another.

Roy Bearden-White explains in "Closing the Gap: Examining the Invisible Sign in Graphic Narratives" (2009) that even though a comic is composed of seemingly fragmentary elements that possess gaps in their arrangement, the reader's interpretation acts as a bridge across the gap between the signs: "From a semiotic viewpoint, both words and pictures operate as individual signs and each provide meaning to the reader. When one sign, however, is placed beside another, as in a comic panel, a new sign emerges and extra significance is conveyed to the reader" (347). By emphasizing that a new sign and a new meaning is formed in the gap between reading the words and images, Bearden-White asserts that they become inseparable. Even in certain comics where the gap in comprehension is small, such as when the words and the images seem to be telling the same information, he says that they stick together in the reader's imagination. On the other end of spectrum, Charles Hatfield in *Alternate Comics: An Emerging Literature* (2011) expands on Bearden-White's claims by arguing that even when the words and the images are telling and showing totally different narratives at the same time, the reader can't help but make a new meaning out of their combination. He describes the effect of when the words and images go in different narrative directions as a "tension" that's presented to the reader. Hatfield claims that the tension between the words and images

causes the reader to gain a new understanding of both narratives. He uses Chris Ware's

short comic "I Guess", where the images show a superhero fighting a mad scientist, while

the words tell a personal story from Ware's childhood, as an example of how this tension

works:

> The iconography of the superhero genre informs and deepens the
>
> autobiographical narrative, while the autobiography invests the clichés of
>
> the superhero with a peculiar resonance, inviting the reader to reconsider
>
> the genre's psychological appeal. Thus the interplay of the two suggests a
>
> third, more comprehensive meaning that the reader must construct through
>
> inference. (37)

Both Bearden-White and Hatfield emphasize that the creator of the comic forces the

reader to try and make meaning out of the words and the images by placing them within

the same space of the of the page. Even if the words and images seem to match or if they

are totally divergent, the meaning produced by their combination is fixed in the reader's

mind.

While the dichotomous scholars claim that words and images are vastly different

from one another, interdependent scholars argue that they share more similarities. As

Charles Hatfield makes clear in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* the

assumption upheld by McCloud that images take a longer duration of time to comprehend

than words is complicated by the ability of images, when aligned in a sequence, to

communicate ideas and stories in a similar way as written words: "Images can be

simplified and codified to function as a language…Pictures are not simply to be received;

they must be decoded" (37). In his reference to "simplification" in terms of images,

Hatfield refers to the cartoon style that many creators use to present their characters and storyworlds. With the term "codification" he refers to the meaning we give to certain visual icons in comics, like the stars that float above a character's head to indicate that the character feels dizzy. He says that by making the images less elaborate and more symbolic they become more like a form of writing that the reader decodes.

In *Theory of Comics & Sequential Art* (1985) Will Eisner explains how the text in a comic can possess image-like qualities: "Lettering, treated 'graphically' and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery. In this context it provides the mood, a narrative bridge, and the implication of sound" (10). In using the term "graphically", Eisner refers to the hand drawn technique that many creators use to infuse their lettering with a distinct visual style. This stylistic approach to the text gives it an extra pictorial meaning beyond its status as a verbal sign. Eisner's concept is similar to the term "expressive typography", which scholars use to describe the visual manipulation of text to express emotions or tone in a comic. They often associate expressive typography with the lettering that comics creators use in superhero comics for sound effects, such as "POW!" and "ZAP!" Therefore, not only can images be decoded like words as Hatfield claims, but also the text in comics is often hand-drawn and expressive.

The scholars that follow the interdependent approach use the similarities between how words and images are composed and read to support their argument that a reader should pay attention to the meaning signified through the combination of these codes.

Applying the Interdependent Approach

In analyzing a comic with the interdependent approach, the reader investigates how the words and images interact with one another on the page. In figures 3 and 4, the

reader may start his or her analysis by pointing out that Mazzucchelli's hand drawn text and word balloons visually reinforce the differences that exist between the characters' personalities. He draws Asterios's lettering in all capital letters to express the character's tendency to state everything as if it's a fact that cannot be argued. The square shape of the word balloons reflect Asterios's tendency for picking clean, straight lines over anything too messy, or expressive. Hana's lower-case lettering shows that she's far more apprehensive in the way she puts forth her opinions and can easily be dominated by those closest to her. Her rounded word balloons further show that she's less restricted than Asterios in her approach to life. Mazzucchelli's choice to contrast the visual style of the characters' lettering and word balloons helps convey that each sees the world in a different way.

In figure 4, Mazzucchelli blurs the line between the verbal and the visual in his presentation of Hana's dream. He structures the story within a word balloon to signify that Hana is telling Asterios what happened; however, the story gets communicated to the reader through a sequence of images within the balloon. These images show each step of her recollection of the night before. Mazzucchelli manifests Hana's words into images in order to place the reader within Hana's mind and show the horror that she experienced. The images also reveal that the shadowy figure holding the pillow has the same half-circle profile as Asterios. It's unclear if Hana includes this detail to Asterios in her spoken recollection or if this is only revealed to the reader. If she includes it, then his ambivalent response on the next page would mean that he has truly blinded himself to the stifling effect he has on her or he simply does not care about the damage he's done.

Through an investigation of how Mazzucchelli's words and images are

interdependent, the reader reveals details about the structure of the narrative that he or she would not notice using the dichotomous approach.

3. **The Stylistic Approach**

Rather than focusing on analyzing the combination of words and images in comics, the scholars that utilize the stylistic approach concentrate on how a creator's visual style may influence a reader's interpretation of a comic. They associate the creator's visual style with his or her hand-drawn line, or what is often referred to as linework. Wolk, who calls comics creators cartoonists, explains why a cartoonist's linework amounts to his or her visual style:

> The line itself is an interpolation, something the cartoonist adds to his or her idea of the shape of bodies in space. In a cartoon, every object's form is subject to interpretive distortion—even when what's being distorted isn't a real image but a distant cousin of something real. A consistent, aestheticized distortion, combined with the line that establishes that distortion, adds up to a cartoonist's visual style, no matter how intentional or unintentional it is. (123)

As Wolk points out, a creator's visual style develops through his or her consistent use of a distinct line. Over time, a well-known cartoonist's line becomes as unique as a signature. He goes on to point out that there are general drawing styles that are not associated with only one creator but with a certain genre or category of comics. For example, readers expect mainstream superhero comics to have a more realistic and dramatic style than Sunday morning comic strips. He uses mainstream comics companies, such as Marvel, as examples of places where a "house style" was

encouraged throughout the 1970s. All the artists working under these companies were expected to draw the characters in a similar style so that comic book readers were not disoriented when a superhero, such as Spider-man, looked different from one issue to another. This practice culminated in the publication of *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* in 1978, which taught fans how to draw Marvel superheroes in the house style. The emphasis on house style changed in the '80s, when executives realized they could sell comic books more effectively to their target audience by advertising the talent of new artists and writers who use unique styles to portray iconic characters (a good example being Todd McFarlane's run on *The Amazing Spider-Man* in 1988). Whether focusing on one creator's visual style or a general style across a genre of comics, style is made present through the creator's linework.

Pascal Lefèvre pushes Wolk's discussion of style further in "Some Medium-Specific Qualities of Graphic Sequences" (2011) by arguing that visual style, or graphic style as he calls it, provides ontological and contextual meaning to the work. Similar to Wolk, he notes that a creator's line is a distortion of reality that can be as unique as a signature, however he also suggests that the line presents the reader with a visual ontology of the story world:

A graphic style creates the fictive world, giving a certain perspective on the diegesis…The artist not only depicts something, but expresses at the same time a visual interpretation of the world, with every drawing style implying an ontology of the representable or visualizable. The viewer is obliged to share this figurative view of the

maker, since he or she cannot look at the object in the picture from

any other point of view. (16)

In other words, the creator's visual style presents the reader with a subjective way

of looking at the world. To explain how this works, Lefèvre uses examples of comics

where one story is told in two different styles. He demonstrates that even though

the comics are both telling the same basic story, the differences in linework and

composition convey a different visual ontology to the reader. He also points out that

a visual style may also provide contextual meaning. Lefèvre says that by recognizing

one artist is imitating the style of another well-known comics creator a reader gains

a different interpretation of the work:

The contextual knowledge the reader can draw on, including his or

her familiarity with the range of visual styles used in comics, is thus

important when it comes to studying drawing styles. Indeed, how a

particular reader reacts to a particular style may be quite personal,

since it will be influenced by previous experiences with similar styles.

(16)

Therefore, style amounts to more than just a creator's unique way of drawing. It is

also an important tool at their disposal that controls the reader's access into the

storyworld and may be used to reference other creators through imitation.

In "Storylines" (2011) Jared Gardner focuses on the way the artist's linework,

besides signifying meaning through its visual ontology and relation to other styles,

provides thematic meaning to a narrative and gestures at the physical work that

was put into the production of the art. He uses Eddie Campbell's work as the illustrator

for Alan Moore's *From Hell* (1991–96) as an example. He says that Campbell's crosshatched lines embody the theme of community associated with the women that live in fear of Jack the Ripper. Softer lines are used in the scenes that take place in the richer neighborhoods to indicate the theme of aristocratic indulgence. Gardner says the artist's line adds another layer to the narrative by indicating the artist's physical relationship with their work: "We cannot look at the graphic narrative and imagine that the line does not give us access to the labored making of the storyworld we are encountering" (64). In other words, the linework can signify both the themes of the narrative and the process the artist used to compose the images in the comic.

Together, Wolk, Lefèvre, and Gardner provide an approach for how one should analyze a comic by paying attention to the creator's visual style and what it may signify through its distinct quality as the creator's artistic signature, its ontological view on the storyworld, its contextual relation to other styles, and its thematic meaning.

Applying the Stylistic Approach

While many creators use one visual style to present a consistent outlook on the storyworld to their audience, Mazzucchelli makes strategic changes in style throughout *Asterios Polyp*. In fact, not only is each character drawn in a different fashion with his or her own uniquely shaped word balloons and lettering, but Mazzucchelli also demonstrates Lefèvre's concept of visual ontology by showing the difference in how Hana and Asterios perceive the world. Figures 3 and 4 present a good example of how Mazzucchelli changes visual ontologies. With Hana's description of her dream in figure 4, the style suddenly changes from the standard, fairly objective, drawing style that

dominates the book to a more subjective style personal to Hana's way of looking at the world. Mazzucchelli first indicates this shift through a change in color from the standard style, where purples with some blues and violets dominate, to a style drawn in all violet. Then Mazzucchelli's linework changes. Suddenly the storyworld is made up of wavy, crosshatched lines instead of the more conventional lines used in the standard style. By shifting from one style to another, Mazzucchelli gives the reader a look into how Hana perceives the world. The stylistic approach helps the reader focus on how the creator uses his or her visual style to add another layer of narrative information to the work or imitate another type of visual style.

4. **The Braided Approach**

A scholar uses the braided approach to identify and analyze recurring iconic motifs within a comic. He or she views the medium as a network of panels, which are linked through their placement on the page alongside one another. A creator braids iconic motifs into the network by repeating a visual symbol within the sequence of panels. The braided approach is centered on the theoretical work of Theirry Groensteen. In *The System of Comics* (2007) he claims that a single panel should be considered the basic unit of signification when analyzing a comic: "The comics panel is fragmentary and caught in a system of proliferation; it never makes up the totality of the utterance but can and must be understood as a component in a larger apparatus" (5). He makes this argument in response to the scholars that break down the image in a comic to smaller and smaller units of signification, which he believes is not a practical approach.

After establishing that the panel is the basic unit of signification, Groensteen says that an entire comic should be viewed as a "multiframe", where many frames, or panels,

are placed alongside one another. The placement and location of the panels on the space of the page is the foundation for his argument that the medium of comics is a network:

> It has been often repeated in these pages that within the paged multiframe that constitutes a complete comic, every panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with each of the others. This totality, where the physical form is generally…that of an album, responds to a model of organization that is not that of strip nor that of the chain, but that of the network. (146)

By defining the medium as a network, he pushes the analysis of a comic beyond the meaning that is gained from the linear progression the reader makes from one panel to another to how a creator weaves thematic meaning across the many panels within the mutliframe.

Groensteen explains braiding as a series of iconic motifs, or visual symbols, that appear throughout the comic: "Braiding is generally founded on the remarkable resurgence of an iconic motif (or of a plastic quality), and it is concerned primarily with situations, with strong dramatic potential, of appearance and disappearance" (152). Groensteen uses *Watchmen* (1986–87) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons as an example of a highly braided work of comics. In explaining how they braid the iconic motif of circularity into their work, Groensteen notes that the yellow smiling badge (an emblematic image of that graphic novel) gets placed in strategic panels throughout the book. He points out that the badge appears in both the first and last pages of the first chapter, and the last page of the last chapter. He says that the recurrence of this iconic motif strengthens the graphic novel's theme of circularity.

In "Teeth, Sticks, and Bricks: Calligraphy, Graphic Focalization, and Narrative Braiding in Eddie Campbell's *Alec*" (2011) Craig Fischer and Charles Hatfield apply Greonsteen's braided approach to Eddie Campbell's body of work. They describe Groensteen's theoretical model of the comic as "an architectural visual space…[Where] everything can connect to everything else. Symbolic and metaphoric repetition can occur, often unobtrusively, in the context of page and publication design, as part of the architectonics of the total work" (82). They explain that braiding is unobtrusive in the sense that the reader may not always notice the recurrence of an iconic motif unless he or she is looking for it. With their analysis of Eddie Campbell's *Alec*, Fischer and Hatfield argue that Campbell has braided certain iconic motifs (teeth, sticks, and bricks) into many of his comics throughout his career. After examining how each motif is repeated in a complex amount of ways in different comics, they conclude that Campbell's method of braiding these images into his work helps to thematically enrich and unify his body of work as a whole.

Applying the Braided Approach

In approaching *Asterios Polyp* with Groensteen's theories of braiding, the reader may be overwhelmed with the amount of iconic motifs packed into Mazzucchelli graphic novel. Throughout the narrative, he repeats certain symbols like the twins, the yin-yang, the lightning bolt, and others. In figure 4, the iconic motif is subtler and requires that the reader connect it with panels in other pages. While it may at first seem arbitrary, the bean shape of the violet word balloon in figure 4, where Hana recollects her dream, is actually highly significant. In fact, it represents a divide between Hana and Asterios. The shape of the violet word balloon gets repeated in other panels in the comic. For example,

Mazzucchelli repeats it three pages later. In a scene where Asterios visits Hana's art studio, the sculpture in the lower right hand corner of the page has the same bean shape as the violet word balloon. Eight pages later, the shape appears again in the form of a coffee table that Hana brings into Asterios's apartment when she moves in. On the surface level, the scene centers on whether or not the table fits into the décor of the apartment. When Asterios questions why she brought it, Hana replies, "There are so many straight lines in here, I thought this would be a nice change" (157). The rounded shape of the table is important, it serves as another example of Hana's different way of perceiving things. More importantly, the repetition of this shape in association with things that are intensely personal to Hana (her dream and her sculpture) further builds the significance of the table. Its addition to the apartment upsets the symmetry of straight lines that Asterios has built and also serves as a visual representation of the changes that she brings to his lifestyle.

Asterios Polyp: Meta-art and Excess

While little academic scholarship exists on *Asterios Polyp*, upon its release in 2009 many of the scholars discussed thus far provided critical reviews of Mazzucchelli's work. A number of them note that he draws attention to the medium of comics throughout the narrative. In her review, Chute notes that Asterios's status as a paper architect (someone who is renowned for his designs on paper, but never gets them built) is analogous to the job of a comics creator: "This is ultimately what the book is about: comics form, which hovers throughout as the absent referent." It is "absent" because Mazzucchelli never makes the discussion of the medium explicit in the book. Wolk adds that Mazzucchelli draws the reader's attention to how different mediums of art compare

to comics. He does this by providing scenes where the characters discuss the different ways they approach music or sculpture. Wolk says that this aspect of Mazzucchelli's comic is a type of "meta-art", meaning that comments on its own status as a piece of art ("Shades of Meaning").

