

Two Pages,



Two Comics,

One Abstraction:



Selections from MadInkBeard.com

by **Derik A Badman**

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All texts have been edited slightly for this publication.

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All images (with the exception of the Hernandez and Taniguchi pages) originally appeared in color.

One Page : “Flies on the Ceiling” : Page One

The “close reading” of a poem is a standard literary practice. You don’t see many close readings of comics -- the most notable exception being John Benson, David Kasakove, and Art Spiegelman’s “An Examination of Master Race.” Since Jaime Hernandez is one of my favorite comic artists, a master of the (mostly) unique comic form of the serial short story, I find it a propos to try a close reading of one of his works. Going through a whole story would take some time (and space), so I’m just going to look at the first page of Hernandez’s “Flies on the Ceiling.” [See page following.] The first page is a brilliant example of a comics narrative’s ability to intermingle timelines and effect a concision in narrative explication. In nine panels he tells a short story within the story.

Panel 1: A black silhouetted house leaning over the edge of a cliff with a large circle moon behind it. Black is important throughout the story, not only visually -- Jaime is a master of the spot blacks -- but also thematically. The house teetering over the cliff can be read as a metaphor for Isabella’s (the protagonist) mental state. The black edge of the cliff leads the eye to the next panel, and the white background on the right side of the panel contrasts nicely with the black background in panel 2.

Panel 2: Isabella sweating over her typewriter in the dark. The despair on her face (even without the sweat) is palpable with only a few lines. The juxtaposition from the first panel to this one lets us assume that Isabella sits inside this teetering house. (For the reader who’s been following the series, we can also tell, by Isabella’s appearance, that this story takes place in the past relative to the ongoing narrative.) In the minimal style of Jaime, even a small detail like the lamp next to Isabella is important. In this case, the tilted shade adds to the feeling of disequilibrium, an echo of the teetering house. The figure’s leaning and the tapering white of the objects on the table lead us forward to the next panel.

Panel 3: The transition from the previous panel to this one starts a page-long sequence of back and forth transitions from an exterior present (Isabella at her typewriter) to an interior (or



Hernandez, Jaime. "Flies on the Ceiling." p 1. From *Collected Love & Rockets Vol. 9: Flies on the Ceiling* (Fantagraphics).

possibly written) past. Here we see a visual trope, the wedding photo in its broken frame, an obvious (and as such, effective) stand-in for a divorce (how better to show that in one panel without words?). The photo is upside-down on a black background, adding to both the off-kilter nature of the previous panels and the darkness. The placement of the photo also leads the composition from the left side of the panel around and down, taking the eye back to the next tier of panels. We can assume the woman in the photo is Isabella; the man

appears to be an older man (moustache and white hair).

Panel 4: Back to Isabella, a little larger in the panel than before, though even more of the panel is black. She looks stunned and motionless. The white in this panel starts at the top left and moves to the middle right, leading us to the main figure in the next panel.

Panel 5: Protesters with anti-abortion signs in front of a Planned Parenthood office. The "Reagan in '80" sign subtly clues us in to the narrative past of this moment (Jaime's stories ostensibly exist in the present, and this story was published originally in 1989.) Again, this is a wonderfully economic way to signal an abortion, Isabella's we assume. The use of type going off-panel into Isabella's left hand (in the next panel) leads us across the panel and onto panel six.

Panel 6: Back to Isabella, just her hands and the typewriter. Is she typing the story of the other images (divorce, abortion, etc)? That's what I assume. The position of the hands in this panel show movement; time is passing in this narrative present. The two hands in their positioning, like the picture frame in panel three, lead the eye back around to the next tier of panels (from her left hand up to the typewriter and then back down the right hand).

Panel 7: Isabella in the past at, we can assume, her family dinner table, with a father, mother, and younger sister. Isabella and her father are yelling. Jaime uses a classic comics idiom of steam shooting out of the characters' heads, which adds a slightly comic edge to what is otherwise a very dark page. The four figures are crowded into the panel, their heads all very close in the composition, which gives a feeling of claustrophobia, adding force to the "daughter fighting with parents" trope.

Panel 8: Isabella again in the present, her profile takes up half the panel, her hand over her mouth, tears and sweat fall. The sequence of panels 2, 4, and 8 ratchet up the despair in Isabella's face. These panels make up a discontinuous-in-page-space but continuous-in-narrative-time sequence (as does the sequence 3, 5, 7, 9.)

As the the composition move closer to Isabella's face, the reader is moved metaphorically closer to the character emotionally. The

page is partly a process of moving us into the character who will be the focus of the story (and who, previously in Hernandez's work, has been seen only from the outside.)

