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Drawing Out the Intangible: A Study of the Depiction and Reinterpretation of Memory in Two Comics

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Drawing Out the Intangible: A Study of the Depiction and Reinterpretation of Memory in Two Comics

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by
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Introduction

No one knows what my memories look like – not even me. The subjective experiences of past events in my life remain in my mind to some extent, sometimes on the cuff of conscious awareness, other times intentionally brought to mind through careful concentration or involuntarily culled into attention. These memories appear as faint images in my mind's eye, where the contours, colors, and depth of objects and people are defined momentarily as ephemeral projections only to soon fade into the obscure, hazy, indeterminate recesses of my mental landscape – forever ghostly instead of fleshly present. Because they are intangible, I don't see them in the same way that I visually perceived these past experiences initially, namely because these memories become 'past-tense' and are necessarily outside of this current, lived moment that I consciously inhabit. But I know what my memories subjectively feel like, and these emotional associations (among other things) are what order my past together. Though I cannot share my memories with others like snapshots in a photo-album – I cannot, for example, hand the lived events of my childhood to you and say “Here, take a look” – what I can relate are my impressions of the past, what I make of my experiences. Meaning then materializes in how we remember personal experiences, despite memories being immaterial.

This project is (fortunately) not about my memories; it is instead concerned with the very question of how we remember, represent, and reinterpret the past, and it will address what happens when the intangible stuff of memory and personal experience (lacking any stable visual appearance) are materialized into a visual format – that is, into the medium of comics, comprised of both images and words. Two stand-alone comic books¹ deeply invested in this task of

¹ Otherwise known as “graphic novels,” a term that this paper will abstain from using because of how it implicitly assumes that traditional 'literary' novels are a higher, more sophisticated form of art. In attempt to elevate the comic medium by placing it in relationship to the traditional 'pure-text' novel, the term “graphic novel” in its guise of sophistication in fact devalues the comic as a legitimate form of art in its own right by apologetically
reinterpreting personal memories will be at the fore of this analysis: David B.'s *Epileptic* (reprint edition in English, 2006) and David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp* (2009).

In the autobiographical comic *Epileptic*, originally published in six volumes from 1996 to 2003, David reflects on his experience growing up with an acutely epileptic brother in 1960's-70's France and the fear, guilt, and hopelessness that this placed upon his family who frantically searched for a cure in all avenues available – moving from Western medicine, alternative healing practices, to the increasingly occult. So, in one sense, it's about the family’s persistent attempts to impose a stable narrative onto his brother Jean-Christophe's epilepsy in hopes of understanding and ultimately curing his condition. However, this isn't the only story told by David. The comic is just as much about Jean-Christophe's epileptic symptoms, the psychological distress of his condition, and how nearly all-consuming it becomes for David and his family as it is about the author's interest in the fantastical, art, mythology, and storytelling as it develops throughout his childhood into his adult years – even interrupting the temporal flow of his telling of the past to interject anecdotes about older and deceased relatives as well as discussions he has with his parents and sister about the making of the very comic we are reading. In this way, David's identity, that of his brother's, and the act of storytelling are all interconnected with one another through his depictions of his subjective memories of the past.

By being intimately intertwined with all these elements of David's memory, Jean-Christophe's epilepsy is thus destabilized from one single meaning, and we as readers are granted insight into David’s multifaceted understanding of himself in relation to his struggling family and increasingly frustrated brother through the comic form. Throughout the strictly black-and-

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assuring readers that what they are holding is more like a *real* novel than a comic book (a form presumed to be frivolous, crude, and largely commercial). I expand on the apologetic tone of much comics scholarship later and how this project will avoid similarly apologizing for the broad, simplistic, and unfair generalizations attributed to this medium.
white comic, one visual motif prominently reappears: snakes and serpentine creatures, which seem to extend out of David's interest in the fantastical, surreal, and mythological. Although each instance of the snake image seems to be merely a representation of Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy, through its many and differing appearances, the snake itself slinks and slithers away from concretely representing something specific: it is and is not epilepsy. I analyze how its connotations change depending on what context it is in and how it is represented through the comic form. Through the reader's engagement, it accumulates a multiplicity of meaning, just as Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy does throughout David's telling of the past. The snake therefore allows David to materialize both his memories and emotional associations as a visual symbol under which he can organize his past experiences, while the indeterminate nature of this symbol enables him to understand the past as an indeterminate narrative. Combining imagination and personal history, the visual depiction of David's memories points beyond external reality (after all, it's not as if there really was some monstrous serpent creature following his brother around) and, with open-ended metaphorical significance, articulates David's subjective experience of his own past as it is bound to that of Jean-Christophe's. The author constructs meaning out of his memories through depicting them in the comic form using such symbolic imagery in his narrative, even if the ultimate interpretation is that of the instability of meaning.

Mazzucchelli’s *Asterios Polyp*, although similarly concerned with the representation and reinterpretation of memory through an artistic medium, takes a rather different approach to encountering memory through the formal elements of comics. Instead of exploring the author's personal past within this form, Mazzucchelli's comic instead presents that of the fictional title character in relation to his present-tense circumstances. Previously a successful architect and professor in upstate New York married to his wife Hana, a quiet, insightful, and artistically
talented sculptor and fellow professor, Asterios loses everything due in large part to his own towering hubris (he indeed envisions himself as part of a 'pantheon' of great minds in architecture before his fall). When his Manhattan apartment burns down in a fateful fire, he on impulse decides to take a Greyhound and start his life anew wherever he ends up – which, as it turns out, is a small town called Apogee. Organized into discrete sections, the book (up until a certain point) switches back-and-forth between depicting the 'present-tense' story-line – Asterios living in Apogee and encountering the various perspectives of the town's inhabitants – and the 'past-tense' of Asterios's memories, including that of his personal history and his past with Hana. Through this back-and-forth structure, Asterios's 'odyssey' to Apogee and back simultaneous becomes a journey into the world of memory, and it represents how Asterios reflects on and reinterprets his memories of Hana in order to piece together how their relationship developed and dissolved.