Both McCloud and Dan Nadel say that the construction of the cover and binding of the book (which was designed by Mazzucchelli) draws attention to the physical process of printing and publishing a comic. McCloud says the book has a "raw" and "honest" quality that emphasizes its status as a comic and not any other medium ("Some Thoughts on Asterios Polyp), while Nadel says that its "lush paper tone and rough-hewn, elegant design" make the reader pay more attention to the book's physical construction ("Space Odyssey"). The shared observation among critics that Mazzucchelli references the medium of comics throughout his narrative, without any assertions as to why he does so, opens the door for further analysis.

In this thesis, I argue that Mazzucchelli references the medium of comics in *Asterios Polyp* in order to provide a guide for how to read his graphic novel. My first chapter asserts that the central lesson of the book's narrative is the value of acknowledging the limits of human perception. My second chapter argues that Mazzucchelli uses each of the main characters' unique perceptions as a model for how a reader may approach analyzing his comic. The ultimate message is that even though there is no complete way to perceive the world, or to analyze Mazzucchelli's work, the acknowledgement that all perceptual and analytical frameworks possess limitations prepares a person to accept when excess details prove his or her perception of the world, or simply the reading of the graphic novel, to be lacking.

Guiding my argument is Kristin Thompson's theory of excess in her article "The Concept of Cinematic Excess." Drawing upon the work of critics including Russian Formalists, Stephen Heath, and Roland Barthes, she claims that, while analyzing a film, a scholar focuses on the elements that fit into his or her analytical lens, while ignoring or not noticing the components that do not fit. She refers to the elements that fall outside the unity of an analytical lens as the excess:

> The idea that the critic's job might include the pointing-out of this excess may startle some. But we have been looking at the neat aspects of artworks so long that we may forget their disturbing, rough parts…For the critic, this means the realization that he/she needs to talk about those aspects of the work that are usually ignored because they don't fit into a tight analyses. (489)

Even though Thompson's argument focuses on film analysis, I contend that her claim that a scholar ignores or does not notice the excess details that do not fit his or her analytical framework translates easily to comics analysis as well. Whether a scholar analyzes a film or a graphic novel, he or she typically pays attention to the elements that fit well into a particular interpretation of the work. The idea of focusing on the excess elements may "startle" a critic because the excess is composed of the elements the scholar overlooked or deemed unnecessary to pay attention to in the first place.

I argue that in *Asterios Polyp* David Mazzucchelli draws attention to the importance of accepting the inevitability of excess in both perceiving the world and critically analyzing his work. Mazzucchelli's narrative of Asterios's journey and his references to the different approaches a reader may use to analyze his graphic novel

assert that no framework is devoid of excess. Even though by definition we almost always miss it, excess is inevitably present. Mazzucchelli raises this issue to serve as a constant reminder of the limitations of perception. By acknowledging these limitations, instead of ignoring them like Asterios does at first, a person starts to anticipate when the evidence of excess will reveal a limitation in his or her framework.

Chapter 1

Everything is filtered through some kind of interpretation.

-David Mazzucchelli[1]

While some may find Asterios's death at the end of *Asterios Polyp* bewildering, I argue that, through his narrative, David Mazzucchelli makes the claim that no matter which method a person may take to perceive the world there will always be excess details that he or she will miss, and that the only way a person can prepare for the unexpected is to accept the limitations of his or her perception. He demonstrates this through Asterios's journey. He starts by showing that Asterios's choice to perceive the world through a dualistic lens is based on his need to find comfort in equilibrium. Mazzucchelli then exposes the inadequacies, or the blinds spots, in his perception through his interactions with Hana. The cast of characters represents a variety of worldviews that Asterios has the option to accept or reject. Mazzucchelli's ultimate lesson, as the ending shows, is not that a person should develop a better way of perceiving life by trying to perceive everything at once, but that he or she should realize the inherent limitations of his or her—or any— perception. Acknowledging one's limitations prepares us to accept when an excess detail, like the asteroid, comes hurtling down out of nowhere.

Asterios's Perception: A Search for Equilibrium

Mazzucchelli structures Asterios's perception around both the character's conscious choice to split concepts into dualities and his deep-seated need to find equilibrium in the chaos of life. The tensions between these two aspects of the character

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[1] Quote from interview with Christopher Brayshaw in 1997 for *The Comics Journal* (69).

manifest themselves in his work as a professor of architecture and the experience of losing his twin brother at birth.

Asterios admits that he makes a conscious decision to perceive the world through a filter that splits everything into its dualistic qualities. In a conversation with Ignazio, he explains his choice:

> Of course I realize that things aren't so black and white—that in actuality possibilities exist along a continuum between the extremes…It's just a convenient organizing principle. By choosing two aspects of a subject that appear to be in opposition, each can be examined in light of the other in order to better illuminate the entire subject. (120)

He admits his dualistic method disregards the possibilities that exist between the extremes, while also arguing it is a necessary sacrifice in order to understand complicated subjects. In a conversation with a colleague, he tries to explain the world through pointing out its dualistic qualities: "Duality is rooted in nature: the brain is divided into right and left hemispheres, electrical current is either positive or negative—our very existence is the result of humans being male and female" (119). By dividing nature into its dualistic parts he organizes complicated subjects into systems based on binary logic. It soon becomes clear where Asterios stands within the realm of dualities.

Even though Asterios's method of perception seems like an objective way to organize information, the bias in his outlook shows through in his work as a teacher and architect. When lecturing to his students, he presents them with two ways of viewing a subject and then argues for what he perceives as the right way. For example, in one of his lectures, Asterios says that art can be either factual or fictional. Factual art doesn't

disguise that it is a piece of art, whereas fictional art presents an illusion to the viewer. He ends the discussion by clearly coming down on the side of factual art: "Anything that is not functional is merely decorative" (115). Asterios's designs, which have titles like "Parallel Park" and "The Akimbo Arms", show his penchant for valuing functionality and symmetry over everything else.

Mazzucchelli compares how someone chooses to perceive the world to how an artist chooses the style of his or her work of art. The panel of apples in figure 5, a tableau that marks a new section of t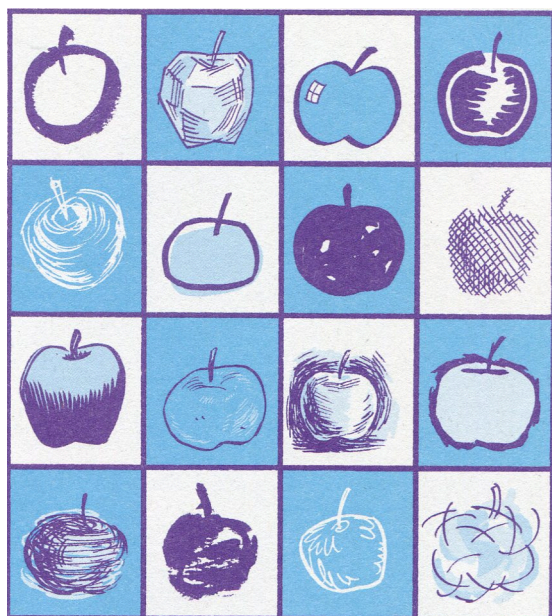he book, represents the parallel between perceptual and artistic choice. In each of the sixteen squares within the panel, Mazzucchelli draws an apple in a different visual style. While each drawing represents the same apple, the difference in the way they are drawn makes each one unique. The placement of the squares alongside one another in the formation of a grid draws attention to the multiplicity of ways that an artist can represent the same thing. And just as he or

Figure 5. *Asterios Polyp (33)*

she can choose one style over another, someone like Asterios can prefer one way of organizing his perception of the world over another. In figure 6, Mazzucchelli expands on the visual metaphor of the apples tableau by drawing a crowd of college students in wildly different visual styles. Ignazio's narration helps to reveal that each style is supposed to represent a different worldview: "What if reality (as perceived) were simply

an extension of the self? Wouldn't that color the way each individual experiences the world?" (34). In figure 7, he draws Asterios as a gigantic configuration of symmetrical shapes lecturing a class of tiny students. It is easy to figure out which students follow Asterios's way of thinking and which ones reject it based on whether they're drawn in the same style as their professor.

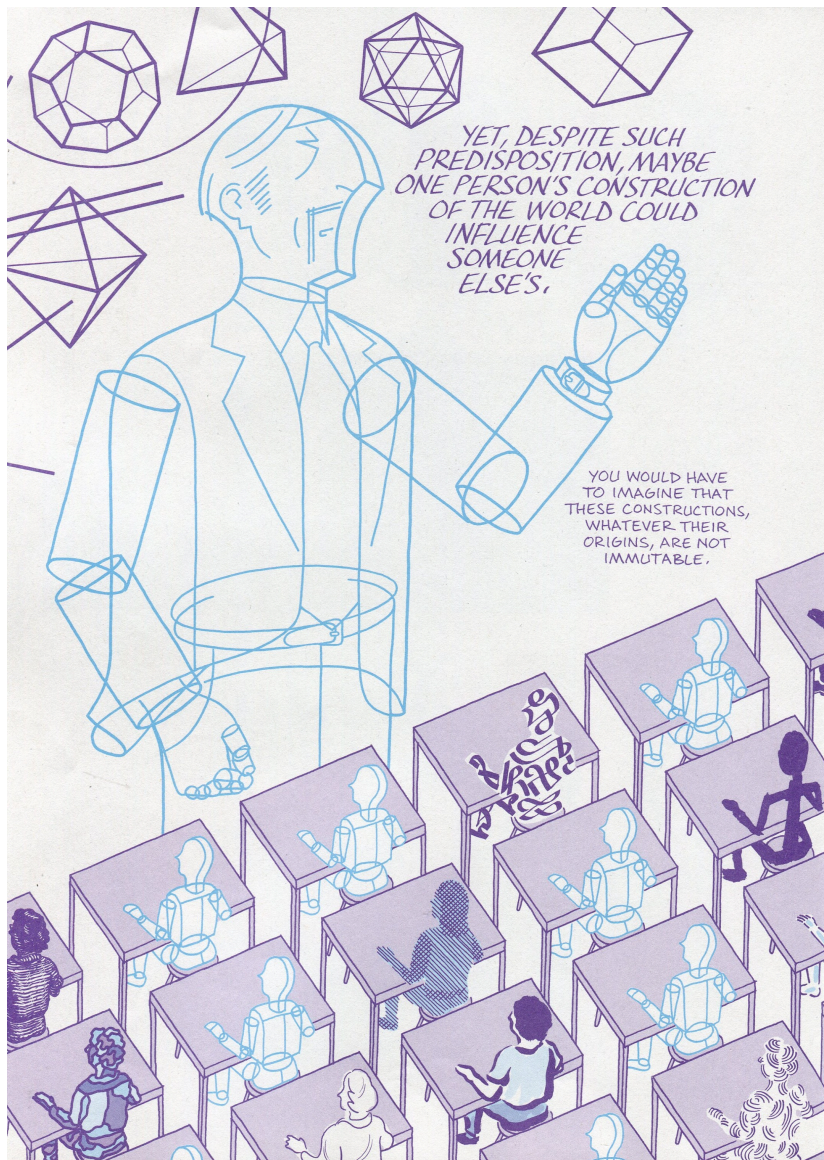

Figure 6. *Asterios Polyp (34)*

Figure 7. *Asterios Polyp (36)*

While Mazzucchelli highlights the similarities between perception and artistic representation, he also asserts that it is much more difficult for someone to change the way he or she perceives the world in comparison to an artist's decision to switch drawing styles. In the narration at the top of figure 7 Ignazio questions if someone's perception can be changed by the influence of someone else. Later on, he continues his narration by suggesting that the process is not as easy as we may wish: "This would suggest it's

possible for someone to freely alter his own perception of reality in order to overlap with that of another...Wouldn't that be nice?" (40–1). The irony of Ignazio's question demonstrates that even if someone like Asterios tries to change his method of perception for the one he loves, the process is very difficult. This is due to the fact that the root of Asterios's way of perceiving the world goes much deeper than a preference for one organizing principle over another.

Asterios's conviction that a part of himself is missing causes him install a network of cameras in his apartment. After spending their first night together, Asterios explains to Hana that the cameras aren't for depraved purposes, but for something much more personal. He says that growing up he always felt there was something wrong within himself. When he was in a crowd he felt alone, but when he was by himself he always felt as if someone else were in the room as well. It wasn't until he was a teenager that he found out about Ignazio. Instead of making him feel better, knowing the reason for his strange feelings, the realization that he had a twin brother who died at birth made him feel even stranger. To try to deal with this feeling of incompleteness, he installed the cameras: "It's not like I ever watch the tapes—I've never seen one minute of them...Somehow, though, it's comforting to know they're there, in the next room…my own video doppelganger" (126). The cameras serve as a comfort for Asterios. They make him feel as if the part of himself he considers missing, Ignazio, is somehow closer. This personal need for a sense of wholeness extends to his dogmatic insistence on aesthetic equilibrium.

By splitting everything between the functional and the decorative Asterios believes he can come closer to designing a world where everything functions rationally.

Mazzucchelli provides a short scene of Asterios idealizing the world at a young age. After his teacher asks if he's ever tried to draw something from real life, Asterios responds, "I don't like drawing from life. Things are never in the right place" (112). The desire for putting things in their "right place" carries into his adulthood. Ignazio describes the peace that Asterios finds in his philosophy of design: "In the certitude of symmetry, the consonance of counterpoise, Asterios found a measure of solace" (118). Much like the cameras in his apartment, but on a more subconscious level, the symmetrical designs help Asterios fill the void left by Ignazio's absence.

Mazzucchelli shows why it is hard for Asterios to change his perception by revealing that he's aware of it as a conscious choice, but that it is also a symptom of a deeper need to replace the missing part inside himself. Even after Asterios starts to change how he perceives the world, Mazzucchelli shows that progress only comes from accepting that all methods of perception have limitations.

Asterios and Hana: Blind Spots

While every method of perception requires that a person filter out excess details, Asterios's failure to acknowledge these blind spots in his own perception causes his downfall. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his relationship with Hana. His refusal to acknowledge that his way of looking at the world may possess inadequacies, and his constant thirst for attention, weighs on her until she can't take it anymore. Even when Hana tries to show him the consequences of his behavior, Asterios does not see the pain he causes her. In the end, he must go on a journey of personal discovery in order to realize the value of acknowledging that there will always be blind spots in the way he looks at the world.

Ignazio warns Asterios that his dualistic method for viewing life may get him into trouble. After Asterios defends his method of splitting a concept into opposing elements in order to better understand it as a whole, Ignazio says it is a valuable approach "as long as one doesn't mistake the system for reality" (120). And later he points out that this method oversimplifies the complexities of life: "Some might argue that such simplification is best suited to children's stories, or comic books" (121). Though Asterios agrees with Ignazio, he still falls into this trap. The dualistic method works well in his career, where, even though none of his designs get built, his colleagues praise his work for its achievement in the theoretical realm of architecture. However, his theoretical process proves less than functional in reality. When Asterios uses the same dualistic method in his relationship with Hana, it proves far less effective, and eventually causes the end of their marriage.

At first, Asterios and Hana's divergent qualities complement one another in a way consistent with Asterios's theory of how dualistic forces work. On the night they meet, Mazzuchelli shows their different ways of perceiving the world overlapping (Figure 8). Hana's violet crosshatched perception fleshes out Asterios's hollow symmetrical perception. This kind of combination, two seemingly opposite things forming equilibrium, is the basis for how duality works. Ignazio further demonstrates how the two characters bring equilibrium to one another by saying, "Asterios's and Hana's lives folded into each other's with barely a wrinkle" (82). Mazzucchelli provides another visual metaphor of the couple's dualistic harmony when he draws them lying together in bed in the formation of a yin-yang, which of course is the Asian symbol for the equilibrium of opposites (Figure 9). While this portrays Asterios and Hana as compatible

through their differences, it soon becomes apparent that Asterios's narrow-mindedness causes major conflicts between them.