Panel 9: Two arms in the air and a torso covered by a sheet. An IV stand and prominent bandages on the wrists create an economical way to signify a suicide attempt. Notice how the hands in this panel echo the ones in panel six directly above. Unlike the two previous panels that ended a tier on this page, this composition does not move around and down. Instead, the position of the arms in relation to the sheet pushes us forward and up; in this case, to the turn of the page. The movement from one page to the next, particularly in a case like this where the reader is turning a page (page one is the recto) is not often utilized in comics. Hergé was particularly conscious of this reader movement and worked it into his *Tintin* stories.

Six of the nine panels are predominantly black, which gives the page as a whole a very dark presence, emphasizing the narrative therein. Even without reading the panels, just looking at the page as a unit unto itself, it conveys a mood, an oppressive black.

As I mentioned, we have two intertwined narrative lines going through this page. It is a brilliant use of what might be called cross-cutting or parallel editing in film theory, where the film jumps back and forth between two narratives. The pacing of each of these narratives is different. Narrative one, the present in panels 2, 4, 6, and 8, seems to exist at both a small moment in time (Isabella is just sitting, typing, and crying) and outside of time (there is no real indication of how much time passes). Narrative two, the past of panels 3, 5, 7, and 9, compresses larger events into single panels and then moves across a longer period of narrative time from one compressed event to the next.

The different speeds of these narratives give a real visual metaphor for the past "catching up" with Isabella. As the present moves slowly forward (or hardly moves at all), the past comes rushing forward at a bounding pace. This prelude to the rest of the story (page two is the title page) acts out a microcosmos of both this story and the general character arc for Isabella in the rest of the *Locas* stories).

One Page : "Discovering America" : Page Twenty-Two

Certain works have had lasting impact on the way I read and create comics. David Mazzucchelli's *Rubber Blanket* is one of those seminal works I discovered while still rather young (I was 16 when the last issue, three, came out). The large format (9" x 12"), the loose brush work, and the limited colors are still unusual, but at the time they were an amazement to me. In particular, the story "Discovering America" in issue two had a strong visual impact, which is why I picked a panel from this story to close read. Page twenty-two is a single large splash page, both a page and a panel at the same time. This is not the first in the story, which also includes a two-page splash, but it is the most dynamic one.

The story, briefly, follows a young man named Chris who is obsessed with a large globe which he is attempting to build, to fix the land, water, and countries, into a stable order. The illusion of geography and stability, abstracted systems and concrete reality, are mirrored in his work and a relationship he develops with a woman who lives across the street (he first sees into her window from the window of his workshop).

Page twenty-one is a quite stable page holding many rectangular panels, showing Chris working with a Mercator map (that is a projection of the globe onto a rectangle). He draws off the map, continuing the longitudinal lines off the page. In the last panel he is marking off the North Pole, here, because of the nature of the Mercator, found at a dozen locations in a line across the top of the map. A reader turning the page moves from this calm, wordy page of stable, enclosed panels to page thirty-eight...



Mazzucchelli, David. "Discovering America." p 22. From *Rubber Blanket* Issue 2 (Rubber Blanket Press, 1992).

...an explosion of movement and large forms which bleed off the edge of the page and even, at the bottom, onto the facing page. This is the climax of the story, which ends two pages later. This is

the point where everything breaks apart. Even the previous splash pages were much more ordered, geometric, and calm, where this one is motion and curves. The contrast is striking and apt, a merging of the visual image and the narrative content.

As an overall composition, the page has a distinct movement downward. The reader's eye naturally starts at the upper left corner and the whole image is organized to move the eye down the page in an arc to the white bottom margin. The primary shapes of the page are circles in the form of the globe, shown twice as a circle and a third time degraded, flattened, and cut off, a misshapen oval. The flattened circle is prefigured in the eyes which top the page. The circles and ovals grow larger in relation to their placement towards the bottom the page, creating a sense of depth and forward movement. The background brushwork also contributes to the movement: it moves in a curve along with the arc of the circles.

The eyes that start the page are abstracted into a series of differently toned ovals, with orange pupils and orange vertical ovals adding the feeling of anger and perhaps a bit of craziness. This is anticipated a bit by the penultimate panel of page twenty-one: a close-up on Chris' face, his eyes widening, sweat forming on his brow. Here, on page twenty-two, the anger has come on full bore. The vertical ovals not only add a certain craziness to the eyes, but they also give to the pupils the appearance of a ringed planet (like Saturn), which is a nice complement to the globes and a subtle distancing of Chris from his work. The darkened face with eyes outlined in white also gives the face a somber countenance. Even the unclosed, imprecise, white line of the eye adds a bit of destabilization to the face. The dark smear of the bridge of the nose leads right into the first figure.