Thus, the manner in which Asterios conceptualizes his memories and goes about reinterpreting his past in order to gain a new perspective on it is, in many regards, the central concern of the comic and is articulated through how the comic medium represents the intangible experiences of memory on the physical page. My point of entry into Asterios Polyp is the moment at which the back-and-forth structuring of time disintegrates – when Asterios begins to forgo his inclination of ordering reality (even that of own memories) into clear, objective, and stable constructs and instead embraces the subjective, fragmentary, and non-linear quality of memory. Paying attention to the formal elements of the comic – including color and quality of line (both of which have been coded to us with thematic and emotional associations internal to the narrative world of the comic), the fragmentation of images and time through comic paneling,
and the reader's interaction with the physical book – grants us insight into Asterios's subjective perspective on his memories and how his interpretation on the past begins to change.

Going beyond the fragmentation and subjective representation of memory, *Asterios Polyp* is also overtly invested in the structure of myth as a way of organizing past experiences. Through a formally isolated section in the book, the comic reflects back on itself within the framework of mythology – specifically, that of Orpheus and Eurydice: the classical Greek myth of a man trying to reclaim his lover back from the domain of the dead. Looking at the myth as metaphor that attempts to revive memory as a stable, unchanging image, this section acts as a meta-commentary on how Asterios had been remembering his past with Hana and his role in their relationship in an idealized way – as if he were the beloved, heroic artist Orpheus vying to retrieve his passive lover Eurydice. Thus, this section reflects back on the work as a whole at a point in the comic when the fragmentary nature of memory begins to take hold in Asterios's mind. It invites us to, alongside Asterios, reinterpret his memories through the very structure of the Orpheus myth. At the same time, because Asterios and Hana do not comfortably fit into the roles of these two mythical characters – in fact, in many ways Asterios is the antithesis of Orpheus, while Hana more meaningfully shares this hero's emotional expressiveness and inclination toward artistic communication – the comic stretches the structure of the myth beyond its conventional connotations in order to grant us deeper insight into these characters while acknowledging the limitations of organizing memory in this way. All in all, the idea of reinterpretation is embodied in the comic's depiction of the Orpheus myth and how it draws different elements of the comic's narrative together to grant us a deeper sense of Asterios's limited way of looking at the past, how his perspective begins to change, and how the comic medium can uniquely intertwine memory and myth as a way of creating meaning out of the
fragments of memory while also pointing to memory's messy, indeterminate quality that extends outside this ordering.

This is thus a project expressly concerned with the comic medium's potential to depict, organize, and reinterpret memory within an overarching structure of a personal narrative while at once drawing out the limitations of the very act of narrativization. *Epileptic* and *Asterios Polyp* both directly tackle questions of how memory can be depicted, how we relate memory to ourselves, and how artistic expression is involved in the re-framing of past events into a specific kind of narrative. The expression of the 'invisible' processes of memory onto the physical page is in a sense a 'fictional' creation, even in the case of David B.'s 'real' autobiographical memories; the transmutation of one's subjective experience of the past (truly ethereal stuff) into the tangible comic medium is fundamentally an act of interpretation – as the memories, beliefs, dreams, fears and feelings about one's past live in one's head and are necessarily unlike that which is represented beyond the imagination into a physical format. These two comics then directly acknowledge the importance of the 'fictive' or storytelling elements of their structures and are invested in narrative and myth as a way of making sense of (i.e. reinterpreting) the past. For David, the 'myth' of the serpentine creature fixes a single image onto Jean-Christophe's epilepsy and structures the author's impressions of his brother while at the same time extends beyond a single association by being interconnected with his own artistic development and the narratives of his relatives. For Mazzucchelli, the Orpheus and Eurydice myth helps draw out Asterios's limited perceptions of the past while the deconstruction of this mythic structure helps us glean a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic between Asterios and Hana and signals that Asterios, too, begins to honestly confront himself and his wife. Thus, in these two comics the reinterpretation of memories through the structure of a narrative (mixing the personal and the
mythical through the comic form) helps the protagonists unpack their pasts and develop a more emotionally earnest way of looking at themselves and their relationships to others, despite the impossibility of fully pinning down one's past memories.

My obsessive focus on the comic medium and how its formal elements engage with myth, memory, and personal narrative is surprisingly uncommon in comics scholarship. In some regard, what I am doing is not necessarily 'academic' when considering how academia has and continues to treat comics as a medium. One typical vein of scholarship seeks to defend comics against the general stigma the public holds of it being an inherently low-brow form of entertainment. This desire for cultural and academic legitimacy results in criticism that, as Charles Hatfield writes, “reeks of status anxiety,” (xii). In their more overt need to satiate the standards of academia and the general public, these scholars work under the fear that “everyone else thinks what they do is kind of trashy and disreputable,” (Wolk, 67). Sometimes this status anxiety manifests by trying to convince readers that comics are legitimate because they are closely related to other, higher forms of art. The first immediate association is often to the form of the novel, embodied largely by the term “graphic novel” intended to ascribe certain comics with the status of being more 'literary' and thus more worthy of critical attention. As Catherine Labio argues, this “privileges […] the literary character of comics over the visual,” by treating the visual dimension as merely coincidental to the form: the graphic element becomes just a “qualifier” to what is considered the more central, culturally-significant noun “novel,” (126). In

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2 Though this label does reasonably differentiate comics that are markedly distinct from one another – after all, episodic strips like Calvin and Hobbes or serials like Batman take on a different mode of storytelling than that of Epileptic or Asterios Polyp, both christened to the consumer public as “graphic novels” by Pantheon Books – it inevitably gives off the impression that some comics are more legitimate than others as a form of art.  

3 Funnily enough, Labio's article – despite implying that comics ought not to be reduced to the form of literature – is already placing comics in direct relationship to another, more academically-regarded medium: that of film, if we take into account that she is published in the Cinema Journal. Labio's situation reflects a larger academic trend that relegates comics under film studies, despite how these two media function in very different ways; unable to be treated as a medium in its own right, comics then become acknowledged as 'close enough to film' to
being chiefly concerned with likening the comic to the form of literature or a 'higher' art, these scholars don't allow comics to stand on their own terms.

Another dimension of this “status anxiety” is how it tends to invoke a certain bombastic or idealistic quality of prose in the writing of certain comics scholars. As Hannah Miodrag points out, these scholars often alternate between aggressively defending and passionately aggrandizing comics (whose exaggerations may indeed be rooted in a certain embarrassment they hold as comics scholars); this “does little to improve the standing of either the medium or scholarly interest in it,” (4). By repeatedly defending the integrity of the comic form and reassuring the reader of its legitimacy, this cyclical reasoning hardly extends our understanding of how comics function as a storytelling medium.