Figure 8. *Asterios Polyp (63)*

Figure 9. *Asterios Polyp (127)*

Asterios's tendency not to acknowledge the blind spots in his perception causes his relationship with Hana to fall apart. When they first meet, Asterios makes Hana feel as if she's the center of attention, but this soon changes. Figure 10 shows a scene where Asterios admires the artwork in her studio. While he starts by praising her technique, his powers of aesthetic analysis soon become the center of attention. Mazzucchelli uses the visual metaphor of a spotlight steadily changing focus from Hana to Asterios within the sequence of four panels to show the shift. Furthermore, his analysis imposes his dualistic philosophy of art onto her work: "There's this palpable tension between order and chaos, the concrete and the imagined, man and nature…the rational and the irrational, humor and horror, fragility and fortitude…" (149). In the background, Hana tries to tell him that this isn't the way she sees things, but he doesn't notice. He's so involved with his own thoughts that he does not see the damage he causes. If this were a one-time occurrence

perhaps Hana could live with it, but Mazzucchelli shows us that Asterios's ignorance of his own perceptual blind spots causes problems on a daily basis. In a two-page spread, he presents a montage of six two-panel scenes where Asterios's narrow perception causes Hana to feel belittled (Figures 11 and 12). The last two panels in the montage end with Hana asking why he always assumes she's wrong. Asterios's conviction that he knows best causes her to feel like her opinion never gets appreciated.
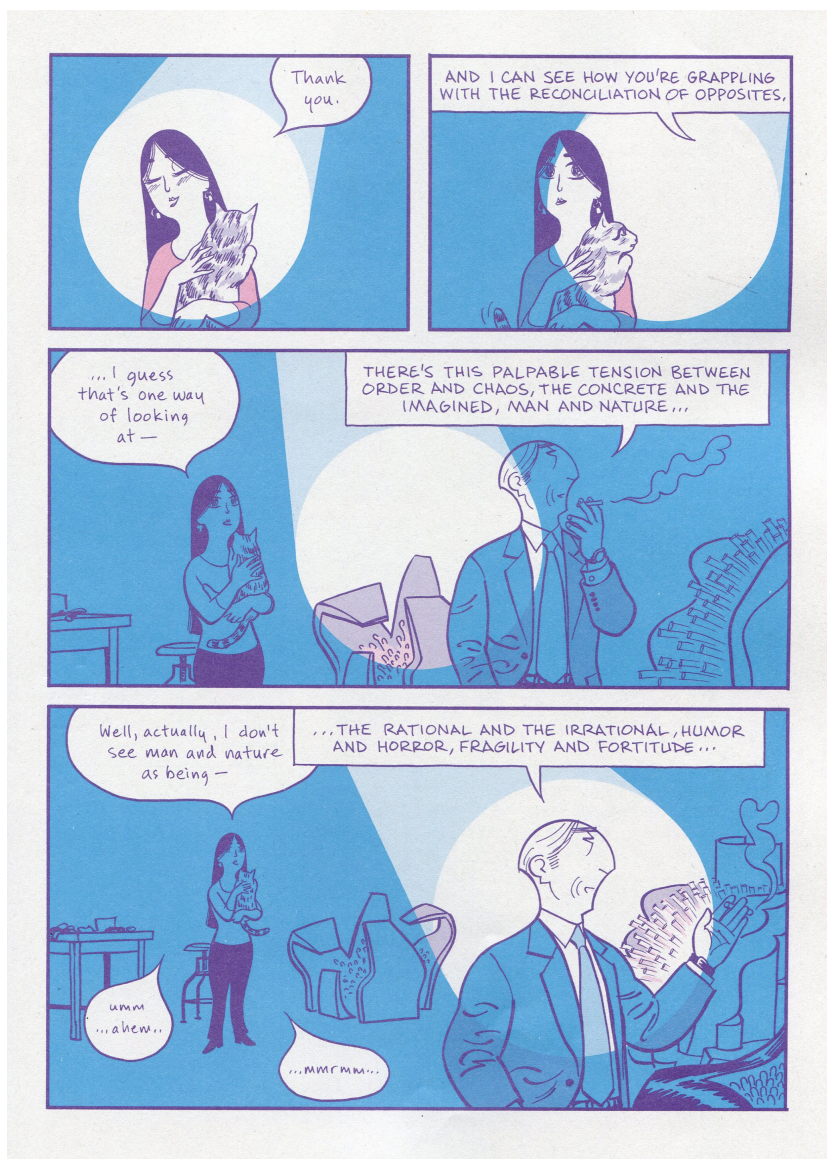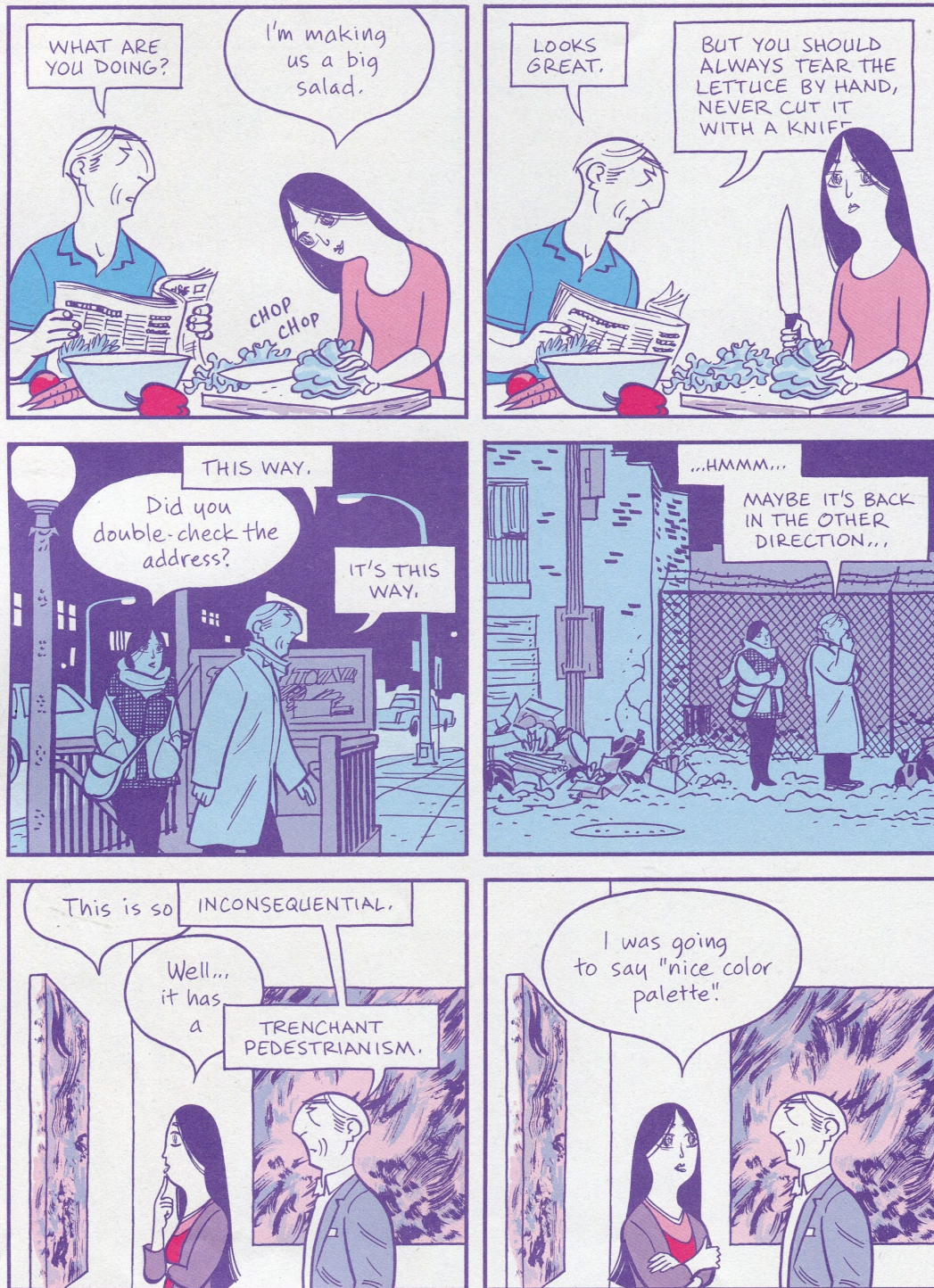

Figure 10. *Asterios Polyp (149)*

Figure 11. *Asterios Polyp (116)*

Figure 12. *Asterios Polyp (117)*

After Hana leaves him, Asterios starts to see the value in the excess details his perception filtered out. At the beginning of the book, he's alone watching the videotape from their first night together. The cameras in his apartment have captured many of the excess details he missed or ignored. By watching them, he's not only trying to hold on to his memories of their relationship, but also trying to find where things went wrong. Near the end of the book, while Asterios is in a state of unconsciousness, Ignazio gives a monologue on the nature of time: "Every memory, no matter how remote its subject, takes place 'now,' at the moment it's called up in the mind. The more something is recalled, the more the brain has a chance to refine the original experience" (287). Underneath these words, Mazzucchelli provides a 4 panel sequence of Hana saying the same basic phrase, but her wording changes with each new panel (Figure 13). She goes from saying, "It's just a matter of paying attention" in the first panel, to "You just don't pay enough attention" in the last panel. Now that he's separated from her, Asterios is in the process of clarifying his memories. He soon realizes that he really wasn't paying enough attention to the effect his narrow perception had on their relationship.

Even though at first it appears their divergent qualities complement one another, Asterios's insistence that his way of perceiving the world is always right causes Hana to leave. It's not until she's gone that he begins to realize the harm he's done. He realizes that his way of perceiving the world filtered out valuable excess details, which may have helped to save their marriage. While Asterios goes on a journey to change the way he perceives the world, his real success is his realization that no method of perception is perfect and that there will always be valuable excess details that will be missed.
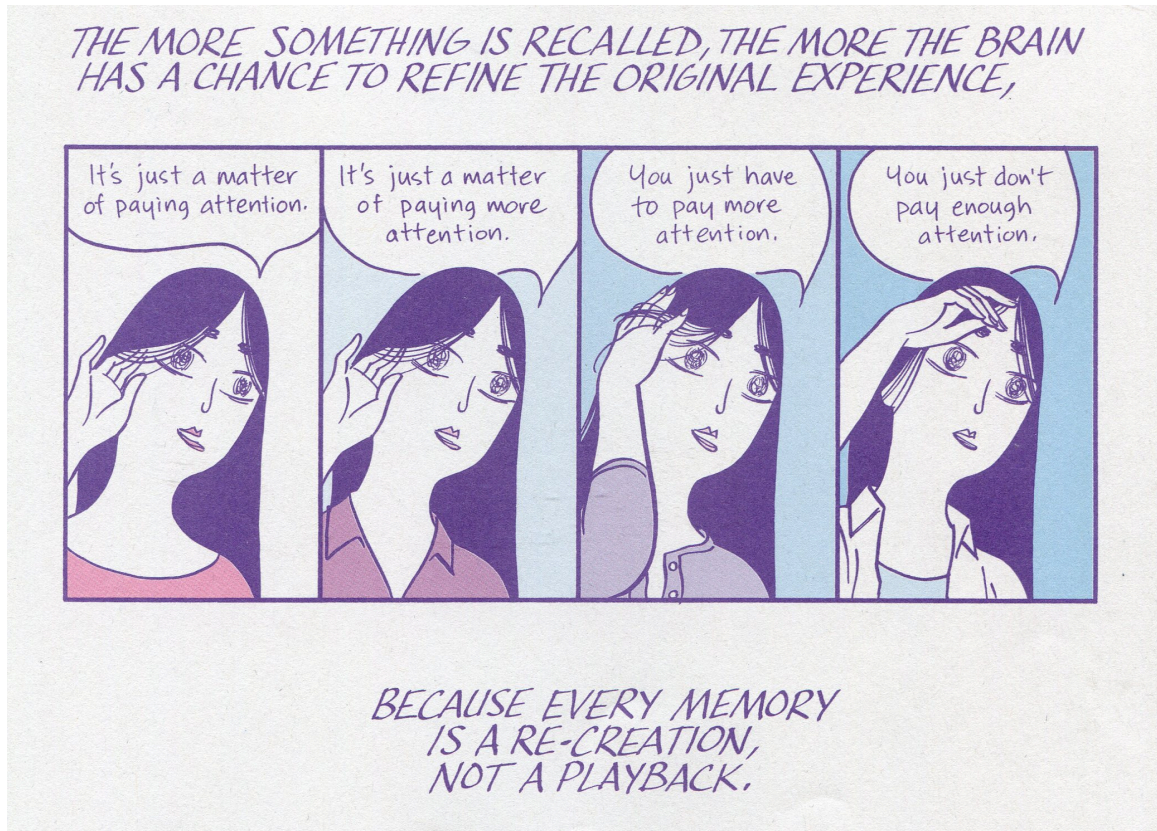
Figure 13. *Asterios Polyp (287)*

An Array of Perceptions

Throughout the narrative, Asterios meets a cast of diverse characters who perceive the world in different ways. His rejection of these characters' philosophies reveals his unwillingness to admit the inadequacies of his own perception. By eventually realizing the importance of acknowledging his blind spots, he's able to change his approach to perceiving the world.

The contrast between Asterios's insistence on function over form and Hana's talent for finding art in things most people don't notice highlights his tendency to take her for granted. Other than using discarded objects to make sculptures, Hana also demonstrates her ability to see art where most people see nothing in her role as a teacher. Standing in front of a class of college students, she places two bricks next to one another

and asks the class to identify how many there are. At first, most of the students say two, but one student notices that the space between the two bricks, through its size and shape, forms a third brick. Hana's point is that sculpture is not just about making forms, but it is also about "designing a finite area of space" (215). She sees value in what most people would see as empty space. On the other hand, Asterios does not pay attention to anything that does not present itself as functional. His cold approach causes Hana to feel unappreciated. In an argument at the end of this section of the book, she says, "Just because somebody seems shy doesn't mean he doesn't exist! Maybe all that person wants once in a while…is a little recognition" (228). Asterios's disregard makes Hana feel as if her opinions and accomplishment, like the space between the bricks, go unrecognized.

The tableau Mazzucchelli provides at the beginning of the section is a visual analogy for Hana's sense of invisibility in the eyes of Asterios (Figure 14). At first, the tableau may look like just a panel of two tulips, but if the viewer pays attention to the shape of the space between the flowers he or she will notice that it forms the outline of Hana's head and shoulders. The lesson is not that Asterios should see the world in exactly the same way as Hana, but instead he should recognize that her perception is just as legitimate.

Figure 14. *Asterios Polyp (213)*

In the Orpheus sequence, Mazzucchelli shows the price Asterios pays for not valuing Hana's way of approaching life. *Orpheus (Underground)* is Willy Ilium's reimagining of the myth of Orpheus traveling to the underworld to rescue his lover Eurydice. While we never get to see Willy's theatrical production, the ancient story gets reenacted in Asterios's dream, which Mazzucchelli presents through a sequence of wordless panels. The dream follows the same basic plot of the myth. Asterios travels to the Underworld, which has been replaced with the subway station from earlier in the plot, where he meets Willy, who represents Hades. After Willy demonstrates to him that he can only depart from the Underworld with Hana if he does not look at her, Asterios and Hana start exiting hand-in-hand. The sequence ends with Asterios losing his grip on her hand and looking back to reassure himself that she's still there. His disobedient look sends Hana back to the Underworld, separating them forever.

Mazzucchelli's choice of the Orpheus myth, which hinges on a disobedient look, represents Asterios's unwillingness to place his trust in Hana. When he loses his grip on her hand, he looks back at her to reassure himself of her presence instead of trusting her to follow him out of the Underworld. While Hana believes that it is important to view the empty space between two forms as a third form of finite space, Asterios does not permit himself to view the space between them in the scene as a bond of trust. He instead views the space as nothing but an empty gap separating them, and he is unwilling to have faith that she will follow him. This reflects his unwillingness to trust her judgment in their marriage. In the scene immediately following the Orpheus sequence, Mañana, the waitress from the Apogee café, argues that contrary to Asterios's assertion that a combination of physical and mental attraction keep a couple together it is really three

things: "Love…trust…respect" (273). To demonstrate her point, she props three beer

coasters against one another, and says, "Take any one of those away and the whole thing

falls apart" (273). Asterios admits earlier to Hana, "I don't think in terms of three" (157).