This panel page is one of multiple moments. Mazzucchelli could have drawn this as three or four (or more) panels, but instead he put them all together, overlapping. The strategy is effective here. It keeps the focus on the figure and the globe by repeating both three times. It creates a greater sense of movement through that repetition. And, as I noted before, by sheer size it works as a climactic moment.

Neil Cohn might call this a polymorphic panel because it shows multiple instances/moments of the same action within a single

panel [1]. Most examples of this type of panel show a moving action through a background, such as Jim Steranko used in some of his work [2]. [See below.] In this case, Mazzucchelli is showing a different type of action. We do not get the feeling that Chris is carrying his globe through a background to smash it, rather his lifting it up—in previous pages it is suspended in some way with a chain structure (you can see part of that on the last instance of the globe in this page)—and throwing it down. This is more like a series of staggered, overlapping panels, than the filmic/animation style of the Steranko panel, where the space on the page is also the space in the scene.



Steranko, Jim. *Strange Tales* Issue 168. (Marvel, 1968). p 12.

Mazzucchelli's figures here are powerfully rendered. Each is, in varying degrees, off-balance as it struggles with the large globe. The middle figure looks like it is straining. You can see the weight. The left leg sticks out under the center of the globe, while the right leg seems to almost stagger out past the head. The area from the bottom of the globe down to the shadowed left leg and foot sits at the center of the page (almost exactly). The shadow of the left leg is immediately adjacent to the shadowed face, chest, and downward/forward pointing limbs of the third figure. This area is a moment of brief stability at the center of the page before the globe comes crashing down immediately afterward. Also take note of the position of the globe here. The first and second iterations of the globe stay at mostly the same level vertically. There is then a precipitous drop to the third globe emphasizing the quicker movement of the downward motion while minimizing and slowing the lifting motion.

Speaking of shadows and tone brings me to the part of this comic as a whole that continues to impress me: the colors (which unfortunately I am unable to reproduce in this printed format, I urge you to seek out the original). What is important to understand

about this comic is that it is printed with only two colors: orange and blue. Both (or at least one, whichever is printed on top) are to some extent transparent, allowing a third tone to be created as a result of the orange and blue overlapping. Mazzucchelli covers enough of the paper with the colors in this page (and many of the others in the story) that he also gains white as a color rather than just the lack of color.

When I first read *Rubber Blanket*, the use of color was unlike anything I'd seen before. Pretty much all the comics I had read to that point were Marvel/DC pamphlets with their black lines and filled in colors or independents (and early translated manga) in black and white with occasional grey tones. Here was Mazzucchelli with no black lines and no filled in colors. He had two different colors and he drew with each (the face at the top is rendered with the orange color, while the figures are mostly rendered with the blue). He calculated when the colors would sit along side each other and when they would overlap to create that third darker tone. The effect is beautiful and endlessly fascinating to examine. I have to attribute my ongoing love of blue and orange as a color scheme to this work [3]. My attempts to recreate this in my own comics have been much less successful.

The figures in this page alternate their primary color: blue, orange, blue. The central orange figure and the orange field on which it sits, recalls the orange circles on the eyes, creating a central field of heightened anger and emotion before the cooling release of the third figure and the bottom of the page. Note the right leg of the middle figure; as it overlaps with the bottom figure, it becomes a simple silhouette overlapped by the blue which delineates the bottom figure.

The white in the upper right part of the page allows the orange globe to retain its shape against the background, an additional arc carrying the composition downward. The jagged white star-burst shape at the bottom of the page gains focus because of the darkness at the top of the page; it's almost like an explosion going off the page. The only apparent margin on the page is not blank space at all but a white colored part of the image. This star-burst also pushes across the gutter onto the facing page.

One Comic : Chimera

The only text here is the “CRASH” sound effect which cuts across the center of the page. Once again, like other elements, the word contributes to the downward motion of the composition through the placement of the letters on an arc. The white of the letters in conjunction with the white of the star-burst create a sense of the effect radiating out from the bottom of the page. This effect is increased by the tiny bits of white paper that seem to have flown off the smashed globe. The crash, the papers, simultaneously go along with and against the downward movement of the page. We see them as we read down the page, but in the world of the comic (the diegesis) their movement is up from the ground/bottom.

Having gone this far, I shouldn't fail to mention the lovely brushwork at play here. From thin consistent lines to thick and chunky marks, Mazzucchelli offers a virtuoso execution. The feather marks add a texture and more movement to the colors and shapes. We can see this most obviously in the swath of background that cuts across the upper half of the page (blue feathered marks on orange), but we also see in the marks across the chest of the third figure, which highlights the curve on his lower side as he brings the globe down.