Perhaps in reaction to this type of argument, another prominent strand of academic criticism attempts to define what formal, aesthetic qualities distinguish comics as an unique medium.⁴ Although this in some ways can be seen as countering the former approach by eschewing the apologetic impulse to justify comics for its likeness to another medium, the fact that it must differentiate comics with new and sometimes confusing jargon seems to also exude of a certain anxiety to elevate the form as something sophisticated enough to study in an academic environment. At the very least, by treating the comic form as this alien thing that necessitates new hyper-theoretical language in order to discuss it, this potentially inhibits us from accessing the medium in a more open and intuitive way as we would with any other media.

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⁴ Though there are too many examples to cite, I can point to a few thinkers who harbor these concerns. For instance, Hanna Miodrag, oriented in both literary and linguistic theory, applies these analytical modes in her book *Comics and Language* order to adamantly argue that there is a strong difference between text and image (thus challenging the tendency of many comic scholars to equivocate the two); and that comics' communication of meaning differs from the linguistics of verbal language (hence the title of her book, which differentiates comics from language and points to another tendency of comic scholars to call comics a 'language'). Other scholars that examine the specificity of the comic form include Pascal Lefèvre, Thierry Groensteen, and seminal comics scholar Scott McCloud.
As Greg M. Smith writes in reference to Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics*: “By trying to make comics so systematic, [such scholarship] misses something vital in their expression,” (141). This desire to definitively define comics generally detracts from a discussion of the narrative structure of the comic as it relates to its formal elements, instead becoming trapped in theoretical conjectures about the comic form and thus at a remove from the immersive experience of reading a comic.

Thus, instead of trying to create a theory of reading comics, which other critics have done and will surely continue to do, I decided to just read the selected comics. Though I admit the desire to define comics was initially attractive – involving the prospect of deeply investigating the characteristic elements of this idiosyncratic, hybrid medium so broad in scope and style – I realized it was more fulfilling to approach *Epileptic* and *Asterios Polyp* as I would with any other text: with a close attention to the formal elements and how they engage with the narrative, characters, and thematic content of the work. Yes, this type of analysis is standard to how one also approaches the study of literature, but I am additionally concerned with aspects such as how the characters are depicted on the page, how images are fragmented and arranged, the use of color or strictly black ink, as well as the mechanics of reading involved in the reader's interaction with the physical book. So, I don't have to defend why I think comics are worthy of studying, nor do I need to read them alongside any other medium. Though it's important to have a multi-layered engagement with a comic and pay attention to the various elements at play, it is possible to simply do this in practice – to be present and engaged with what's in front of you on the page. My theory is in my reading, and this is what I present to you.
Figure 1

The above image is jarring and perplexing, depicting as it does a face agog, run over with multiple perplexing references. Here, the narrator of *Epileptic* (David B., the author of this
autobiographical comic) speaks to the reader outside any particular moment in time as various illustrations of himself roam on the surface of his brother (Jean-Christophe's) face – exaggerated in its size, number of scars and, well, ability to be walked upon. The panel demands that the reader step outside of normal physical reality (represented in this case by a human face). Instead, we are invited to reorient ourselves in a more fantastical, surreal space composed of all the separate little 'David's standing and walking on his brother's head and shoulder; a young Jean-Christophe impossibly standing on his own face alongside his brother, both garbed in Mongolian-inspired battle gear and wielding swords; a dark, white-spotted serpentine creature facing the boys and placed on the face as if to form Jean-Christophe's eyebrows; a battlefield of skulls and fallen arrows set in his hair; the perfectly circular shape of the head; and the enlarged details of the face itself. The singularity of this image collapses all these different elements into a simultaneous space, where the way David's separate avatars all speak at separate locations but at once in the 'moment' of this panel especially muddles the conventional separation of space and time. Because this is displaced from a linear sense of time and naturalistic sense of space, there is no one straightforward way to interpret the events on this page; instead, they take on a decidedly symbolic mode of meaning. Jean-Christophe's face then becomes an imaginative landscape in itself that the many David’s tread upon.

Though this image appears twenty pages toward the end of the comic (which consists of 362 pages in total), it aptly demonstrates how David retreads his memories of his epileptic brother throughout the course of the book by emphasizing the subjective, emotional elements of his interpretation of the past through the densely illustrated, surreal, and highly symbolic nature of his representations – where past, present, myth, and imagination all collide on the space of the page. Jean-Christophe's perfectly-rounded head calls to mind the cyclical nature of the family's life once he develops epilepsy unexpectedly as a child. Throughout the comic, David reflects on his and the family's desire to fight the illness, which unfolds into a repeated routine of placing hope in a new healing method (as they get increasingly desperate, the practices they seek out get increasingly
more non-traditional, even fantastical – including seances and alchemy) as they urgently attempt to ascribe a stable 'narrative' or meaning onto Jean-Christophe's epilepsy in hopes of understanding and ultimately curing his condition. Again and again, each narrative is insufficient to capture and address the misery of his brother's condition.

The distress of this context permeates David's own interests in narrative and storytelling by influencing how he increasingly looks toward other traditions, mythical frameworks, and symbols. Two symbols especially central to David's narrativization of his past appear on the surface of Jean-Christophe's face: his childhood preoccupation with a mythologized, glorified idea of war (shared with his brother), most prominently that of Genghis Khan, as well as the image of the serpentine creature (alluding broadly to the iconography of snakes and dragons without fixing itself to a specific tradition) that reappears throughout different points in the book. Through his immersion into fantastical narrative worlds and imagery, David uses his imaginative mode of storytelling to reframe his memories of Jean-Christophe and to try to process his own conflicted emotional response to the disintegration of his older brother's condition through his art – oscillating between feelings of affection, alienation, hope, doubt, responsibility, and guilt toward Jean-Christophe.