With the motif of revealing two things to actually make three, Mazzucchelli shows that

Asterios's unwillingness to recognize the value of perceiving the world outside of his

dualistic lens is the reason for his downfall. The Orpheus sequence displays the damage

he causes through his inability to trust in Hana.[2] Indeed, she later enjoys spending time

with Willy Ilium because he acknowledges her talents.

Even though Willy also proves to be self-obsessed, he still notices an intimate

aspect of Hana's character that goes unseen by Asterios. Willy approaches choreography

by reassembling the works of old masters into new interpretive pieces. To poke fun at this

approach, Asterios calls him "Willy Chimera," a reference to the mythical creature made

up of many different animal parts. By not taking him seriously, Asterios demonstrates his

unwillingness to give tribute to anyone else's way of perceiving the world outside his

own. Willy, on the other hand, though pompous, still notices an intimate detail in Hana's

work. After examining the sculptures in her studio, he turns to her and asks, "Tell me,

were you abused as a child?" (186–7). While Asterios angrily claims this cannot be

accurate, Hana's noncommittal response hints that Willy is somewhat correct. His

question exposes an aspect of Hana's personality that Asterios never noticed. This is

another example of a valuable excess detail that Asterios misses due to a blind spot in his

perception. While it is unfair to claim that he should have noticed this secret about his

wife, it is reasonable to assert that he's unable to anticipate it due to his conviction that he

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[2] In Chapter 2 of this thesis, the significance of the Orpheus sequence is expanded to include an analysis of Mazzucchelli's shift in visual style and how it presents an alternative approach to interpreting his work.

already knows everything about her. Willy's question would not come as such a shock if Asterios admitted that his way of perceiving life causes him to miss valuable details about Hana.

Asterios's meeting with Kalvin Kohoutek serves as another demonstration of his unwillingness to appreciate how someone else may perceive the world. While Asterios believes that art should be clean, straightforward, and symmetrical, Kalvin's approach to musical composition embraces chaos in order to send the listener on a journey of musical discovery: "In a cacophony of information, each listener, by focusing on certain tones and phrases, can become an active participant in creating a unique…polyphonic experience" (221). He goes on to explain that it is the listener's job to notice the unique patterns of sound within the cacophony. In this scene, Mazzucchelli visually demonstrates how Kalvin's concept works by overlapping the panels across one another (Figure 15). In doing this, Mazzucchelli presents the reader with a cacophony of visual information that he or she must sort out. This also reflects Kalvin's assertion that "Simultaneity—the awareness of so much happening at once—is now the most salient aspect of contemporary life" (221). The overlapping panels similarly make the reader aware of how many different things are simultaneously taking place in the scene. However, these ideas are lost on Asterios. Just like his encounter with Willy, he quickly shows his disdain for Kalvin's way of perceiving life: "Some things, alas, are probably better left unnoticed" (222). The irony of this statement is that Asterios does not notice Hana standing in the background obviously upset by his disrespectful attitude. His conviction that he's always right once again blinds him to the problems in his narrow perception. While it is impossible for Asterios to see every detail, the awareness of the

simultaneity of life would prepare him to be proven wrong once in a while.

Figure 15. *Asterios Polyp (221)*

Once Asterios meets Ursula, he starts to show signs that he's considering other ways of perceiving life. Even though she has some views involving reincarnation and the zodiac that he finds outlandish, he still shows more respect for her ideas than he does for Hana and the other characters. At first, when Ursula claims that "everything in the universe is linked to everything else" Asterios disregards her with his usual sarcasm

(106). However, once she finishes explaining the reasons behind her belief in the zodiac, such as the fact that electromagnetic waves from the sun affect the way vegetation grows, Asterios admits that Ursula's ideas are "worth considering" (108). While on the surface this may not seem like a big change, the acknowledgement serves as his first significant step toward open-mindedness.

Eventually, Asterios even admits to Ursula that his way of perceiving the world might be excessive. This occurs later in the book when they visit the canyon, which Asterios describes as a "hole" (174). After Ursula mentions that many origin stories involve a "sky father" and an "earth mother," Asterios says, "It always comes down to male and female doesn't it? Like two sides of the same coin" (176). Ursula politely rebukes his claim by pointing out that in some cultures they believe in multiple sexes. She goes on to debunk Asterios's dualistic way of thinking by saying that it can create fanatics, who basically only see the world in terms of black and white. Instead of trying to defend himself, which he does earlier in the plot when Ignazio accuses him of oversimplifying reality, Asterios admits, "I've probably engaged in some of that simplistic thinking myself" (177). The setting of the scene next to a giant hole reinforces the theme of noticing the hole, or blind spot, in one's own perception of the world (Figure 16). In this scene, he finally acknowledges that his narrow mindedness is the cause for many of the conflicts in his life.

Figure 16. *Asterios Polyp (174–5)*

Through his rejection of Hana's and the other character's methods of perceiving life, Mazzucchelli exposes Asterios's dogmatic belief that his way of doing things is always correct. It isn't until he loses everything that he starts to see the error of his ways. It takes Ursula's influence for Asterios to finally acknowledge the blind spots in his own perception. While this acknowledgement does not save him, it at least prepares him to accept the likelihood that an excess detail may prove his perception to be lacking.

Learning to Expect the Unexpected

At the end of the graphic novel, when the asteroid shoots down from the sky, it is Asterios's awareness of something approaching that reveals Mazzucchelli's ultimate lesson. While, at first, someone may think Asterios's perceptual journey is an allegory for how all people should strive to develop more perfect perceptions of life, the real

knowledge to be gained from the story is that no matter how hard a person tries to improve there will always be blind spots in his or her perception. Furthermore, by acknowledging that these blind spots will always filter out important information a person can prepare themselves for the thing that comes hurtling out of the ether to prove him or her wrong.

While admitting to Ursula that his perception is not perfect represents a huge step toward open-mindedness for Asterios, it takes a more radical internal shift for him to change the way he perceives the world. As stated earlier, his perception is not just constructed around a choice of duality as a convenient organizing principle, it is also a symptom of his deep need to find comfort in equilibrium. The killing of Ignazio in a dream sequence symbolizes Asterios freeing himself from this need. Throughout the narrative, he has a series of dreams involving Ignazio, and the final dream occurs while he's unconscious after undergoing an assault from a man he disregarded earlier in the plot. In the dream, he finds Ignazio working in Stiffly's auto shop. When Asterios asks him how he got there, he recounts the events that led up to the end of Asterios's marriage as if they happened to him. Before he can finish his story, the dream ends with Asterios swinging a tire iron at his head. By killing Ignazio, Asterios destroys the part of his psyche that gives him the conviction he's living an incomplete life. Over the years, he's tried to make his life seem less incomplete by installing cameras in his apartment and upholding the principle of equilibrium in design, but in the end, these actually prove to be the obstacles that kept him from a healthy relationship with Hana. Furthermore, the violence of the killing shows that he's truly fed up with trying to fill the void left by Ignazio. Instead of holding onto the image of his brother that he's created in his mind as a

type of comfort, he violently destroys it in order to move on with his life. When Asterios awakes from his dream, Mazzucchelli reveals that the assault in the bar has resulted in the loss of the character's eye.[3] Both violent events, one physical and the other mental, result in Asterios's learning to perceive the world in a different way.

Mazzucchelli shows that killing Ignazio and the loss of his eye marks a change in the way Asterios perceives the world through both a shift in the color palette of the graphic novel and Asterios's choice to repair and drive the solar powered Cadillac. Throughout the book, he uses two main color palettes to define different sections of the narrative. In Asterios's journey to Apogee, Mazzucchelli uses a monochromatic yellow and deep purple palette, while the flashbacks of his old life with Hana are in cyan and magenta. However, after Asterios awakes in the hospital, the storyworld possesses an array of new color tones, including greens and oranges. The difference in color palette becomes more pronounced when compared with a panel from earlier in the story (Figures 17 and 18). The shift in colors from the monochromatic to the more diverse palette visually signals that Asterios has shifted his perception from looking at the world in terms of dualities to opening himself to notice some of the things between extremes.

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[3] The loss of Asterios's eye is a reference to his family's original last name, Polyphemus (the name of the cyclopes from Homer's *The Odyssey*), which he says was "cut in half" when his father immigrated to America (20). See Douglas Wolk's review of *Asterios Polyp* for his discussion of Mazzucchelli's references to the Odyssey.

Figure 17. *Asterios Polyp (319)*

Figure 18. *Asterios Polyp (235)*

Asterios also demonstrates his new way of perceiving the world through the

choice to repair the solar powered Cadillac. If he were to follow his previous way of

thinking, where anything that's not functional is merely decorative, Asterios would find

the idea of driving a solar powered car across the country as simply ridiculous. However,

in a fashion similar to Hana's belief that "nature gets it right every time," Asterios wants

to fix the car because he likes the fact that it runs on the power of the sun (81). Paralleling Asterios's shift in perception, Hana reveals that her way of perceiving the world has also shifted a little closer to Asterios's approach. The new sculptures she shows him in their last meeting together incorporate the five platonic solids, shapes Asterios admires for their simplicity and functionality (Figure 19). In their time spent apart, both characters discover merit in how the other perceives the world. In the end, however, even though Asterios develops a new perception of the world that's more pliable, it does not save him from the asteroid.
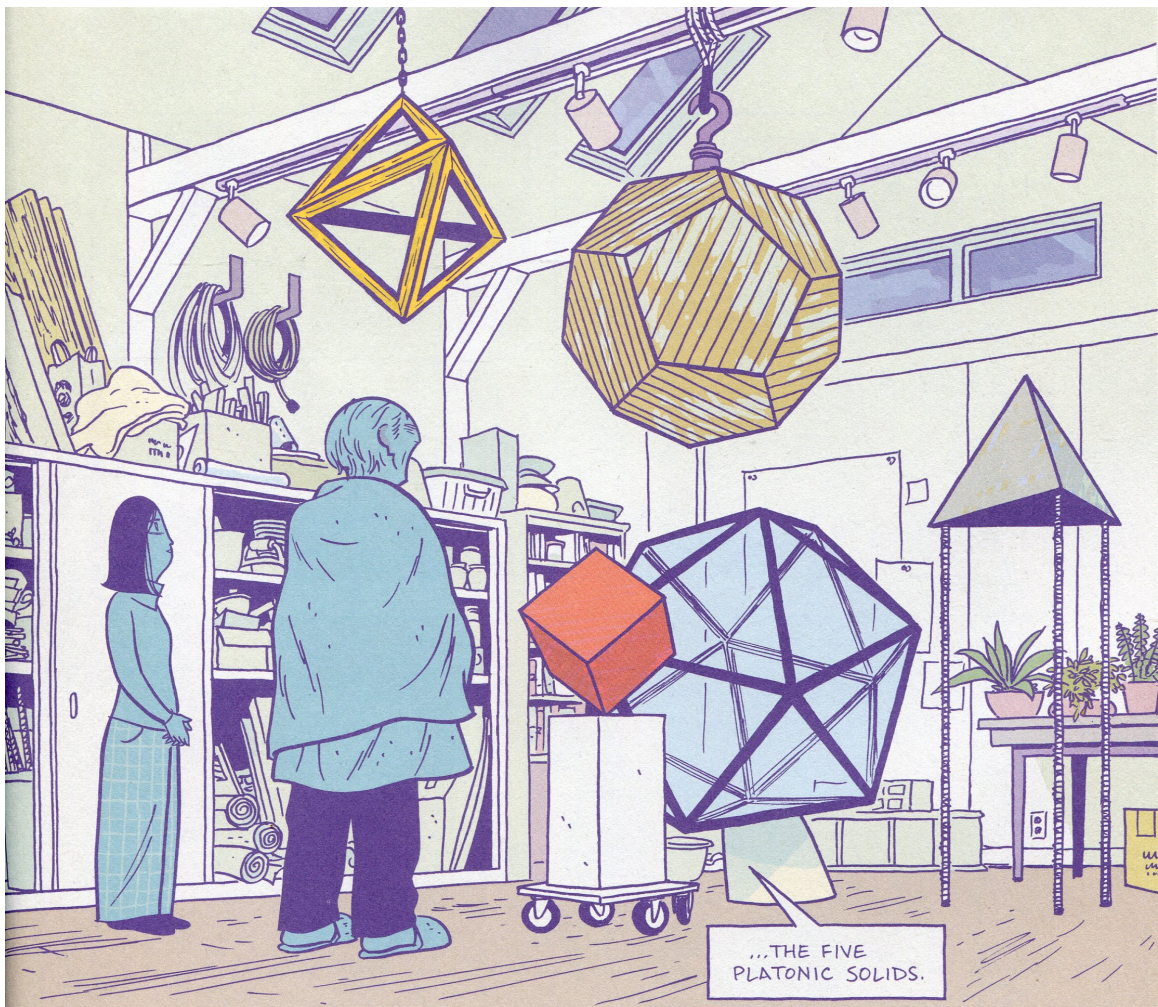

Figure 19. *Asterios Polyp (323)*

The asteroid is an excess detail that Asterios filtered out earlier in the plot. On his first day in Apogee, Stiffly takes him to the local café where he meets Steven, a.k.a. Spotty Drizzle (a character from Mazzucchelli's earlier project, *Rubber Blanket*), who warns him about the possibility of a large asteroid crashing into the earth: "All the observatories, they have their telescopes focused on deep space—they're not paying attention to what's happening right here! Somebody's gotta be prepared. Somebody's gotta be on the lookout. We don't wanna end up just like the dinosaurs!" (74). Nobody in the café takes his warning seriously, including Asterios. And it is fair to say that not many people would think one man's warning about the possibility of a giant rock falling out of the sky is important enough to spur them into action. Nonetheless, Steven's urge for people to pay more attention to what's happening "right here" gets at the meat of the problem in Asterios's relationship with Hana. She similarly tells him that he does not pay enough attention (Figure 13). However, Mazzucchelli demonstrates with the approach of the asteroid that even when Asterios finds a new way to perceive life it does not give him the ability to notice everything; he still possesses blind spots in his perception that make him unaware of important excess details.

While the asteroid destroys Asterios and Hana, Asterios's victory is in his anticipation of its approach. His awareness of the asteroid shows that he has prepared for an excess detail to disrupt his perception, something he was not willing to accept in the past. The asteroid makes its appearance during a peaceful moment between Asterios and Hana. While reminiscing about their previous time together, Asterios shows Hana that he's more open-minded and she admits that no one else has appealed to her the way he did. They sit together on the couch in Hana's living room with their hands almost

touching. Mazzucchelli's focus on their hands in this scene draws attention to the

Orpheus sequence, where Asterios lost Hana after losing his grip on her hand. Now,

Mazzucchelli depicts their fingers almost touching in order to show that the couple is

close to reuniting once again. The sequence of panels pulls out through the living room

window showing the exterior of the cabin, and just when things couldn't seem calmer,

Asterios says, "What's that noise?" (331). Asterios's almost clairvoyant observation of

the noise of the asteroid's approach demonstrates that he's succeeded in becoming aware

of the limits of his own perception. The walls of sarcasm and condescension he used as a

shield against those who tried to show him a different way of perceiving the world have

broken down. This new awareness of his limits has prepared him to anticipate the excess

details he has missed, which makes him pay attention to the noise. On the next page,

Mazzucchelli reveals a two-page spread of the giant asteroid hurtling toward the tiny

dwelling. With this image he portrays death not as an evil menace, but as an inescapable

truth of life. The asteroid hangs in the air above the cabin as a reminder that every person

has an asteroid hurtling toward him or her that could make impact at any moment. Even

though Asterios is powerless to stop his death, his victory occurs in his newfound

willingness to accept his own fallibility. He, like everyone else, is not able to change the

time or fashion of his death, but he achieves a personal victory in his ability to change a

crucial part of himself for the better.