I have had great pleasure returning to this work from a time of booming independent comics, a high quality self-published work, which I found in a regular old comic book store mostly devoted to superheroes. Unfortunately for you, the reader, *Rubber Blanket* is long out of print and sells for high prices online. Mazzucchelli has a new book, *Asterios Polyp*, coming out in June of this year. Maybe it will spark enough interest to reprint some of these older works.

[1] See his “Times Frames... Or Not” (<http://www.emaki.net/essays/timeframes.pdf>). I am greatly simplifying here.

[2] Another famous example from Steranko shows Captain America tumbling across a room. Unfortunately, I couldn't find a reproduction of this panel.

[3] See my previous webcomic *Maroon* (<http://madinkbeard.com/webcomics/maroon.php>), as well as some sections of *Things Change* (<http://madinkbeard.com/comics>).

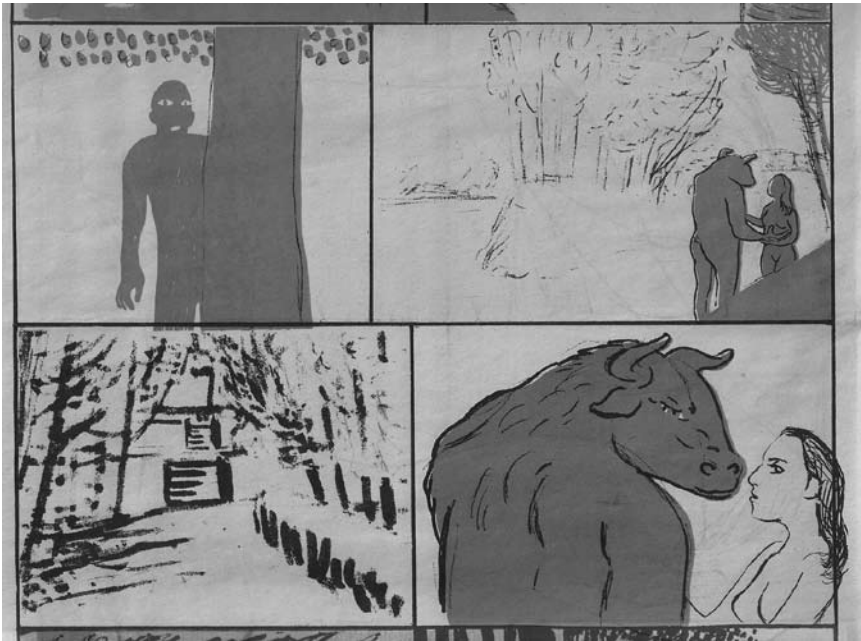
While Frank Santoro's previous work *Storeyville* told a fairly conventional narrative of search and discovery with a linear movement, clear characters, and distinct settings, *Chimera* is decidedly unconventional, juxtaposing reality and dream, the everyday and the fantastic with a poetry that has the distinct feel of early 20th century Surrealism.

At a basic level, reading a comic is a process of joining fragments. This is often done with clear guideposts for the reader: narrative captions tell us “two days later” or “back at the house”; the repetition of characters and backgrounds allows the assumption of time or motion; or an initial panel sets the stage for the relation between characters and objects in the panels which follow. This process becomes more complicated and reader intensive as the guideposts are removed or hidden.

Chimera requires work by the reader. Surely, it could be enjoyed by reading breezily through it—the imagery alone is enough to captivate the eye, but I found that the more I read and the more I worked to make connections, the more I felt engulfed by the comic. The closer I read, the more the art gave back to me, aesthetically and narratively, the more I wandered over the images, appreciating the fine compositions and handling of colors (no one else could make a yellow and pink comic so attractive), and the power of the minimal lines. There is truth to the idea that some things are worth working for.

The story, such as I decipher it, involves a young couple's bittersweet love story. The beginning is perhaps a dream or a fantasy: erotic, mythic, and protean. The narrative becomes clearer when we see the young couple at the beach. The woman is swimming in the sea, the man lying on the beach. Perhaps he was fantasizing as he lay there or we were seeing their combined dreams? They go into a

town. They are playful, obviously young and in love, though the man seems troubled by something that takes the form of a minotaur. The woman laughs it off. They go to the movies (Douglas Sirk's *There's Always Tomorrow*).



Santoro, Frank. *Chimera*. (Picturebox, 2005) p 8.