The combination of text and image (and the formal properties of the page as a whole, such as the quality of line, lights and shadows and arrangement of panels on a page) work together to bring the reader into the strange, surreal, and at times claustrophobic space of David's subjective experience of his memories. Incorporating Jacques Derrida's concept of 'play' as the multiplicity of meanings inherent in a sign (a word or image) that he discusses in his reading of Plato's Phaedrus, this analysis will explore how images in a comic – especially Epileptic's highly symbolic and open-ended imagery – overturn the comfortable idea that there is static and unambiguous meaning in a

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5 Louis Sass describes how, working off of the Greek term pharmakon – which paradoxically means both “remedy' and “poison” – and drawing out the different associations of this word through phonetically similar terms, such as pharmakeus (meaning “magician” or poisoner”) and pharmakos (“scapegoat”), Derrida argues for the multiplicity of meaning inherent in one word, regardless of the author's intentions, (Madness and Modernism, 200). Derrida explains that “certain forces of association unite … the words actually present' in a discourse with all the other words in the lexical system, whether or not they appear as 'words' … They communicate with the totality of the lexicon through their syntactic play and at least through the subunits that compose what we call a word,” (Dissemination, 95-96).
sign. This idea has significant implications when applied to Jean-Christophe's epilepsy, which seems to defy any concrete comprehension, by putting his illness in relationship to a visual motif that prominently reappears throughout the comic: snakes and serpentine creatures. Although it in one sense materializes Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy into a concrete metaphor, through its many and differing appearances the snake itself slinks and slithers away from concretely representing something specific: it is and is not epilepsy. Though associated to Jean-Christophe's illness, there isn't a one-to-one correspondence between the representation of a snake and the experience of epilepsy; thus the snake extends beyond just this one association as the comic progresses, interconnected with the events of their shared childhood, the pasts of their relatives, and David's artistic progression. Its connotations change depending on what context it is and how it is represented through the comic form. Through the reader's engagement, the snake accumulates a multiplicity of meaning, just as Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy does, and connects different points in time together in David's memory. By following the repetition of this symbol throughout the book we progressively become intimate to David's rich web of subjective associations he has of his memories.

This chapter will thus examine Epileptic by and large through the recurrence of the serpentine symbol in the comic and how its connotations multiply within each new context, where the indeterminate meaning of the snake symbol draws out the comic medium's ability to make memory tangible while embracing the dynamic, unfixed quality of memory. Various formal elements of the comic will be analyzed in terms in how they relate to and inform the multiple instances of the snake symbol, such as how figures are placed in the space of a panel or page, David's textual narration and the way it compliments or contrasts the presence of the snake, as well as the distribution of lights and darks in relation to its form. After analyzing the way Jean-Christophe's epilepsy is treated in the comic and how the symbol of the snake emerges out of this circumstance, I will then observe how David responds to his brother's epilepsy by receding away from him and deepening his involvement in art, the fantastical, storytelling, the world of the
imagination that spans history and memory. Lastly, I will investigate how the illness impacts the family as a whole as it struggles to navigate feelings of love, uncertainty, frustration, and desperation. Altogether, following the snake symbol as it appears in these varying contexts shows how Jean-Christophe's epilepsy cannot be limited to one narrative: the ambiguity of this image instead frees his epilepsy from any one explanation or meaning and emphasizes how David's relationship to his memories is similarly indeterminate and consisting of ever-fluctuating associations.

*Jean-Christophe's early epilepsy, his treatment, and the rise of the snake's multivalence*

It's 1969. David is ten years old, and Jean-Christophe thirteen, when the black bodied and white-dotted serpentine symbol first appears in the comic. At this point, after having had his first seizure in 1964 near the family's home in Orléans, Jean-Christophe has been brought by his parents to a couple of health professionals to be treated for his condition – all of which are implied to be largely (if not entirely) ineffectual. He saw a neuropsychiatrist in Paris (who simply says: “Ma'am, your son is a bad boy,” (11)) and, after the anti-psychiatry movement begins in France – “propounded by people, like Giles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Roger Gentis” (36) – attended a psychopedagogical institute in Orléans. After a certain period, Jean-Christophe's seizures intensify in severity and occur three times a day, and the parents are then referred to a certain Professor T., a neurosurgeon at Sainte-Anne hospital in Paris who specializes in “disease of the brain,” (40). The family learns, however, that Professor T. is harsh, unsympathetic to his patients, and trigger-happy with his surgeon's scalpel – eager to perform risky surgeries to enhance the glory of his career. Happening upon an article about what is called “zen macrobiotics” in an issue of the magazine “Planete,” which outlines what the practice categorizes as illnesses (including idiosyncratic, decidedly non-scientific categories of illness such as “Undisciplined, cowardly, selfish life,” and “Excess of Yin or Yang,” (44)) and what the macrobiotic cure for them entails, Jean-Christophe
convinces his already disconcerted parents to try out this treatment before undergoing Professor T.'s operation.

It is here, then (specifically, on page 52), where readers begin to associate the symbol of the snake with Jean-Christophe's epilepsy. After David’s family removes Jean-Christophe from the controlling and unsympathetic environment of the hospital – moving away from the cold, impersonal hand of scientific objectivity and instead identifying with an approach that seems sensitive to the spiritual, emotional dimensions of an individual alongside the bodily – they all begin to immerse themselves into the philosophy and lifestyle of George Oshawa’s macrobiotics: an alternative medicine practice originating in Japan which largely revolves around maintaining a spiritual balance through a specialized, 'down-to-earth' diet. Not wanting to subject their son to a high-risk surgery performed by a self-absorbed physician interested solely in enhancing his career, the parents seek the aid of a certain Master N: a Japanese man who heals using macrobiotic principles. Though even a young David (or then Pierre-François, before he changes his name later in life), is skeptical of this practice – in one panel, for instance, David narrates sarcastically in reference to his family beginning a macrobiotic diet: “I don't realize it, but I'm on the road to supreme judgment,” (50) – he illustrates its positive effects on Jean-Christophe in an endearing manner: through two snakes, one bright, sustaining, and comforting, the other dark, threatening, but tamed by a friendly feline man.
Jean-Christophe is highly motivated. He conscientiously follows the diet dictated by Master N.

It’s a fairly flexible diet he eats: rice, vegetables, cheese.

Master N. does not agree with Mr. Oshawa’s doctrine, which he finds too inflexible.

They continue to see each other in Paris. My brother adores him. He’s found a leader, a guru, a master.

Someone to whom he can pass along his misery and who knows what to do with it.

I can only help cure you if you have the will.

After several months, he is no longer on any medication; he no longer has any seizures. He’s cured.

Figure 2
Still, by being associated to alternative medicine, the presence of the serpentine creature represents how David's family seeks to impose a definitive narrative onto Jean-Christophe's epilepsy in attempt to understand and control it – even if the narrative of macrobiotics is more whimsical and pleasant than that of particularly unsympathetic practices of Western medicine. At the same time, as we learn throughout the narrative, Jean-Christophe's condition becomes something multifaceted and beyond the grasp of Western medicine, alternative remedies, or occult explanations, just as the snake will become an image that cannot be pinned down.