Mazzucchelli emphasizes the limits of perception in Jackson's observation of a

shooting star in the very last section of the graphic novel. Sitting in their backyard tree

house together, Jackson points up toward the night sky and says, "Mommy look! A

shooting star!" And Ursula, sitting with Stiffly, replies, "Make a wish" (336–7). The

panel sequence then ends with a frame that puts the reader in the little boy's point-of-view, looking up at the vast amount of starts in the sky (Figure 20). By drawing the reader's attention to the night sky, Mazzucchelli reminds him or her of the limits of human perception. No matter which way we try to look at the night sky we inevitable can't see all the stars above. There will always be constellations we won't recognize or shooting stars soaring just out of our line of sight. Similarly, in daily life we are confronted by an overwhelming display of information from the world around us, which cannot be perceived in its entirety. Mazzucchelli argues, however, that even though our perception of the world is restricted, by acknowledging our own limitation, as Asterios eventually does, it prepares us to accept the excess details that may prove our perception to be lacking.

Through Asterios's journey, Mazzucchelli not only explores the limits of human perception, but also argues that acknowledging the blind spots in our perception better prepares us to deal with the unexpected events of life. If we hold on to the knowledge that no matter how we try to perceive the world there will always be important excess details that we miss we eventually become more willing to accept when something proves us wrong. He accomplishes this by establishing that Asterios's perception is based both on his choice of duality as an organizing principle and a symptom of his need to find comfort in equilibrium, exposing the conflicts that arise in his marriage because of the blind spots in his perception, showing Asterios' unwillingness to consider other people's ways of perceiving the world until he ends up alone, and, finally, demonstrating that, although Asterios's new way of perceiving the world does not save him from the asteroid, it does prepare him to notice its approach. Ultimately, Mazzucchelli asks us not

to find a new way to improve our perception of life, but instead to stay aware of the vast
sky of possibilities overhead.

Figure 20. *Asterios Polyp (337)*

Chapter 2

I try to make stories…I don't make them to necessarily have one specific reading,

because often when I'm creating them I'm not sure of what that one reading would be.

-David Mazzucchelli[4]

In this chapter I argue that, through both his narrative and his visual style, in

Asterios Polyp David Mazzucchelli not only illustrates the journey that Asterios must

take to realize the limits of his perception, but also provides a guide for different ways of

interpreting his graphic novel. He does this by comparing how someone might interpret

the meaning of his comic to how the characters in the narrative approach different art

forms, such as sculpture and music. By providing this spectrum of interpretive

approaches, Mazzucchelli urges the reader to read his work with the awareness that no

particular interpretive approach will provide a complete explanation of an artwork's

meaning. He or she should instead approach it with the knowledge that there will always

be excess details he or she misses that can contradict or shed new light on his or her

interpretation.

As Kristin Thompson argues in "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," when a

scholar uses an interpretative approach to analyze a piece of art he or she necessarily

overlooks the excess details that do not "fit into a tight analysis" (489). In his graphic

novel, Mazzucchelli refers to four different ways the reader may interpret his work. In

presenting these approaches, he not only encourages the reader to approach life with the

knowledge that excess can prove his or her perception of the world to be lacking, but that

he or she should also approach interpreting his work the same way. He models the

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[4] Quote from interview with Christopher Brayshaw in 1997 for *The Comics Journal* (71).

alternative interpretive approaches through his characters' outlooks on life and art. And, through this variety of approaches, Mazzucchelli asserts that no matter which one someone uses there will always be excess details that may prove upon further readings to shatter the placid surface of his or her interpretation. Instead of trying to develop an all encompassing approach to interpret his graphic novel, Mazzucchelli's lesson is that we should stay aware of the excess created by our analysis so that we're more prepared for when an unexpected detail proves our analysis lacking.

Splitting Words and Images

Mazzucchelli's decision to characterize Asterios as someone who perceives the world through a lens that splits concepts into their dualistic qualities parallels the dichotomous approach of reading comics. Mazzucchelli uses this parallel to show the excess created through approaching the words and images as separate narrative threads. Just as Asterios's perception causes him to miss valuable excess details, using only the dichotomous approach to read the graphic novel will cause the reader to miss the meaning created through the imbrication of the words and the images.

Asterios's perception parallels the dichotomous approach through his organizational method of splitting concepts into dualities. The scholars in the dichotomous approach similarly split words and images up into two opposing methods of representation. In *Understanding Comics* Scott McCloud claims, "Pictures are received information. We need no formal education to 'get the message.' The message is instantaneous. Writing is perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language" (49). His distinction between pictures as received information versus words as perceived information demonstrates Asterios's

method of focusing on the two opposing aspects of a subject "in order to better illuminate" the entire thing (120). In other words, focusing on the seeming duality of something, whether it's comics or architecture, allows a person to open up conversation regarding these two opposing forces. The parallel between Asterios's dualistic perception and the dichotomous approach is further emphasized through the use of the visual metaphor of the scale. When Asterios discusses his dualistic perception of art, Mazzucchelli uses a scale to show how "factual" and "fictional" art get separated and weighed in the character's mind (Figure 21). When discussing how words and pictures function in comics, McCloud also uses a scale to separate these opposing modes of representation (Figure 22). While it is highly unlikely that Mazzucchelli intends for this connection with McCloud, the overlap still reveals that a similar thought process of splitting a subject into its dualistic aspects, and weighing the value of each, takes place in both Asterios's perception and the dichotomous approach.
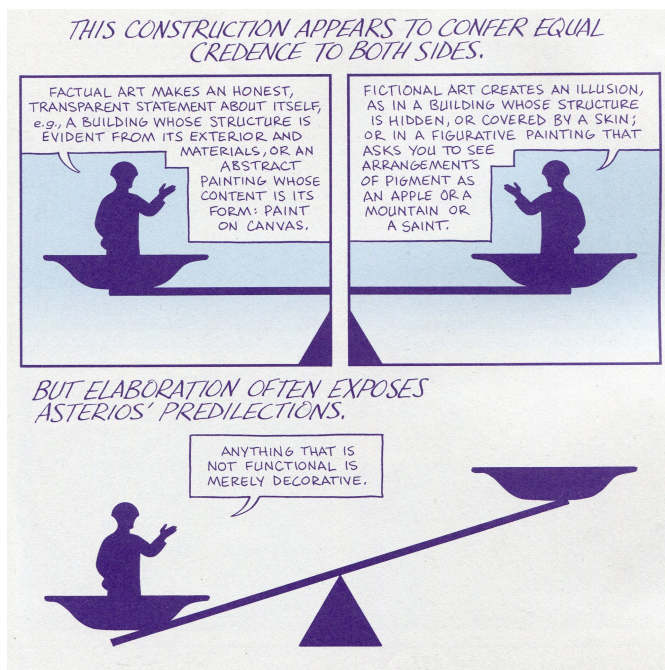

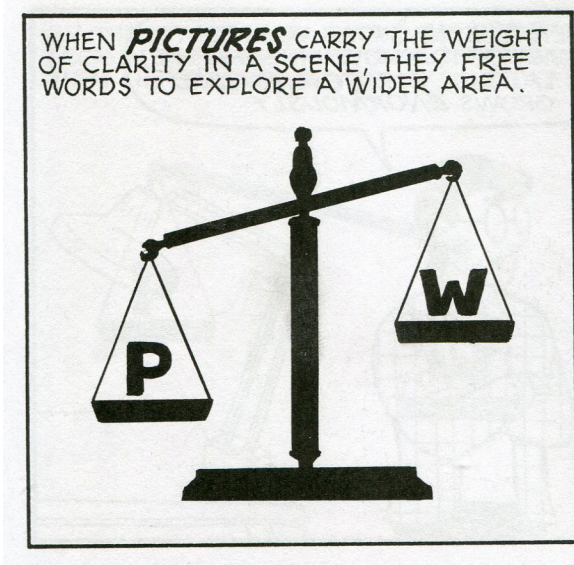**Figure 21.** *Asterios Polyp (115)*

Figure 22. *A panel from Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics (157)*

As Mazzucchelli demonstrates in the narrative, Asterios's dualistic perception of

the world causes him to miss important excess details. Similarly, if the reader of

Mazzucchelli's work only uses the dichotomous approach to analyze the graphic novel,

he or she misses the excess meaning created through the interdependence of the words

and images. Asterios refers to his own tendency to overlook excess when he admits that

"possibilities exist along a continuum between the extremes." However, because his

dualistic method serves as a "convenient organizing principle," and it is a deeply rooted

part of his personality, he overlooks the excess (120). In the dichotomous approach, a

similarly strict method is used in the separation of words and images as two narrative

threads. In their introduction to the winter 2006 issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, Hillary

Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue that there's a clear "picture/word divide" in comics

(772). Furthermore, they state that this divide makes the reader consider the words and

pictures as presenting two separate narrative threads:

In comics, the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a

separate narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way

than the prose text, which also moves the reader forward in time. The

medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal

and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified

whole, but rather remain distinct. (769)

Chute and DeKoven focus on words and images as separate narrative threads that do not

function as one mode of representation. In treating these threads as separate, a reader

following the dichotomous approach will not pay attention to how the words and images

create new meaning through their unification. They will ignore, what Asterios would call,

the "possibilities", or the excess meaning that reside between the threads.

Mazzucchelli emphasizes the inadequacies of reading his work through the

dichotomous approach by pointing out the limitations of Asterios's perception. After

Asterios defends his way of splitting subjects into dualistic parts by explaining that

humankind has studied the nature of duality throughout literary history, Ignazio says,

"Some might argue that such simplification is best suited to children's stories, or comic

books" (121). Ignazio is accusing Asterios of oversimplifying complex subjects. Even if

duality is a convenient organizing principle it still causes him to overlook important

excess details. While I will soon provide an example of the excess created by reading

Asterios Polyp through the dichotomous approach, it is important that I first discuss the

reference to "comic books" in this scene.

The reference to "comic books" as an artform conducive to duality is

Mazzucchelli's way of presenting a facet of the comics medium where the dichotomous

approach to reading the words and images is most appropriate. The term "comic book"

connotes what Wolk describes as "mainstream comics," which are typically superhero or

other genre-based stories that are released on a serial basis. He describes the method that

a group of people uses to make comic books as an "assembly-line style—one writing, one

penciling, one inking, one lettering, one coloring—under the aegis of an editor who hires

them all individually" (31). This "assembly-line style" makes the words and images

appear as separate threads to the reader because of the tendency for one thread to repeat

the meaning of the other. Figure 23 provides a clear example of this repetition. These

three panels from *The Amazing Spider-Man* # 23, written by Stan Lee and drawn by

Steve Ditko (1965), show Spider-Man trying to break his fall through the air after failing

to stop his archenemy the Green Goblin. In each panel, Lee's words and Ditko's images

repeat the action happening in the scene. For example, in the first panel Ditko shows

Spider-man trying to grasp a billboard light to stop his momentum, but it breaks under his

weight. Lee's dialogue for Spider-Man narrates what's happening: "If I can just grab that

billboard light, I'll—It's too thin! It snapped off!" A similar repetition continues in each

panel as Spider-Man eventually figures out how to break his fall. The repetition of the

words and images make them appear as two narrative threads that repeat one another,

which makes it possible to read either the words or the images and still gets a clear sense
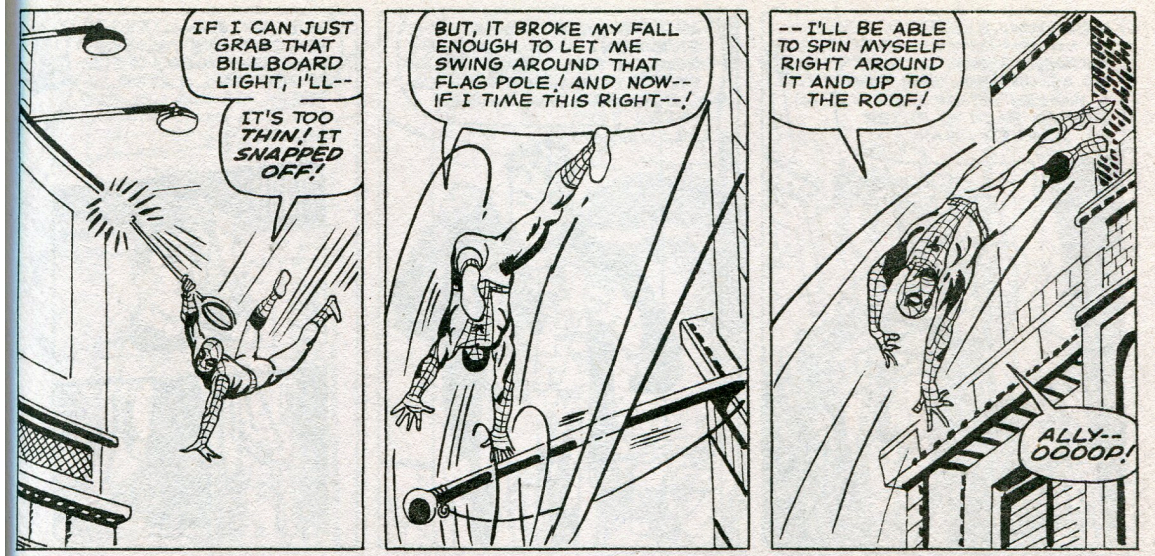
of how the story moves forward.

Figure 23. *A strip from Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's The Amazing Spider-Man #23 (18)*

      Wolk contrasts the assembly line style of mainstream comics, with the "auteur style" of what he refers to as "art comics" where the words and images are composed by a single creator (27-28). He says that for these creators, like Art Spiegelman (*Maus*) or Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis*), "'writing and drawing' sometimes didn't even seem like separate activities" (26). For creators who both write and draw their comics, like Mazzucchelli, their words and images tend to depend on each other more to convey the meaning of a scene. In pointing out that Asterios's perception is more suitable to approaching comic books, where the words and images tend to repeat one another because of their assembly line style, Mazzucchelli demonstrates the limitations of the dichotomous approach. While it may work for analyzing certain parts of his work—as with any interpretive approach—it still possesses limitations that cause the reader to overlook excess details. Mazzucchelli became familiar with the assembly-line style and its limitations while illustrating for Marvel and DC comics in the 1980s. The restrictions

inherent to the collaboration process are what led him to eventually leave the industry to write and draw his own comics.

For example, if a reader interprets the scene in figure 10, where Asterios discusses Hana's artwork, using the dichotomous approach he or she will examine the words and images as separate narrative threads without paying attention to how they sometimes work as one mode of representation:

The thread of images in the four-panel sequence of figure 8 reveals a spotlight gradually moving from Hana to Asterios. With the change in lighting, there is also a change in Hana's facial expression. In panel 1, she looks happy and satisfied. In panel 2, as the spotlight shifts away from her, she suddenly becomes tense and unemotional. In panels 3 and 4, she looks confused and somewhat disappointed. The panel frame in the transition from panel 2 to panel 3 pulls back to reveal Asterios standing nearby looking at Hana's sculptures. With the transition to panel 4, the distance between the characters increases, leaving Hana standing in the dark background. With the consecutive shift of the spotlight and Hana's facial expression in figure 8, Mazzucchelli establishes a change of attention away from Hana to Asterios through the visual metaphor of the spotlight.

In the dialogue between Hana and Asterios in figure 8, Mazzucchelli displays the main character's alienating habit of trying to force everything he sees to his dualistic way of perceiving the world. When Asterios says that Hana's work is "grappling with the reconciliation of opposites", she responds that his interpretation is "one way of looking at it." Not paying attention, Asterios continues to rattle off his analysis. While Hana tries to get her opinion heard, she eventually gives up until she's not even speaking words but

only mumbling. The elliptical ending of the dialogue indicates that the scene continues with Asterios ignoring Hana.