The earliest pages of the comic are mostly large images free of any conventional sequential narrative, two or three to a page, figures, objects, and landscapes: a man, doubled, looks over at a woman, also doubled; a large vase or urn juxtaposed with an archway through which one can see a puff of smoke; repeated images containing a house (like a toy) with smoke pouring from its upper story; sexual imagery of the man and woman, together or separate. A narrative sequence of more conventional panels shows a tree-filled landscape where the man spies the woman standing with a minotaur, who glares menacingly back at the man. [See above.] Classical elements, such as the urn and minotaur, add an out of time quality to the images, a sense of the mythic past.

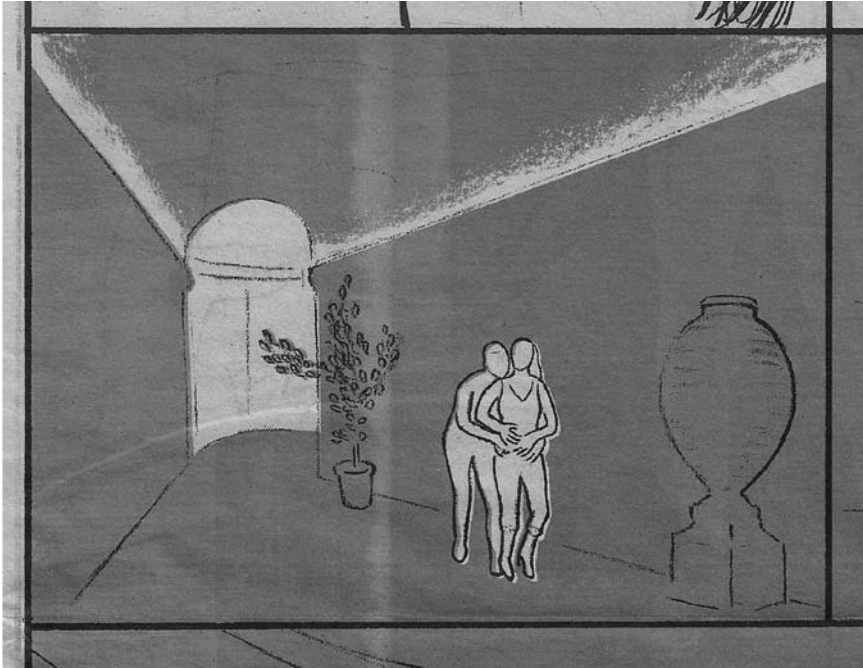
On repeated readings, small details and connections become evident. The silhouette of a woman walking on a beach is echoed

in the curves of the large vase/urn on the opposite page. The angles on the vase's base are repeated in reverse on an archway in the next panel. The pink of the woman is the pink of the vase. The pink vase on a yellow field becomes the pink archway with a yellow opening. After many readings I noticed the vase and archway repeated in a panel, at the end of the comic, showing the couple in a movie house. In this way the early abstract and mysterious pages gain resonance and context through the latter pages, much like the unravelling of dreamwork. [See this page and the next.]



Santoro, Frank. *Chimera*. (Picturebox, 2005) p 5.

Even in the more conventionally narrative and linear sequences, Santoro subverts a conventional sense of consistent appearances from one panel to the next. The simple lines and forms allow a blurring of perceptual boundaries. In one sequence we see a wide panel of the man on the beach and the woman floating in the water. The following two panels (a single tier on the page) show a pink spherical shape on a field of yellow. The first of these has a few black lines on the pink shape: the woman's head peaking out from the water. The next panel's pink shape is bare: a rock jutting from the water that we can see behind her in the first panel? The simplified



Santoro, Frank. *Chimera*. (Picturebox, 2005) p 15.

art and limited colors increase the correspondence between the woman's half-submerged head and the large rock rising from the sea. Or is it the sun? While this ambiguity may be a weakness in many conventional comics, here it is a strength that opens up interpretive possibilities. The indicia on the last page, defines "chimera" as "the dream beyond the dream." A dictionary I have defines it as "something wished for but impossible." This colors my view of the couple, instilling them with more sadness, less hope. Are they doomed to break? That's up to the reader.

One Comic: The Walking Man

I just got back from a walk to the post office down the street. As I walked, thinking about this book, I realized I hadn't really looked at my new neighborhood (been here about a month now). I've walked the streets and I've been to different buildings, but I've not really looked around me.

The Walking Man is for the most part about walking and looking. The main character, who remains nameless throughout the 18 vignettes contained in the book, is a youngish married Japanese man who in the first story has just moved into a new house in a new town (subtly conveyed by a few boxes in the background and the way he is surprised to see a bird that a bird watcher tells him is the most common bird in the area). The man must have some kind of job—we see him dressed in his suit, carrying a briefcase, coming home—but there is never any indication of what he does. The book solely focuses on his walks, often beginning or ending at his house.