At this point, Jean-Christophe has already been under the care of Master N and David has spent a few pages describing these principles to the reader (albeit through a skeptical and humorous tone). Here, he is depicted following Master N's regimen and, in the final panel, appears seemingly cured. He stands upright on top of the serpentine demon gripping a downward-facing sword, as if having slain a dragon, above him the caption reading: “... he is no longer on any medication, he no longer has any seizures.” Jean-Christophe's progresses into a healthier state by undergoing Master N’s treatment, following his dietary regimen and looking up to this guru as a mentor until, after several months, overcoming his epilepsy (which as we later learn is only a temporary phenomenon). This is communicated not merely through realistic means, where we see characters acting reasonably in space in a way that resembles our own experience of the physical world (like sitting at a table, or lying down to receive acupuncture), but is aided by the symbolic representations of the two serpentine creatures and tiger-esque man; the juxtaposition of these two modes (the real and symbolic) in the same space imbues the scenes on this page with an overall surreal quality. This surreal mode signifies to the reader that this page (and the comic as a whole) is not a straightforward, ‘documentarian’ attempt at depicting events as they happened; rather, the serpentine imagery reveals to the reader that we are in the realm of the interpretative.

On one level, the snake symbolically illustrates how Jean-Christophe’s condition progressively improves and ties all the panels on the page together through their shared imagery. As

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6 Indeed, this image is reminiscent of depictions of Saint George slaying a dragon, an iconic motif that has been treated in many paintings and sculptures in Western culture.
mentioned, there are two similar but distinct serpentine creatures depicted on this page: one which takes up the first three panels and is overall lighter in appearance, and the other that is depicted in the latter two panels of the page and is overall darker in appearance. The first serpent visually connects the first three panels by way of magically emerging out of Jean-Christophe’s plate in the first panel, feeding the boy through a spoon in the second, and its upper body curving inwards toward its own head to create a space in which Jean-Christophe can recline and read in the third panel. When taken together, these three separate panels create one cohesive image of the snake through their sequential alignment. Within the captions of these first three panels, David describes the diet Master N prescribes to Jean-Christophe as well as the guru’s thoughts about Oshawa’s doctrine (its “too inflexible”). In this way, we can think of the light snake as visually representing aspects of David's textual narration, and thus acts within the panels as the emanation of Master N’s continued guidance and advice. The fluid interconnection of these panels further highlights the flexibility of Master N's method within the clear regimen of macrobiotics (a practice that unfortunately, as we later learn, can be applied as dogmatically as science). David subjectively portrays Master N as a cat, creatures known for their flexible bodies. Building off these associations of flexibility, Master N can move and adjust his method according to Jean-Christophe's needs – as indicated by the bendy snake moving freely across the straight, defined boundaries of these top panels.

The fourth panel marks a shift by directly representing Master N himself, albeit in his symbolic feline form which David has previously characterized the guru as having (“he reminds me of a big cat” (45)) and it shows him caring for Jean-Christophe by administering acupuncture. When considering the layout of the page as a whole, Master N is visually situated between the two distinct serpentine representations; a symbol himself, he metaphorically mediates these two forms of the snake. In other words, Master N goes beyond merely providing Jean-Christophe with dietary advice, where the smiling serpentine creature might symbolically suggest the nurturing side of

7 What's more, this flexibility is optimal for hunting prey – just as Master N metaphorically 'hunts' down Jean-Christophe's epilepsy through an approach flexible to the child's needs.
Master N’s care and the healing effects this has on the child, but he also helps Jean-Christophe confront his condition: he is “someone to whom he can pass along his misery and who knows what to do with it,” (52). The brother’s “misery” as described in the caption of the fifth panel is implied to refer to the serpentine representation that impossibly (hence symbolically) floats in the center of the panel between Jean-Christophe and Master N. Here, it is depicted as bounded together through acupuncture needles, as if to suggest that the acupuncture performed on Jean-Christophe’s body in the previous panel was simultaneously a symbolic act: the taming of this ‘miserable’ beast inside him. Notice how here, the panel does not explicitly mention epilepsy. Instead, “misery” stands in as a way to encompass what epilepsy consists of (the physical phenomena) but also to go beyond these identifiable aspects of epilepsy: in other words, “misery” is epilepsy and much more.

Similar to the presence of the word “misery,” the snake symbol’s presence here takes on a more open-ended meaning. Yes, it is associated to misery, but misery as a concept is complex and unstable (there’s no one single experience of misery). The connotations of Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy thus become broadened when likened to misery, and they become even more broad when represented by the snake symbol. True, the concrete symbol of the snake might be easier to grasp than the abstract concept of misery, or Jean-Christophe's particularly unstable form of epilepsy; we can readily feel like we know what we are looking at. But by associating epilepsy to a snake, David pushes his readers to dig into the implications of this association and beg us to question: what does a snake have to do with epilepsy? With memory? How do we even understand what a snake means in the context of this comic?

*Snake as pharmakon: the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the serpentine symbol*

What further complicates our reading of the snake symbol in this instance, and simultaneously nuances our notion of the “misery” alluded to here, is that serpentine imagery has already appeared previously in the comic before being directly associated to Jean-Christophe's epilepsy. These analogous appearances open up the symbol of the snake into a multiplicity of
meanings that inflect upon one another as we encounter each new iteration of the serpent. Looking back to Derrida's discussion of *Phaedreus*, in which Socrates defines writing using the Greek word *pharmakon* (a term that Derrida describes as “caught in a chain of significations” for its diverse functions and associations (95)), we can think of the snake as also building up a fluid, ever-fluctuating chain of connotations in the course of the comic. Derrida discusses the issues of translating a word like *pharmakon*, which “cites” or refers to different senses of the same word even in its one appearance; for example, even if it seems in one instance to mean “remedy, [it] cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which in the same word signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, poison (for example, since that is not the only other thing *pharmakon* means),” (98). In this view, the multivalence of the “sign” or word can't help but be hinted at or “cited” within the sign itself because of its pre-existing connotations in different contexts: the sign, then, contains a “play” of meanings continually in conversation with one another. Similarly, each instance of the serpent symbol can't help but “cite” the associations inherent in earlier renditions and can be read into in any given instance, despite their occurring at separate moments – altogether impregnating the symbol of the snake with a rich network of potential meanings.