The analysis above examines the words and images in figure 10 as separate narrative threads. Using this method, the scholar can focus in on how each thread functions, but he or she does not pay attention to how the threads may fuse together to create meaning for the reader. For example, if a scholar took the interdependence of the words and images into account he or she would notice that the visual metaphor of the spotlight shifting attention away from Hana and onto Asterios corresponds with Asterios overpowering her in the dialogue. In panel 4, Mazzucchelli emphasizes this by overlapping their word balloons. Asterios's square word balloon cuts into Hana's smooth round balloon, visually emphasizing Asterios overpowering her with his words. Mazzucchelli's combination of the visual and the verbal in this panel strengthens Hana's sense of alienation due to Asterios's narrow perception. He uses a similar technique in other scenes in the graphic novel. When Hana tries to tell a story earlier in the narrative, Asterios's word balloons cut across her, visually reinforcing the irritation of his interruptions (86). Conversely, when Asterios and Hana reunite near the end of the narrative, Mazzucchelli visually reflects their newfound cohesion by melding and twisting their word balloons together (327). However, if the reader uses the dichotomous approach to interpret Mazzucchelli's work, he or she will not notice how the visual and the verbal threads fuse together to reinforce, and also add to the meaning of certain parts of the narrative. Elements such as the shape or placement of word balloons, or the shapes of the letters themselves, are part of the excess information overlooked by viewing the work through a lens that encourages the reader to focus on certain aspects of the work.

However, it's important to keep in mind that no matter which approach a reader uses to interpret the artwork there will always be excess.

By demonstrating the limitations of Asterios's method of splitting subjects into their dualities, Mazzucchelli simultaneously shows the reader the limitation that come with interpreting his graphic novel through the dichotomous approach. The excess ignored not only by Asterios looking at the world through his narrow perception, but also by approaching the words and images as separate narrative threads, has the potential to reveal the certain inadequacies of an interpretation. Mazzucchelli symbolizes the other approaches to reading his graphic novel by showing how other characters' perceptions of the world correspond with how someone may interpret his graphic novel.

Between Word and Image

While if a reader imitates Asterios's thought process he or she will interpret Mazzucchelli's graphic novel as composed of two separate narrative threads, Hana's perception demonstrates an alternate way for the reader to interpret the words and images. Her habit of finding meaning in things that most people do not notice highlights how a reader may approach the words and images as working interdependently to form meaning for the reader. While this approach may seem to cover much of the excess overlooked by the dichotomous approach, it still, like any analytical lens, ignores certain elements of the graphic novel.

Hana's perception demonstrates the interdependent approach through her ability to find meaning in things that most people overlook. Her sculpture lesson is a prime example of how her method of perception demonstrates the interdependent approach. When Hana puts two bricks in front of her students and asks how many they see, the

majority of the students respond that there are only two. However, she soon makes it

clear that her intention is for them to notice a third brick, which is formed by the equal

size and shape of the space between the two material bricks. Her lesson is analogous to

the scholars in the interdependent approach, who argue that within the comprehensive

gap between reading the words and images in a comic a reader gains a new meaning from

interpreting how these two narrative threads work together. In "Closing the Gap:

Examining the Invisible Sign in Graphic Narratives" Roy Bearden-White asserts, "From

a semiotic viewpoint, both words and pictures operate as individual signs and each

provide meaning to the reader. When one sign, however, is placed beside another, as in a

comic panel, a new sign emerges and extra significance is conveyed to the reader" (347).

While the scholars in the dichotomous approach separate the narrative functions of words

and images, the scholars in the interdependent approach view words and images as

working together to form meaning by their placement on the page next to one another. It

is within the gap between reading the words and seeing the images that a reader,

according to the interdependent approach, understands a new meaning. Since a third brick

could not be formed without placing the two other bricks next to one another, Hana's

lesson reflects how words and images work interdependently through their placement

together on the page.

By paying attention to the meaning made between the words and the images, a

reader using the interdependent approach examines much of the excess overlooked by

those scholars that use the dichotomous approach. Mazzucchelli references this through

Hana's ability to notice the things that Asterios often ignores. For example, Hana shows

Asterios the importance of paying attention to nature by pointing out the benefits of using

the shape of a pinecone in architectural design, which is something Asterios would typically overlook because of his tendency to only pay attention to the things he deems functional. In *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* Charles Hatfield points out the inadequacies in McCloud's assertion that words are perceived information and images are received information: "Comics, like other hybrid texts, collapse the word/image dichotomy…Images can be simplified and codified to function as a language…[While] pictures are not simply to be received; they must be decoded" (36–7). Just as Hana tries to show Asterios the importance of the excess that he ignores, Hatfield, by breaking down the seeming dichotomy of words and images, exposes the excess overlooked in McCloud's approach to interpreting comics.

Figure 6 serves as a strong example of Mazzucchelli utilizing the interdependence of the words and images in his work. In this scene, instead of the words and images repeating the meaning of one another (like the Lee and Ditko Spider-Man example), they act as fragments that the reader fuses together in his or her mind to produce the intended meaning of the scene. By themselves, Ignazio's questions are abstract and ambiguous: "What if reality (as perceived) were simply an extension of the self? Wouldn't that color the way each individual experiences the world?" (34). Without further elaboration, these questions appear as fragments. However, the images of the students drawn in a variety of artistic styles complete the meaning of the scene by showing what it would be like if people's unique perceptions were "extensions" of themselves. Neither of these fragments can stand alone to represent the concept that Mazzucchelli tries to get across in this scene. Each fragment is dependent upon the other to form the unified meaning for the reader. In other words, rather than repeating the meaning between the words and the images like

Lee and Ditko, Mazzucchelli unifies the meaning of the scene through the interdependence of the words and the images.

While it may seem as if someone will get a complete interpretation of *Asterios Polyp* by following the interdependent approach because it examines some of the excess created by the dichotomous approach, it is crucial to remember that no matter which approach the reader uses there will always be excess. By focusing on the interdependent relationship between the words and the images, the reader will necessarily overlook significant excess details outside this relationship, such as the significance of Mazzucchelli's visual style and the repetition of iconic motifs that he weaves into his work, such as the yin-yang and twins motifs. He represents how the reader should pay attention to these aspects through Willy Ilium and Kalvin Kohoutek. The methods each one of them uses to perceive the world presents a different way that the reader may interpret the graphic novel.

Examining a Patchwork of Styles

Mazzucchelli uses the character of Willy Ilium to represent how a reader may interpret the variety of visual styles presented in the graphic novel. As with Asterios and Hana, the analytical approach is demonstrated through Willy's artistic methods. In his narration, Ignazio describes Willy's unique technique for composing choreography: "Essentially, his pieces were formed by excising sequences from famous dance compositions and reassembling them into new works…So that Balanchine, Perrot, Graham, and Tharp (to name a few) rubbed elbows and asses onstage" (184). And this method of putting sequences of different arrangements together into one piece is what leads Asterios to call him, "Willy Chimera" (184). By using this patchwork composition

technique, Willy represents the stylistic approach to interpreting comics, where the reader pays attention to how the creator of the comic combines different visual styles in his or her work. In focusing on the different visual styles and their connotations, the reader employing this approach gains a new meaning from their combination. In "Some Medium-Specific Qualities of Graphic Sequences" Pascal Lefèvre describes how this process works:

> The contextual knowledge the reader can draw on, including his or her familiarity with the range of visual styles used in comics, is thus important when it comes to studying drawing styles. Indeed, how a particular reader reacts to a particular style may be quite personal, since it will be influenced by previous experiences with similar styles. (16)

Therefore, if the creator's visual style mimics qualities from another well-known artist's work or if the style is reminiscent of a certain genre of comics, it brings a new contextual meaning to the reader's interpretation. Just as a creator seeks to imply contextual meaning through his or her choice of different visual styles, Willy uses pieces from various masters of choreography to stitch together a new work of dance. Mazzucchelli presents Willy's unique composition technique as a way of demonstrating that his work also possesses elements inspired from well-known artists.

A reader using the stylistic approach focuses on the sequences in Mazzucchelli's work where he mimics other artists' styles. After identifying what style he's imitating, the reader then tries to determine why Mazzucchelli chooses to use this particular style in the book. For an example of this type of analysis, I discuss why Mazzucchelli imitates the style of the artist Lynd Ward in the Orpheus sequence of *Asterios Polyp*:

While Mazzucchelli imbues his work with many different visual styles, the Orpheus sequence stands out as a strong example of a stylistic shift that provides contextual meaning to the reader. By mimicking the visual style of Lynd Ward, Mazzucchelli not only provides an appropriate atmosphere for Asterios's decent into an urban underworld, but also strengthens the central lesson of his narrative. Born in 1905, Ward is considered by many comics scholars to have produced the first American graphic novels. Will Eisner, the creator of *A Contract With God* (1978), the first comic to be called a "graphic novel," describes Ward's work as a "forerunner of the modern graphic novel…He stands out as perhaps the most provocative graphic storyteller in this [the twentieth] century" (qtd. in Herb "Lynd Ward Graphic Novel Pioneer" 92). After meeting the inventor of the wordless woodcut novel on a trip to Europe, Flemish artist Frans Mansreel, Ward started producing his own woodcut novels in the late 1920s. The method for producing a woodcut novel requires the artist to cut the desired image into a block of wood and use it as a stamp. Each page of a woodcut novel consists of one stamped image devoid of words. Despite the onset of the Great Depression, Ward's first woodcut novel, *Gods' Man* (1929), sold quite well (Spiegelman x-xii).

Mazzucchelli's standard visual style throughout most of *Asterios Polyp* is a composition of clean and meticulous linework in monochromatic colors. By leaving the backgrounds of his images blank and providing little to no shadows, he often forgoes realism and chooses to only present the details needed for the reader to understand a scene. With the transition into the Orpheus sequence, the visual style suddenly becomes much more like Ward's expressionistic wood engravings. Figure 24 provides an example of one of Ward's engravings from *Gods' Man*. Mazzucchelli replaces his clean linework

with scraggily crosshatched lines, and steeps the scene in deep purple shadows that often obscure Asterios's face. In mimicking the qualities of Ward's wood engravings, Mazzucchelli not only sets a darker tone for the scene, but also gestures at a more handmade approach to storytelling.

Figure 24. *An excerpt from Gods' Man Lynd Ward's first woodcut novel (n.p.)*

Mazzucchelli's imitation of Ward's style in the Orpheus sequence exposes the universality of Asterios's downfall: his pride. He taps into this universality by not using any words in the sequence. Just like all of Ward's woodcut novels, the story in the Orpheus sequence is devoid of written dialogue or narration. The reader instead follows the progression of the narrative solely through the images. With no translation needed, the wordlessness allows the themes of the story to be understood across language boundaries. He also taps into the universality of Asterios's pride by interconnecting Asterios's story with *Gods' Man* and the Orpheus myth. Anyone familiar with *Gods' Man* will notice that the narrative of *Asterios Polyp* possesses many of the same themes. As Art Spiegelman points out in his introduction to the collection of Ward's work, the main character in the novel takes a journey from the city to the country, where he eventually learns the importance of putting aside his prideful nature before his untimely death:

> Our Hero, a destitute artist seeking fame and fortune, accepts a magic
> brush from a Mysterious Stranger. His rapid rise proves hollow, but he
> flees the corrupt City, meets a beautiful goatherd, and lives a life of
> Edenic beatitude until the Mysterios Stranger comes to collect payment
> and Our Hero dies…*Gods' Man* is a cautionary tale about the Sin of Pride.
> (xii)

By using Ward's visual style to re-tell the Orpheus myth in his graphic novel, Mazzucchelli acknowledges that the lesson Asterios learns at the end of the story is not new, but it is something storytellers have explored throughout history. Not only do Asterios and Our Hero from *Gods' Man* learn the importance of putting aside one's pride

and admitting his limitations, but Orpheus also learns the price of a prideful nature when he looks back at Eurydice. In their ascent out of the Underworld, his pride stops him from trusting her to follow and causes them to be separated forever. Of course, this theme is explored throughout many other stories across history, including *The Odyssey*, which Mazzucchelli references throughout *Asterios Polyp*. He interconnects these stories in the Orpheus sequence to emphasize that, while pride is an ancient sin that man has explored throughout literature, it's still a universal failing present in modern life. Furthermore, by linking the visual style of his graphic novel to Ward (a foundational graphic novelist), Mazzucchelli acknowledges that he's continuing to explore the possibilities of the American graphic novel.

Through Willy Ilium's artistic technique of combining pieces of choreography from different composers to form new pieces, Mazzucchelli shows the reader how he or she can approach his graphic novel by focusing on how the different visual styles bring contextual meaning to his work. On the other hand, with Kalvin Kohoutek, the musical composer, he represents another approach the reader may take to interpret the narrative's meaning.

Unbraiding the Comic

Mazzucchelli shows how the reader can interpret his graphic novel using the braided approach through Kalvin Kohoutek's polyphonic musical composition method. When Hana and Asterios first meet Kalvin, Mazzucchelli makes a strong connection between the composition of music and comics. After Hana admits to Kalvin that she can't read music, he points to the transcriptions on his wall and, in his tendency to repeat himself, says, "All these, these dots and squiggles just stand for sounds and, and pauses"

(219). By describing the music in visual terms such as "dots" and "squiggles", Kalvin draws the reader's attention to the way Mazzucchelli represents forms and sounds in his comic through strategic lines on paper.

The connection to the craft of comics design is further strengthened when Kalvin responds to Asterios's assertion that musical composition is like Gregg shorthand: "Actually, actually not, really. It's more like each page is a record of time passing in a certain way. This one, for example, represents about thirteen seconds, while this one is about, about four and a half minutes" (220). With Kalvin's observation, Mazzucchelli furthers his meta-artistic commentary on how his graphic novel is constructed. He's drawing the reader's attention to how the words and images on the page are composed to convey the passage of narrative time. On one page there may only be one image representing one moment in time, while on another there may be several images to represent a long passage of time. He does this in order to set up his argument for how the reader can interpret his work through the braided approach.

The braided approach to reading comics, which asks the reader to analyze the repetition of iconic motifs in a creator's work, is represented through Kalvin's description of his musical composition methods. He emphasizes that the listener must focus on certain parts of the music in order to engage with it: "Simultaneity—the, the awareness of so much happening at once—is now the most salient aspect of contemporary life. In a cacophony of information, each listener, by focusing on certain tones and phrases, can become an active participant in a creating a unique, unique polyphonic experience" (221). The "simultaneity" that Kalvin describes, where the listener is confronted with a "cacophony of information," is analogous to the multiframe in comics.

Theirry Groensteen points out that a comic presents the reader with a multiframe: "The strip, the page, the double page, and the book are multistage multiframes, systems of panel proliferation that are increasingly inclusive" (31). His concept of how the reader interprets the multiframe contrasts with Chute and DeKoven's model, where the reader "moves forward in time" at different rates when he or she reads the words and images (769). Instead of being pulled forward linearly in time when reading a comic, Groensteen claims that the multiframe confronts the reader with many nonlinear relationships: "The network that they form is certainly an oriented network, since it is crossed by the instance of the story, but it also exists in a dechronologized mode, that of the collection, of the panoptical spread and of coexistence, considering the possibility of translinear relations and plurivectoral courses" (147). In other words, as opposed to film, where the viewer watches a sequence of images that progress the narrative forward independently from the viewer's control, the multiframe of the comic frees the reader to pay attention to how certain images relate to one another outside of the constraints of their intended sequence. This "dechronologized mode" of the multiframe is what creates a visual "cacophony of information" for the reader.

To draw attention to how comics can provide the reader with a cacophony of visual information, Mazzucchelli overlaps the panels in Kalvin's scene while he discusses his musical composition theories (Figure 15). The overlap of the panels prevents the reader from viewing the panels as forming a linear relationship; it instead displays multiple frames of visual information simultaneously. In the following section of the book, Mazzucchelli provides another strong example of how his graphic novel provides the reader with a cacophony of visual information. In this section, which focuses on one

of Asterios's memories of Hana, Mazzucchelli uses the multiframe to overwhelm the reader with a cacophony of visual information. Across seven pages, he represents Asterios's recollection of one moment spent with Hana by constructing a linear sequence in the middle of the page. Around this sequence, he provides a multitude of panels that depict Hana performing various actions. Figure 25 is an example of one of these pages. The panels of Hana surrounding the main sequence in the middle of the page cannot be read as a linear or chronological narrative. They are instead meant to evoke various moments of Hana flitting across Asterios's memory while he recollects this one particular moment. The nonlinear quality of these panels confronts the reader with an overwhelming amount of visual information.