In one sense, "nothing" really happens in this book: he walks, he looks, he reads, he exchanges a few words, he takes a bath, it rains, he buys cake or a paper balloon, he walks his dog, he helps a group of boys retrieve their model airplane from a tree. On the other hand, the world happens in this book: plants, weather, animals, people. In an age where zooming from one place to another is de rigeur, the simple act of walking and looking becomes almost revolutionary. Taniguchi skillfully takes us along with the "walking man" and makes us look at his surroundings. Maybe next time we won't have to be lead along.

The walking man is endlessly curious, observative, and kind. His dog uncovers a seashell in the backyard, and he no sooner goes to the library to look up the shell. He gets off a bus early after spotting a tree covered hill at the end of a small cross street, then climbs the hill to its top. He helps an old lady find her way and squeezes through the narrowest alley I've ever seen (he has to turn sideways). Throughout he is looking and smiling and appreciating the world. Very few words are exchanged in the book. Other than with his wife, he rarely says more than a word or two to people. When engaged in

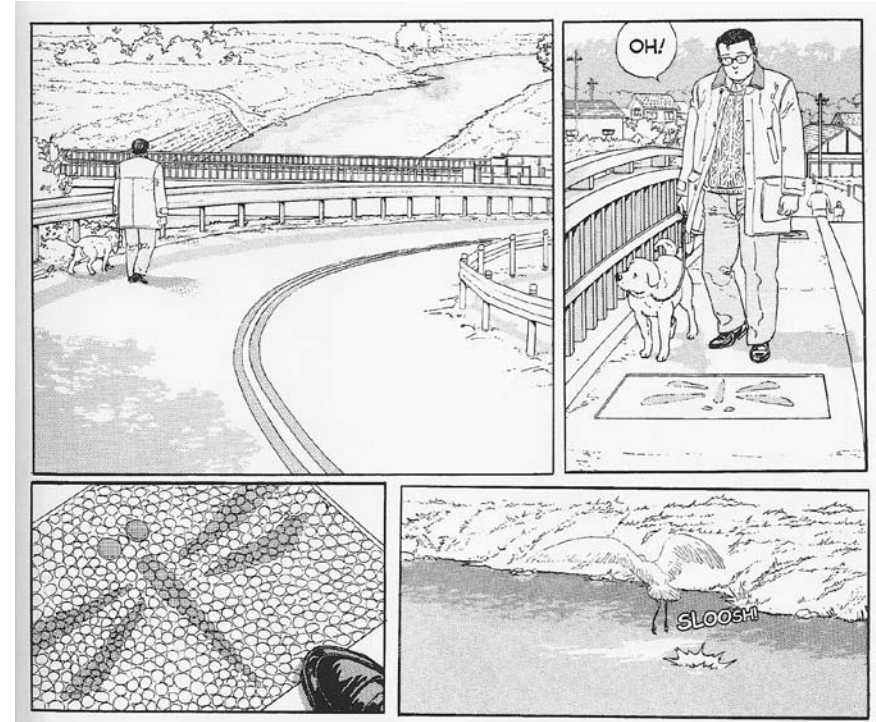
conversation he lets the other person do the talking. He listens.

The artwork is in a realist manga style. It is quite reminiscent of Katsuhiro Otomo's artwork (perhaps Taniguchi was an influence or there is some other mutual influence in manga history). Backgrounds are quite detailed, while characters are slightly more cartoony with large chins and eyes somewhere between the "big eyed" manga style and the small eyed American style.

The realist backgrounds are a great strength in this book. While the story made me think a bit of John Porcellino's comics, with the interest in looking, nature, and discovery, the backgrounds made a great difference. When Taniguchi shows his characters interested in something we see that something in amazing detail, in Porcellino's case the art does not allow that sense of looking. On the other hand Porcellino's work also uses more narration which conveys attitude, emotion, thoughts. Taniguchi makes us guess the walking man's attitudes and thoughts and gives us only his wonder and curiosity with the world. It is much more about the looking. Numerous scenes are set up with a panel of the man looking and then a panel of the thing he is looking at. This is particular prevalent in the earlier parts of the book, as if Taniguchi is teaching us to look with the character.

The pages are organized in what Benoit Peeters would call the "rhetorical style": tall panels are used for trees, wide panels for scenic vistas, smaller wider panels for the man's head looking off panel at something, single panel pages for slowed down moments that last forever (he takes a hot bath after being stuck in the cold rain in two single panel pages). The organization is mostly invisible because it is so integrated into the story.