Thus, by illustrating his past memories through dark, surreal, open-ended images such as the snake, David frees Jean-Christophe's epilepsy from the limitations of a single meaning and attempts to extend the connotations of his brother's condition by complicating the notion of misery as well as looking beyond it. Like the *pharmakon*, the snake symbol is unstable in itself, even in the scene described previously – both signifying the 'remedying' care of Master N and the 'poisoning,' miserable effects of epilepsy through the two white and black renditions of the serpents. This doubling of opposites begins to hint at the multivalence of the snake, which ultimately extends

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8 In his description of Derrida's idea of the “play” of language that he develops out of his analysis of the *pharmakon*, Louis Sass remarks on Derrida's approach as exemplifying Roland Barthe's description of modern literature “as dominated not by the intention of the speaker but by a monolithic Word (for example, *pharmakon*), a Word that 'shines with an infinite freedom and prepares to radiate toward innumerable uncertain and possible connections … plung[ing] into a totality of meanings, reflexes and recollections' (*Writing Degree Zero*, pp.47),” (*Madness and Modernism*, 200). In my analysis of *Epileptic*, which no doubt inhabits a modern mode of storytelling, the symbol of the snake similarly 'radiates' toward innumerable meanings and frees Jean-Christophe's epilepsy from one limiting, unrepresentative narrative of his illness.
beyond just these two associations into a greater 'play' of associations. The serpentine symbol, then, provides David with means to communicate his subjective interpretation of the past and attempt to process his own conflicted feelings through such indeterminate symbolism. Unable to find the words to convey what epilepsy means to him, David uses this open-ended imagery to represent it and the various associations it holds to him. In re-framing the events of his past in this way through imagery with unfixed meaning, this emphasizes the necessity of reinterpreting one's own memories.

Tracing the origins of the snake motif, arising out of the shadows of David's imagination

All in all, the ambiguous, surreal snake is a useful image for an autobiographical piece that draws the reader into David's attempts to grapple with his family history and his past memories of his childhood with his brother – all of which resist easy narrativization. Tracing the visual development of the serpentine symbol within the narrative provides a more nuanced sense of how this symbol, like the pharmakon, accumulates a multiplicity of meanings – and how it particularly does so in conjunction with the formal elements of the comic as they represent different memories recollected by David. In the pages leading up to page 52, various visual ‘proto-types’ of this creature appear throughout the comic. We begin to see semblances of it lurking in the shadows as silhouettes on page 20.

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9 As he writes later in the comic during his reflections on his time in Paris as an art school student, “[An epileptic seizure] is impossible to describe, it must be seen. I get tangled up in the words […] Someday I'll draw it,” (313).
Figure 3
Here, David reflects on how he as a child indulged in drawing battle scenes, particularly of the Mongolians and Genghis Khan, and uses this mythologizing of war to reframe his emotional state at the time. In doing so, he becomes no longer just one person: through his illustrations, he metaphorizes himself as “a group, an army” and has enough rage in him for one hundred thousand warriors. In addition, David relates his own rage – as he expresses it through these drawings of battle scenes, which is in a sense an act of storytelling – to his brother's seizures. “What horse is carrying him away?” he wonders in the same panel at the top of the page, in which Jean-Christophe is depicted as if frozen within a seizure with wide eyes and mouth ajar, while a horse (continuing the Mongolian imagery) rides off with him. In the next four panels, David discusses the first novel he wrote and drew as a child, which details more Mongolian battle exploits. “Once the book is finished,” he adds, “I keep covering entire pages with epic battles. It’s my own form of epilepsy.” In this early instance, David sets up his inclination toward storytelling and narrativization as a way of processing his emotions – specifically, his conflicted feelings toward his brother's epilepsy – and by connecting the act of drawing with epilepsy, this suggests that he identifies the externalization of his own emotions with Jean-Christophe's epilepsy; in a sense, this preludes the more concrete icon of the snake later to come.

By viewing his brother’s epilepsy as rooted in the shared impulse or ‘possession’ by intense emotion (rage, in this case), David reveals his desire to identify with Jean-Christophe through the act of storytelling via illustration; it is here that we serpentine imagery begin to exist in the shadows of David's mind. As he narrates in the bottom right panel of the page, by drawing battle scenes, David expends the rage that “boils” within him. In the same panel, he suggests that “Jean-Christophe suffers from the same rage, but we express it differently.” Here, David and his brother stand side-by-side and face the reader head-on with angered expressions; behind them are the silhouetted figures of sharp-toothed serpentine creatures that each emerge from a larger shadow. Aside from visually prefiguring the serpentine creature that we see later on page 52, these shadowy figures also foreshadow David’s own artistic development: how, throughout the comic, he shifts
away from illustrating war scenes and incorporates more imagery of the fantastical, monstrous and occult. In any case, by conjoining these slithering creatures into one amorphous shadow, this visually links what David believes he and his brother share: an erratic, ‘epileptic’ rage. Again, this imagery signifies that David is beginning to link his compulsion to draw and characterize his own feelings with a desire to connect with Jean-Christophe and understand his own emotional reaction to his brother's condition.

Importantly, this instance appears not too long after Jean-Christophe’s fist seizure (10) and it more immediately follows a realization that young David (age five) has after dreaming of Anubis at his grandparents (17).
Figure 4

I'm not afraid, I'm no longer afraid, ever since a dream I had.

I was sleeping at my grandparents'. I was dreaming of Anubis, god of the dead.

He was walking toward me. I was terrified.

I woke up.

Anubis was still there, and he was closing in on me.

Suddenly everything froze. There was only the silhouette of the closet, which looked vaguely like a coyote.

Since then, I may fear people, life, the future.