In his philosophy of musical composition, Kalvin says the listener focuses on "certain tones and phrases" within the cacophony to become an active participant in the experience of the music. Similarly, in his explanation of the braided approach, Groensteen explains that the reader must pay attention to the series of certain iconic motifs within the sequence of the multiframe in order to analyze how they strengthen the meaning of the graphic novel as a whole. The creator of the comic braids iconic motifs into his or her work through repetition: "Braiding is generally founded on the remarkable resurgence of an iconic motif (or a plastic quality), and it is concerned primarily with situations, with strong dramatic potential, of appearance and disappearance" (152). The reader's objective is to recognize the iconic motifs in a comic, which sometimes appear and disappear across many pages, and interpret the thematic meaning they brings to the work. Kalvin goes on to say, "I'm setting the conditions for a sonic expedition…It's like the, the discontinuity of quantum effects: something only occurs if you pay attention to

it" (222). Since an iconic motif often resurges across many pages in a graphic novel, the reader must be paying attention to it; otherwise the braiding becomes a part of the excess that goes unnoticed.
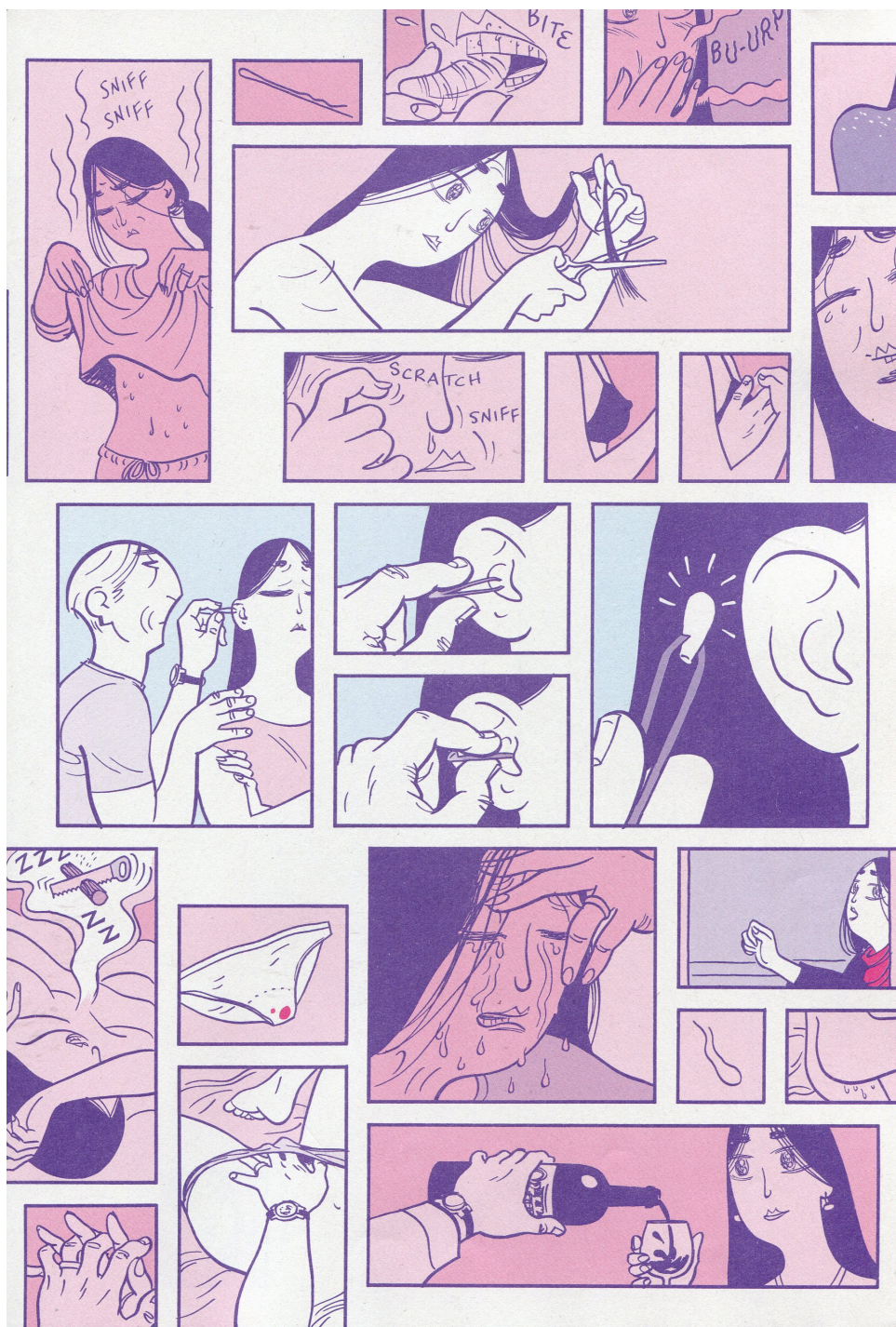

Figure 25. *Asterios Polyp (241)*

In *Asterios Polyp* Mazzucchelli braids both basic and more complex iconic motifs into his work. The basic iconic motifs are specific shapes and symbols that get repeated throughout the book. For example, as Wolk points out in his review, the way Mazzucchelli draws the shape of Asterios's head is thematically significant: "His head is a drawn as a two-dimensional construct: half a perfect circle, interrupted by two equally proportioned curves" ("Shades of Meaning"). The two-dimensional quality of Asterios's head reinforces Mazzucchelli's characterization of Asterios as someone who splits the world into dualities.

Another iconic motif that Mazzucchelli braids into his work is the symbol of dualistic twins. Images of twins appear throughout the book and they often appear as dualities. The image of Asterios's apartment building is the first twin image in the narrative (4). The building has two towers that mirror one another exactly. With the knowledge that Asterios upholds symmetry as one of the most important factors in design, it's easy to see what attracts him to this building. In the next section, he starts with a circular tableau of Asterios that gets doubled on the next page (15-16). While both images are circular and show Asterios in profile from the same distance, each depicts Asterios at a different time in his life. The first tableau shows Asterios facing to the left in a business suit, looking satisfied, and smoking a cigarette. The second image shows him facing the opposite direction in the rain, unshaven, and depressed. These dualistic double images help show how Asterios's life has been turned upside down since Hana left him.

Later in the section, Mazzucchelli provides a panel of Asterios as a child. On his bedroom wall are pictures of Tweedledum and Tweedledee from *Alice in Wonderland* and Romulus and Remus from Roman mythology—also, sitting on his table are the books

The Prince and the Pauper and *The Man in the Iron Mask*, which all feature twinned characters (20). On the next page, Ignazio, Asterios's twin brother, describes that when they were born, "One was alive, the other dead" (21). Mazzucchelli accompanies these words with images of two infants: one in light and the other in shadow. Similar to the circular images at the beginning of the section, Mazzucchelli symbolizes duality through the differences between the two images. Together, the images of the infants form a yin-yang. Bookending this section is another tableau, which shows Asterios walking away from his apartment in the rain (23). The tower he lived in is now billowing smoke, while its twin remains untouched. In weaving the iconic motif of dualistic twins into his work, Mazzucchelli strengthens the influence that Ignazio's death has on Asterios. The repetition of this symbol serves as a constant reminder of Asterios's loss and his sense of incompleteness, which cause him to find comfort in symmetrical designs that promote equilibrium.

Mazzucchelli also braids more complex iconic motifs into his work. Instead of a distinct shape or symbol, specific panels also get repeated throughout the book. For example, he braids the same panel of Asterios's living room across many pages of the story in order to represent the different stages of Hana and Asterios's relationship. The panel of the living room first appears at the very beginning of the plot (Figure 26). In this scene, the apartment is covered in trash, all the plants are dead, and even the windows are left open during a storm. The disarray of the living room parallels the messiness of Hana and Asterios's divorce and his subsequent spiral into depression. When the apartment catches fire later in the scene, Mazzucchelli repeats the same size and angle of the first living room panel (Figure 27). In consuming the filthy living room, the fire creates a

clean slate for Asterios and sends him on a new course that will bring him back to Hana. The same panel gets repeated again when Hana visits Asterios's apartment for the first time (Figure 28). Here the room is presented in Asterios's signature modern style, consisting of minimalist straight-lined furniture. The cleanliness of the room conveys the blossoming of their relationship. The panel gets repeated a fourth time when Hana moves into the apartment (Figure 29). The boxes, new furniture, and plants obscuring Asterios's immaculate living room represent Hana's invasion of his space. The transition into living together is messy as they try to figure out how to integrate their different styles together. The final appearance of the living room panel occurs just before Hana and Asterios have a major fight (Figure 30). Ironically, in this scene, Mazzucchelli shows that Hana and Asterios have found a way to harmoniously combine their clashing styles. Hana's plants and furniture have been integrated into Asterios's modern setup, creating a warmer and more balanced atmosphere to the living room.

By braiding the iconic motif of the living room panel throughout the graphic novel, Mazzucchelli not only shows the status of Hana and Asterios's relationship at different times in the story, but he also provides an example of how Hana influences Asterios's perception of the world. When discussing the nature of perception, Ignazio says, "Maybe one person's construction of the world could influence someone else's" (36). Asterios's living room serves as a microcosm of his preferred way for constructing the world. In figure 28, the straight lines of the furniture and the lack of any extraneous details reflects his philosophy of only focusing on the functional rather than the decorative. Hana's invasion of the apartment in figure 29 shows the messy and awkward transition of allowing decoration into his meticulously constructed space. Figure 30

represents the couple's attempt at integrating their perceptions together. This is similar to the scene where Asterios and Hana first meet, and Mazzucchelli visually represents, through the integration of two different drawing styles, the overlap of their perceptions (Figure 8). The trashed version of the apartment in figure 26 signifies how the divorce throws his construction of the world into disarray. It causes him to question the principles he once relied on to guide him through his life. And finally, figure 27 represents the destruction of his meticulously constructed reality. Its destruction leaves room for Asterios to find a new way of perceiving the world. When examined together, all five of the different panels of Asterios's living room show how Mazzucchelli depicts Hana's influence on Asterios's construction of the world at different points in the story.

Mazzucchelli parallels Kalvin's musical composition methods with the braided approach, which analyzes the repetition of iconic motifs, in order to suggest to the reader another way he or she can interpret the work. This approach, along with the three others represented by Asterios, Hana, and Willy, form a guide to the different ways to read his graphic novel. However, Mazzucchelli makes it clear that none of these approaches provide someone with a complete reading of *Asterios Polyp*.
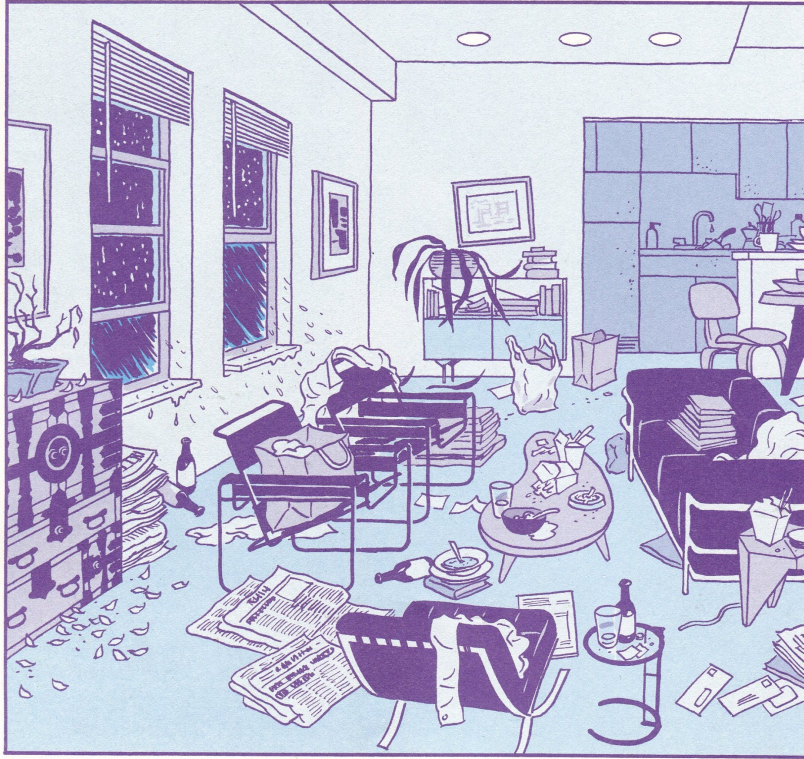
Figure 26. *Asterios Polyp (4)*
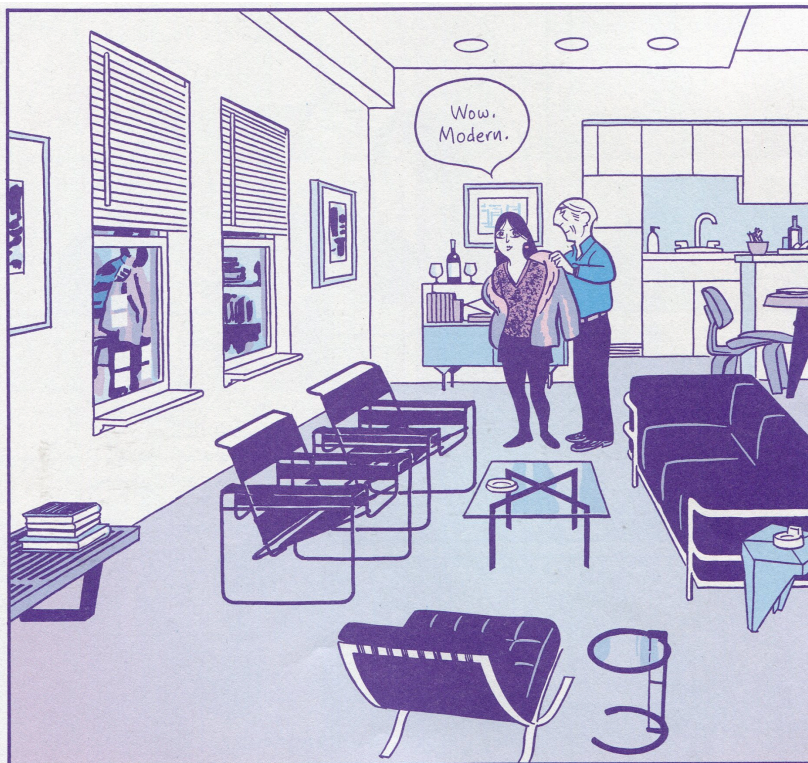

Figure 27. *Asterios Polyp (12)*

Figure 28. *Asterios Polyp (87)*

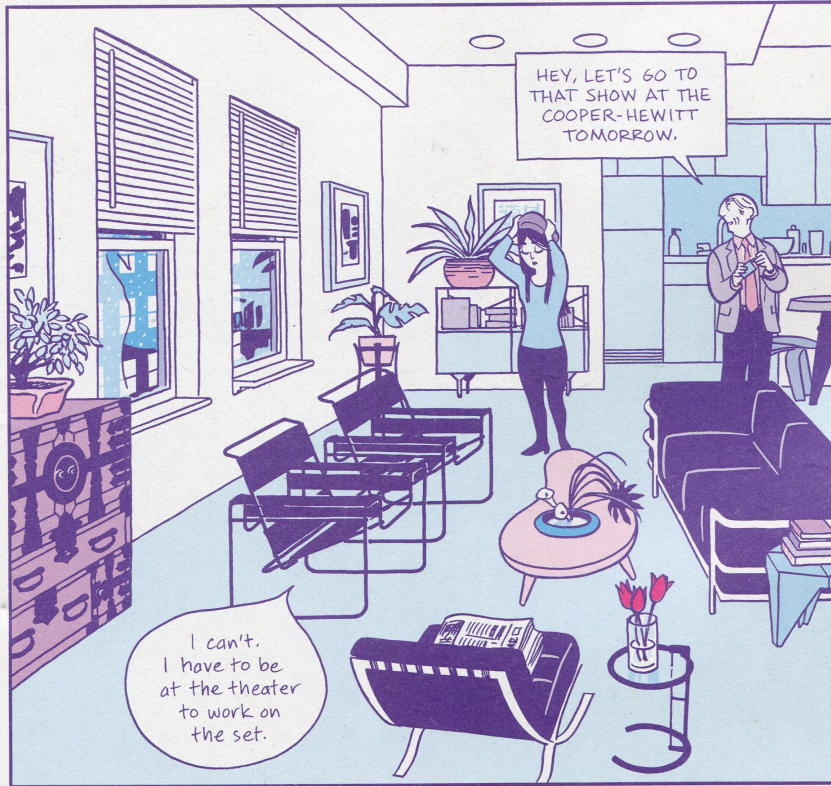**Figure 29.** *Asterios Polyp (156)*

Figure 30. *Asterios Polyp (225)*

A Grid of Lenses

Together, the four approaches to reading Mazzucchelli's graphic novel (dichotomous, interdependent, stylistic, and braided) form a grid similar to Mazzucchelli's grid of apples (Figure 5). Each approach examines the same book, but through a lens that asks the reader to pay attention to different elements of the work. Mazzucchelli's references to these approaches throughout his graphic novel form the grid wherein the reader sees the methods and limitations of each lens. By choosing to analyze the work through one lens, the reader necessarily disregards the methods used in the others. No matter which one he or she chooses, it causes what Thompson describes as the "excess" that the reader overlooks due to his or her "tight" analytical approach (489). Mazzucchelli asserts at the end of *Asterios Polyp* that no approach will provide a reading

of his graphic novel devoid of excess, but that the acknowledgement of the limitations of any analytical framework prepares the reader for the excess that proves his or her analysis to be lacking.