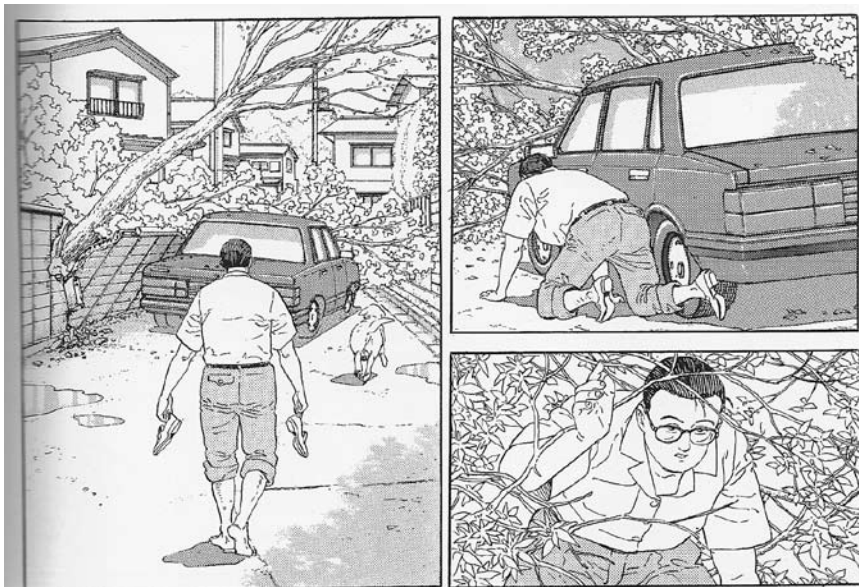
One thing that I'd be curious to know is how the pages were flipped for the left-to-right reading in this book. Flipped or "original" format for manga is an oft-contended issue with translated manga. There are a few ways to do this that I am aware of: one being to just flip the whole page, so it is a mirror image of the original (causing some problems such as a high percentage of left-handed characters); the other being to take the page apart by panels and recreate it going the opposite direction. This would preserve things like handedness but also destroys elements of the layout.



Taniguchi, Jiro. *The Walking Man*. (Fanfare/Potent Mon, 2004). p 17.

I started questioning this because of a few scenes' layouts, both excellent and poor. One excellent example is a set of four panels on page 17 that are smoothly integrated with each other. [See above.] The top end of the curved guardrail in panel one leads off the right side to the next panel where the line is continued by the guardrail at a different angle that curves into the walking man as he looks down at a mosaic in the street. The bottom curve of the road in the first panel leads down to the third panel in the group. The road line becomes the one end of the mosaic in close-up. This line of the road/edge of the mosaic moves into the fourth panel and becomes the shoreline of the river below the bridge.

On the other hand there are numerous scenes where the direction of the man's walking and his gaze are at odds from one panel to the next. It looks backwards and awkward, making me wonder if something with the flipping (or lack of flipping) broke-up the layout.



Taniguchi, Jiro. *The Walking Man*. (Fanfare/Potent Mon, 2004). p 57.

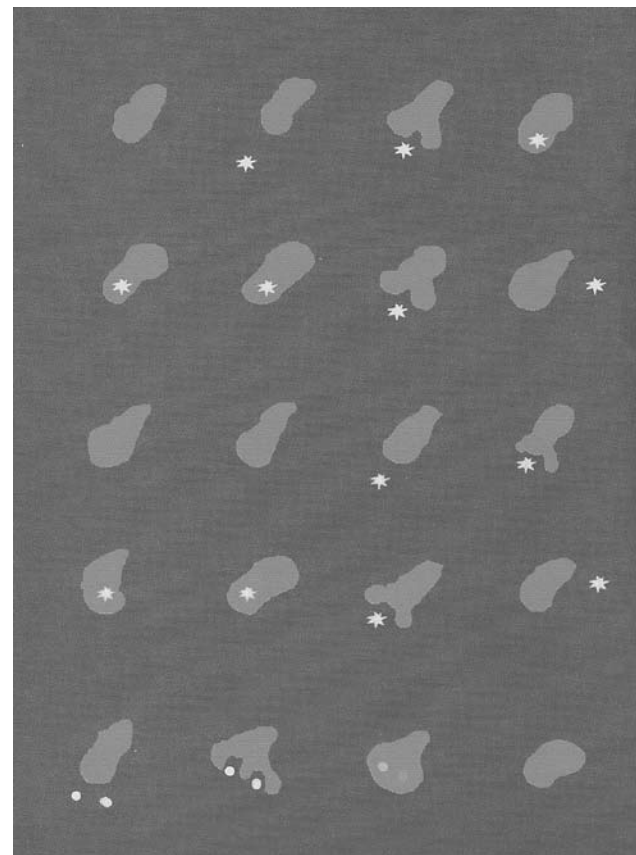
An example that really put the whole thing in question is on page 57. [See above.] In the first panel the tree and fence are leaning against the left side of the car. In the second panel we see the man crawling around the left side of the car, except it is clear in this panel the tree is coming from the right side of the car. Either the artist messed this up in the original or there is a problem with the flipping. Can I know the answer? Not without seeing an unflipped version, but it does make me rethink my opinion of flipping manga.