But I no longer fear ghosts, witches, vampires, devils.
From this progression of panels, we can see David come to embrace the power of myth visual metaphor. Though he initially fears Anubis (the Egyptian god of the dead) when encountering him in the world of dream (third panel), David wakes up and finds that his experience of this mythical god changes when he acknowledges Anubis's status as merely a shadow of the living world (panels 4-6). The shift in Anubis's appearance from white to black helps connote this: though Anubis still has a powerful presence over David (“Anubis was still there, and he was closing in on me”) and in darkness looms over the young boy cornered at the bottom of the fifth panel, “suddenly everything froze.” At this moment, in the sixth panel, David acknowledges Anubis for what he really is: only a figment of his imagination inspired by an aspect of the living world – “the silhouette of the closet, which looked vaguely like a coyote.” He reflects on himself that “since then, I may fear people, life, the future,” under this text depicting his younger self in his pajamas and walking alongside a mass of clone-like adult figures (with black, almost silhouetted bodies) who resemble the warehouse manager that he and his brother angered toward the beginning of the story (6-9). In the next panel, he continues his thought: “But I no longer fear ghosts, witches, vampires, and devils.” Here, his younger self smiles softly as he is surrounded by a circle of mythical beasts and beings by-and-large cloaked in shadows (or who seem to be emerging from the shadows). Though fearing the inevitable circumstances of lived reality, he now embraces fantastical stories that imaginatively explain or comment on the real world – that is, he embraces the shadowy world of myth for its ability to imbue the world with an added layer of meaning.

Given how richly inked David's illustrations are in general, with some dark shadowy figure or another lurking in the depths of many panels within the comic, we can also view this as a formative moment that influences David stylistically as an artist and storyteller. He begins to understand how shadows, silhouettes, and dark figures become pregnant with potential symbolic meaning and indicate that there’s a whole world of the imagination lurking beyond the shadows of the external world (the closet casts a silhouette which in itself takes on its own metaphorical life, an 'almost' coyote existence). This metaphorical connection casts off David's fear of the uncertainties
of the lived world and, later on, empowers him as an active metaphor-maker (i.e. storyteller). Darkness, dark figures, and fantastical creatures – as seen in the silhouette of Anubis and among the ring of mythical creatures in the last panel on the page – thus begin to connote David’s desire to impart meaning onto his subjective experiences through visual metaphor and myth. This indeed becomes significant to the development of the serpentine symbol, both dark and fantastical in its appearance.

But there’s yet another layer to these visuals: they seem to relate to his brother’s epilepsy in an understated way. If we go back further to page 11, shortly after Jean-Christophe’s first epileptic seizure, we witness “the endless round of doctors” depicted as standing in a circle surrounding David’s brother and parents, smiling, holding hands and moving their legs as if they’re dancing the horah.¹⁰

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¹⁰ The horah is a typical Jewish wedding dance, where participants gather in a circle, hold hands and dance in unison. Although the likeness to this dance is probably unintentional in David’s depiction, it nevertheless seems to fit in with his style and interests – given his taste for the absurd and, well, the ‘Jewish’. You could even go so far as to say the doctors are in a celebration of Jean-Christophe’s illness, as it provides them with interesting material to play around with (though largely not to the child’s benefit). And, if we want to stretch the marriage metaphor, we can look at this as preempting the reality of Jean-Christophe and his family being ‘wedded’ to his disease from here on out, despite all attempts to cure him.
Aside from the playful absurdity of this depiction, what’s interesting about this panel in comparison to the final panel on page 17 (young David surrounded by fantastical creatures and monsters) is that there is an inversion in the way lights and darks are distributed within the panels. Whereas David (mostly white) is depicted reclining in a white space that becomes encroached upon by the dark figures of the creatures (a black circular border that nearly touches him), the ring of dancing doctors is white and surrounds David's three family members (also white) at a safe, clinical distance (close but not nearly touching). The space itself is all black, save for the over-sized books that line the corners of the panel, and our orientation in this space is a bit uncertain. They could all
just as well be floating in a black, endless abyss, and perhaps this is metaphorical of David's family beginning to fall into an endless 'pit' as they desperately search for answers to Jean-Christophe's illness – where countless offices of experts amalgamate into a shared symbolic space of 'bookness' and blackness.

Thus, the panel of David on page 17 functions as a visual inversion of this 'dancing doctors' scene, which suggests that David's burgeoning penchant for the shadowy world of myth, metaphor, and imagination is in some ways a response to Jean-Christophe's illness and the strain this puts on the family to find a cure (i.e. narrative) for his indeterminate condition. Between the two selected panels, the lights and darks are switched to an extent; the panel on page 11 is large while the one on page 17 is small; the former begins the page while the latter ends it; the doctors are each distinct figures while the shadowy monsters on page 17 blend into one another and the environment; and again, David is physically closer to the 'monster ring' (pleased with his soft smile) while the chain of doctors stands at a distance from his family members in the center. Perhaps this visual inversion metaphorically expresses David's response as a child – reacting in the 'negative', as it were, to these circumstances his family is facing. If he fears “people, life, the future” (17), all of which are implied in the panel on page 11, then it is as if he is 'inverting' or recoiling from this reality by engaging with the fantastical. In others words, through this visual relationship, we can see David's fixation of darkness and otherwise spooky creatures as directly related to his brother's condition in some capacity. Hence the use of shadowy figures and silhouettes on pages 17 and 20, which are both intimate to David (nearly touching) and speak to the shared rage of the brothers.

Again, all of this indicates that David finds shadowy, fantastical creatures useful as visual metaphors from which to create meaning out of and reinterpret lived experience and memory; he clings toward storytelling ('meaning-making') as a response to the distress caused by Jean-Christophe's epilepsy – thus to some extent recoiling from the reality of his condition while at the same time attempting to identify with his older brother. But our understanding is still incomplete:
from where does the brother's personal serpentine demon come, the specific one that trails him up until the end of the book? And what can be said about the style of its depiction?

Page 39 reveals more about David's relationship to the world of the 'unreal' – the strange and fantastical – as well as complicates readers' association to the snake symbol. This page follows an episode where David intentionally provokes a seizure in his brother and, in frightful regret of his power over Jean-Christophe, vows to never provoke him again. Right after this moment is depicted, David suddenly shifts to tell us about “Planète”: a magazine that his father had begun reading in 1968.
My father has been reading Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier’s magazine ‘Planète’ since the first issue. I like looking at the pictures.

It's full of photographs, drawings, and really great paintings.

All these images that illustrate articles, of which I only read the titles and which I don’t always understand, seethe with an intense poetry.

Who killed Adam? Equinoxes, the future, a modern-day Cantor, a genius from beyond, Extra-planetary intelligence.

I, who had lived only for war and battles, discover a new world. A fantastic world that opens onto the future, into history, into religions.