Asterios's triumph at the end of the story does not occur in his discovery of a new way to perceive the world, but rather in his acknowledgement that all perceptions possess limitations that create excess. He demonstrates this valuable lesson when he hears the approach of the asteroid. Even though his question of *"What's that noise?"* does not save him from the asteroid's destructive path, it epitomizes his newfound acknowledgement that no matter which method of perception he uses there will always be excess details that can prove his interpretation to be deficient. In accordance with this central lesson of the narrative, Mazzucchelli's grid of lenses draws the reader's attention to the excess created by any approach he or she uses to analyze his graphic novel. The dichotomous approach encourages the reader to focus on the separate narrative threads of the words and images. Alternatively, the interdependent approach asks him or her to examine how Mazzucchelli uses words and images as one mode of representation. The stylistic approach zeroes in on his linework and its allusions to other artists' visual styles. And finally, the reader using the braided approach tries to identify and map out how Mazzucchelli braids iconic motifs in his work.

None of these approaches provides a complete reading of every element of Mazzucchelli's work. There are still details of his graphic novel that go unexplained no matter which of the four approaches a reader utilizes, such as his choice not to include page numbers, his design of the cover and binding of the book, and his tendency to design his panels on unusually large amounts of white space. While these excess details

may not seem relevant at first, upon further reading they may prove a reader's analysis to be lacking in a vital way. Mazzucchelli's ending image of the night sky symbolizes the vast amount of visual information his graphic novel presents to the reader (Figure 20). No matter which approach he or she uses to interpret the meaning of the comic there will always be excess details that go unnoticed. Instead of remaining overwhelmed by this large amount of information, Mazzucchelli encourages the reader to acknowledge that an excess detail that he or she ignored or overlooked before may prove valuable upon further readings.

Conclusion

When Asterios visits the canyon with Ursula and Jackson, he looks out at its wide

rim and says, "Now, *that's* a hole" (Figure 16). In *Asterios Polyp* David Mazzucchelli

focuses on the holes, or blind spots, in human perception. He draws attention to the

excess information that escapes through these holes. When Asterios realizes that his

closed-mindedness prevents him from giving Hana the attention and care she deserves, he

tries to solve the problem by finding a new method of perception that will fix his blind

spots. However, he eventually acknowledges that every perceptual framework has its

limitations that stop a person from absorbing all the information from the world. This

acknowledgement prepares Asterios to hear the approach of the asteroid at the end of the

narrative. With the question, *"What's that noise?"*, Asterios demonstrates that he's

finally ready to acknowledge the limitations of his perception and accept when excess

details reveal inadequacies in his interpretation.

Mazzucchelli asks the reader to follow Asterios's path in his or her interpretation

of the graphic novel. Through references to the formal qualities of comics, he displays a

grid of analytical approaches. Each approach asks the reader to focus on elements of

Mazzucchelli's work in different ways: in the dichotomous approach the reader analyzes

how the words and images function as separate narrative threads, in the interdependent

approach he or she pays attention to how the words and images work as one mode of

representation, in the stylistic approach he or she studies the shifts in Mazzucchelli's

visual style, and in the braided approach he or she examines the repetition of iconic

motifs throughout his work. Mazzucchelli's references to these approaches form a grid

that displays the benefits and limitations of each approach. Like Asterios's lesson

regarding perception, Mazzucchelli emphasizes that a reader's interpretation always overlooks excess details that do not fit into his or her analytical framework. Therefore, he encourages the reader to acknowledge that there is no approach that will offer a complete reading of his work. This acknowledgement prepares the reader to accept when an excess detail sheds new light or proves something to be lacking in his or her interpretation.

My argument regarding *Asterios Polyp* suggests several avenues for research. There remains no single-author study of David Mazzucchelli and the thematic ties that link his comics together. An examination of his entire body of work would deepen our understanding of what he's trying to convey as an artist across his body of work. Another possible avenue to explore would be a comprehensive study into the different ways comics creators represent mental processes such as perception. Such a study would shed light on how the formal qualities of comics, such as word balloons and panel frames, present opportunities to visually represent invisible mental processes. Furthermore, Mazzucchelli's references to the formal qualities of comics in *Asterios Polyp* opens up the possibility for a project that would focus on how certain comics creators use meta-art in their work. By comparing different artists and what they have to say about the medium, such a project will highlight the meta-artistic discourse running throughout different creator's graphic novels.

The comics where Mazzucchelli is both writer and illustrator (as opposed to the works where he serves solely as illustrator, such as *Batman: Year One*) have various thematic links connecting them together. A project that focuses on these links would provide assertions as to what Mazzucchelli is trying to do or say as an artist when he's in full control of the art rather than collaborating. A place to start is with the three-volume

set of Mazzucchelli's comics anthology *Rubber Blanket*. The short comics within these volumes have motifs that tie into both the narrative and visual style of *Asterios Polyp*. The three areas that this project might focus on are the recurring themes in his work, his portrayal of women, and his experiments with visual style.

For example, Mazzucchelli establishes the theme of preparing for the unexpected in "Near Miss," the first comic in volume 1 of *Rubber Blanket*. The story centers on a young man named Steven who leaves home in an effort to prepare for the possibility of an asteroid hitting the earth. As I point out in Chapter 1, Steven makes a cameo appearance in *Asterios Polyp*. His reappearance serves as the most obvious link that Mazzucchelli makes between his previous work and his graphic novel. Another link between "Near Miss" and *Asterios Polyp* is the use of a canyon as a place of inner-exploration. After leaving home, Steven drives to a canyon where he plans to stargaze. In the canyon he has an encounter with an anonymous half-naked woman. Before he can get to know the woman in the canyon, a pair of jets flying close by distract him. By the time he turns back to the woman, she's vanished. Similarly, Asterios's acknowledgment of his flawed perception occurs while visiting a canyon with Ursula and Jackson. "Near Miss" ends with Steven gazing out into the night sky with his telescope. This ending serves as a connection to the final scene of *Asterios Polyp*, where Jackson gazes out at the night sky searching for shooting stars. A single-author study of Mazzucchelli's work would attempt to survey how his earlier work in *Rubber Blanket* helped to develop the concepts he explores further in *Asterios Polyp*.

In "Discovering America" from the second volume of *Rubber Blanket*, the protagonist, Chris, has a problem with women that correlates with Asterios. Both

characters don't pay enough attention to their significant others because they're blinded by their pride. In "Discovering America" Chris can't even remember what his girlfriend is studying as her major. Furthermore, Mazzucchelli doesn't reveal her name, which makes her appear as even more forgettable. Chris, who's in the process of making a giant globe, gets furious when his girlfriend gives him an atlas to use as a reference. Pride blinds both Chris and Asterios to the mistakes they make in their relationships. There's also a clear link between their artistic pursuits. As a mapmaker, Chris says, "A lot of it is finding ways to make something three-dimensional into something two-dimensional" (22). This approach parallels Asterios's profession as a "paper architect," where colleagues praise him for his brilliant designs of three-dimensional buildings on the two-dimensional surface of paper. Finding more links to Mazzucchelli's portrayal of women, and the characters who underappreciated them, would help develop a more cohesive understanding of his attitudes towards gender and identity in his body of work.

Of all the comics in *Rubber Blanket*, "The Death of Monsieur Absurde" from volume three is the closest in visual style to *Asterios Polyp*. Its plot revolves around a running gag of people distracting and frustrating Monsieur Absurde into a rage. In the comic, Mazzucchelli draws in a cartoon-based style that that uses a minimum amount of lines and visual details to depict the characters and setting (Figure 31). His goal is to present these characters, especially Monsieur Absurde (who's similar in stature and attitude to Willy Illium), as caricatures rather than realistic people. The visual style of *Asterios Polyp* is not quite as caricature based. However, Mazzucchelli's character design of Asterios with a half-circle shaped head evokes the same flat, minimalist, approach to cartooning. In "The Death of Monsieur Absurde" we also see Mazzucchelli playing with

different typographies. The practice of giving each character a different style of lettering is something Mazzucchelli carries into *Asterios Polyp*. On a thematic level, Monsieur Absurde is another character that is blind to what's really going on around him. While lecturing an admirer of his work on philosophy, he does not notice that his wife is having a sexual encounter with the bellboy behind him. Like Chris from "Discovering America" and Asterios, Monsieur Absurde's pride gets in the way of his ability to notice what's happening in his relationship with his wife. By examining these shared qualities of Mazzucchelli's work, his recurring themes, his portrayal of women, and his visual style, the single-author study would provide a new perspective on what Mazzucchelli is trying to accomplish as an artist.
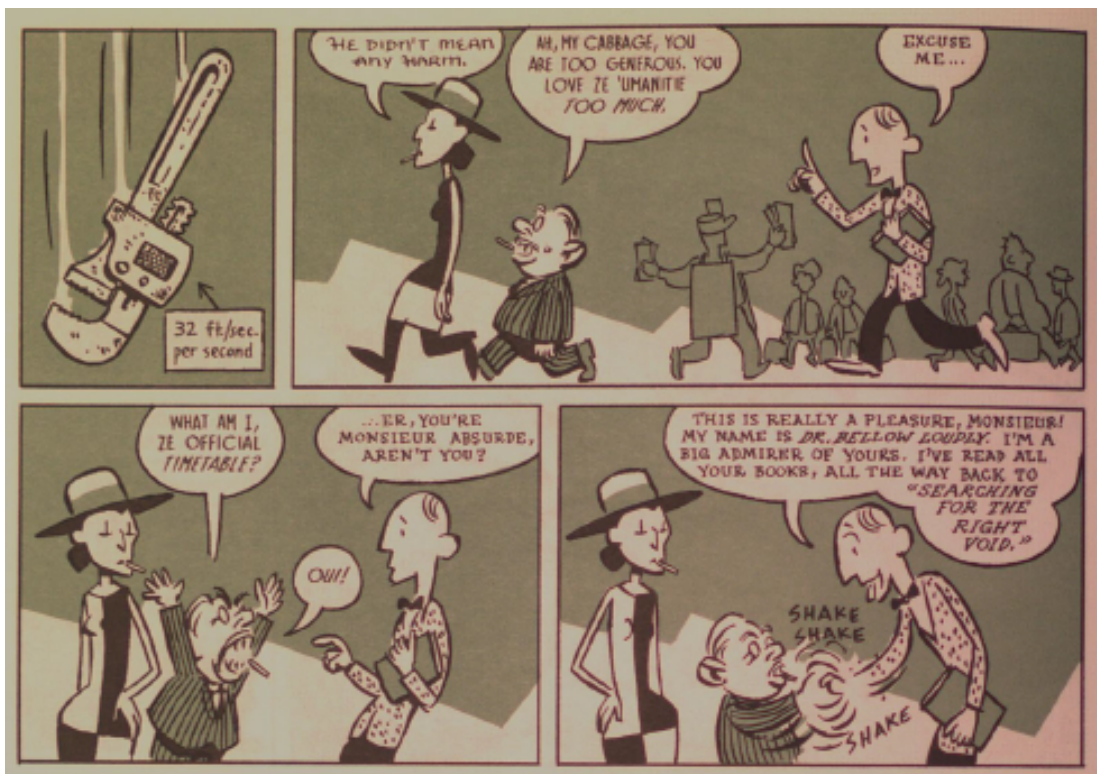
Figure 31. *From "The Death of Monsieur Absurde" in Rubber Blanket vol. 3 (68)*

Going beyond an examination of Mazzucchelli's work, I propose a project that focuses on how the particular formal qualities of the comics medium allow creators

opportunities to represent human perception and other mental processes in unique ways. In the artform of fiction writing, authors will occasionally switch the first-person narrator in order to show the difference in perception between characters. In film, a director may use several different point-of-view shots to convey how various characters perceive the world in different ways. The unique formal qualities of the comics medium (which presents the reader with sequences of images like film, but allows his or her eyes to wonder back and forth across the panels on the page) possesses methods for representing mental processes that have yet to be examined fully by scholars. The unique formal qualities of comics include: the page layout, the panel frame, the space between the panels (called the gutter), word and thought balloons, and others. For an example of how an artist can use these formal qualities of comics to portray complicated mental processes, I provide an example of a two-page spread from writer Scott Snyder and illustrator Yanick Paquette's *Swamp Thing* series (2011) for DC comics (Figure 32). In this scene, Swamp Thing, who is a plant-based entity, links his mind with Eric Holland's in order to show him visions of The Rot, a force of destruction that he needs Eric's assistance to stop. To represent Eric's complicated state of mind as he's linked with Swamp Thing, Paquette uses highly stylized panel frames that look like plant cells under a microscope. The manipulation of this formal quality of the medium helps convey how Eric perceives these events through Swamp Thing's plant-based mind. The project focusing on these formal qualities will collect a series of examples similar to figure 32 from different comics creators to show the techniques creators can use to represent various mental processes of their characters.

Figure 32. *From Scott Snyder and Yanick Paquette's Swamp Thing #2 (9–10)*

The third project I propose is an analysis of how other comics creators use meta-art in their work. This project will focus on writers like Grant Morrison and Alan Moore, whose work also references the medium of comics and the culture surrounding it. In Morrison's *Animal Man* series (1988–90), the main character, Buddy Baker, eventually realizes he's living the life of a character inside a series of superhero comic books. The story arc of the series culminates with Buddy meeting his creator, Grant Morrison himself. Morrison raises interesting questions about how mainstream comics deal with complicated issues of seriality and continuity. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986-1987) is a deconstructionist superhero tale, which posits what it would be like if superheroes existed in a more realistic world. Moore references the medium of comics and the culture

surrounding it by not only deconstructing society's concept of the superhero, but also including a comic within the graphic novel called, "Tales of the Black Freighter." The method of having the reader read a comic within a comic heightens the meta-art of Moore's work. This project on meta-art in comics will attempt track the meta-artistic references running throughout these and other graphic novels in order to focus on how comics writers and creators use meta-art in their work.

I want to end with a reflection on what my experience developing this thesis project on David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp* has brought to my attention. While the medium of comics is accepted as a legitimate artform by the world of academia, and there's a growing body of critical analysis and theory in the field of comics studies, there remains a missing component in comics scholarship. In other fields of study, such as film or literature, there are many textbooks designed with the goal to assist university-level scholars in writing about these mediums and their formal qualities. However, in the field of comics studies, there remains an absence of helpful texts. There's a need among both comics scholars, and professors that teach courses on comics, for a book that defines the formal qualities of the medium and assists scholars in how to write about comics at the university-level. My goal is to fill this need by developing a textbook that provides accessible definitions of the formal qualities, such as page layout and expressive typography, and discussions of various analytical approaches, such as the stylistic and the braided approach. By providing this missing component in comics studies, I hope to make a significant contribution that will help the field continue to grow and thrive.

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