But those are only minor problems. This is an excellent work, one that offers another genre of manga that is seldom seen in translation.

One Abstraction : Bleu

The unassuming pamphlet *Bleu* adds another facet to the work of Lewis Trondheim. Packaged in a plain blue cover with plain blue flaps, the only text in the whole book is a basic indicia hidden beneath the back cover flap. The book's 30 pages are an extreme example of abstracted art in comics form. The whole comic is a sequence of colored blobs and dots passing, intersecting, overlapping, and transforming on a blue background (the paper itself is a bright blue).

An example page:



Trondheim, Lewis. *Bleu*. (L'Association, 2003).

A blue page on which one finds: twenty green blobs at regular intervals, five of which have a vaguely forked end; seven yellow stars in the top half of the page; six blue stars in the middle of the page; two yellow dots accompanied by two blue dots; one yellow-green dot accompanied by one blue-green dot.

That's the view of the page as a single image. But, while the page contains no panels as such, an experienced comics reader can easily divide the pages up into twenty panels in five rows of four. Trondheim maintains enough of a visual consistency from one "panel" to the next that one can construct a page of 20+ blobs into a timeline, a sequence:

A green blob is approached by a yellow star. The blob splits in the front and the star overlaps the blob. The star stays in place for a few images and then it moves away from the green blob as it once more splits in the front. The yellow star disappears off the page and a little later a blue star appears. It too overlaps the blob, stays for a moment and then leaves. A yellow dot and a blue dot then appear. The blob splits at two points and the two dots overlap the blob. They fade and disappear.

While it is just a bunch of blob, stars, and dots on a page, by applying the reading method for comics, one sees the many elements as repetitions of the same entity. The twenty green blobs are really only one green blob repeated twenty times. The stars and dots too become distinct: one yellow star, one blue star, one yellow dot, one blue dot, each repeated multiple times. After we begin to see those shapes as a repeated individual, we can begin to construct the sequence as I did above.

On this level one can read *Bleu*. The ever shifting interactions of a number of shapes of different colors. But, one can begin to look at them in another way: the shapes take on life. Not just abstract shapes, they are abstract creatures, amoeba-like. Then we see their interactions in new ways:

A green blob sees a yellow star approaching it. The blob opens its mouth and ingests the yellow star. It mulls over the yellow for a while and then spits it back out. The yellow star flies away. After more time, a blue star appears. Once again the green blob opens

its mouth and swallows the star. And, once again after mulling it over, unsatisfied, the green blob spits out the star. The blue star flies away and soon after two dots, one yellow, one blue, appear. The green blob opens itself up and swallows both. These it finds more pleasing, so it absorbs them into itself.

So we have a more narrative reading of these abstract shapes as interactions of entities. We see many of these interactions in the book: attraction, repulsion, joining and unjoining, ingestion, digestion, and more. One could even hazard a metaphorical level to these abstract interactions. At some abstracted narrative level are not these types of interactions the basis of all stories: meeting, parting, attraction, repulsion, taking in, letting go—all of which could apply to people interacting with people or people interacting with ideas.

Trondheim has created a truly abstract comics, both visually and narratively. Surprisingly (and I was skeptical) it's an enjoyable book to read. I found a lot of amusement in these strange little blobs interacting with each other (though I'm sure much more would get tiring). Trondheim manages to provide enough variations to provide novelty and amusement: sometimes colors change, sometimes shapes, sometimes numbers of entities. Most often he varies the interactions between the entities.

An Oubapo logo is printed on the indicia, so I'm assuming Trondheim has applied some kind of constraint to the work. It might be the restriction on representation, or else some kind of permutation of situation.

This is not just abstraction but minimalism. How much does it take to create a comic? Trondheim has taken this perhaps not to the limit, but certainly further than most would dare. Here we have a comic that excludes much of what one expects to find in a comic. No gutters. No balloons. No text. Characters? Not really. Panels? Kind of, but vaguely. What we get down to is comics as a way of reading, comics as a way of looking.

Further Reading:

Madinkbeard Blog:

madinkbeard.com/blog

More comics criticism and analysis, updated regularly.

Things Change: The Metamorphoses Comic:

madinkbeard.com/comics

An ongoing webcomic, very loosely based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, updated thrice weekly.

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