First use of a核武器 in the future. Necrophage, a madman, a ghost, a genius from beyond. I still don’t have the keys to unlock it, so I adapt it to my current world. I begin drawing fantastic battles in which Genghis Khan’s Mongols are replaced by regiments of ghosts, robots, and devils.
“I like looking at the pictures,” David remarks in the first panel in a caption, and in the following panel he illustrates himself as a boy reading the magazine as his environment is overtaken by enigmatic, almost cultic imagery that fills the landscape of his mind as it does the space of the panel. Reading these symbols as intentionally ambiguous or non-specific (some seem vaguely Eastern, while others appear somewhat African-inspired), the presence this imagery that spans across different cultures and mythological frameworks highlights young David's curiosity as a child as he immerses himself into this world of the occult and supernatural: everything appears unknown and wondrous to him. We see a greater sense of this attitude in the third panel, where he narrates in a caption that “all these images that illustrate articles, of which I only read the titles and which I don't always understand, seethe with an intense poetry.”

Interestingly, in this panel we also see a serpentine figure that begins to more closely resemble the one on page 52. Here, a snake spirals within the space of the entire frame, although you can only discern with certainty that it is serpentine (and not just a spiraling striped pattern) by the small reptilian head that pokes of the top right-hand corner of the panel. On a visual level, the snake is another circular shape that young David is surrounded by – and in this case, he becomes part of the circular motion. Depicted in the center of the panel holding presumably an issue of “Planète,” he lies on top of the serpent, which erases the distance implied in the ring of a creatures circling around him that we saw on page 17. The posture of his body also follows the motion of the snake: although his arms and legs sprawl a little haphazardly, the shape of David's body bends accordingly to the inner spiral of the snake. So, metaphorically speaking, he's spiraling down the hole of occult curiosities (at least in wonderment of the visual “poetry” that he feels within its imagery), and therefore immerses himself more deeply into this new mode of seeing the world. In other words, this whole constellation of mysterious symbols and mythologies is beginning to 'shape' him (again, think about his body almost taking on a 'spiral' shape), beginning with the article titles and illustrations he sees in “Planète.”
We see this symbolic ‘shaping’ (and identification) with the dark and fantastical made more explicit in the fourth panel, where David becomes nearly conjoined to this snake image. Here, he views the reader head-on from the neck up, his face centered in the panel and taking up a good portion of space, as the snake creature coils itself around David’s head like an impossible headdress (impossible given that its rendered very flatly and appears more-so to be floating around David’s head rather than realistically adorning it). What’s more telling is how the serpent’s body molds itself to David’s facial features. Turned downwards, the snake places its head in the center of David’s face and by doing so, forms the bridge and nostrils of David's nose: the serpent's protruding snout and chin form the lower end of the child's nose, and its elongated jaws make up the bridge of the nose. The snake's neck and upper body arcs over David's right eye like an eyebrow, and the end of the tail similarly curves over as if in the form of an eyebrow.

This imagery shapes how we readers perceive David at this stage in his childhood and how David begins to view the world. Unlike in the prior panel, David is no longer falling into the serpent (and the mysterious, mythical universe that it represents); instead, it becomes a part of him by joining his physical features – and hence implied to be more embedded in David's being as a growing child. It is hardly a coincidence that the serpent surrounds his eyes: seeing the imagery in “Planète” alters his perception, influences his artistic sensibility and opens up his imagination. The serpentine creature fantastically extends outwards from David’s face like a pair of magical glasses, allowing him to see and discover a new world. “A fantastic world,” he writes in a caption above, “that opens into the future, into history, into religions.”

The use of the snake symbol in this instance creates a visual relationship to the later serpent image (the black, white-spotted creature) and thus extends the multiplicity of meaning that the snake progressively builds throughout the book through the reader's engagement with this symbol in the comic. Still, it still is unclear as to what the image of the snake saying about the relationship between David's burgeoning broader interests and his brother's epilepsy. In order to make sense of this image, we need to put the events of page 39 in context to the previous page: when David
knowingly provokes a seizure in his brother. It’s important to look at the structure of events in any given text in order to understand how isolated events add to the overall narrative meaning, but the printed quality of *Epileptic* forces us to view page 38 and 39 side-by-side: the binding of the book has them both face-up together. The proximity of these two pages suggests that the latter page is a response to the former in some capacity.

Though the comic lacks an explicit narrative transition to link this episode of David invoking an epileptic fit in Jean-Christophe with his reflections on “Planete” and his deepening immersion into the realm of myth, history, and the imagination, the presence of the snake on page 39 marks a relationship between the two pages in the way that it signifies his changing perception — both of the world at large, the potential of the imagination, and of how he relates to Jean-Christophe. On page 38, David realizes that he has a “terrifying power” over his brother, and upon acknowledging this and vowing to “never play that game again” of provoking his brother into seizures, he feels as if he's “grown up.” His interest in “Planete” discussed on the following page thus suggests a greater maturity that he develops in response to his brother, with the symbol of the snake at the heart of the matter. As David sees his own brother being disempowered, he begins to recognize his separateness from Jean-Christophe and starts to view him and his epilepsy through the lens of the imagination. In this way, David reframes his perception of his older brother through the act of storytelling, where perhaps his increasing realization of Jean-Christophe's vulnerability to his illness compels him to try to find a way to express his own complicated feelings toward his older brother with whom he still wants to identify. David's “terrifying power” thus becomes transformed into a creative agency that can free Jean-Christophe from the limiting narrative of his condition as an epileptic through the indeterminate quality of the symbolic representation of his illness — enhanced by David's expanding lexicon of similarly unfixed, fantastical imagery and mythologies that become infused into the dark, surreal, image of the snake.
An unwanted house visitor: how the snake penetrates Jean-Christophe and the lives of his family

Beyond representing David's desire to process his perceptions of Jean-Christophe through art and storytelling, the snake and its varying iterations become more intimately tied to the elder brother's physical and emotional experience of his epilepsy; and David uses the serpent image to indicate that the family, too, has to negotiate with Jean-Christophe's growing discontent and fluctuating symptoms as it constrains their lives. Page 113 marks an especially dramatic shift in Jean-Christophe's general affect and attitude, in which the presence of the serpent symbol continues to open up his illness to a pharmakon-like multiplicity of associations. The year 1970 nears its end and, as David writes in a caption at the top of the page, “This is the year my brother revolts. He’s fourteen years old. I’m twelve, Florence, eleven.” Like most budding teenagers, Jean-Christophe becomes self-conscious of what makes him different from others, where his recognition of his epilepsy inspires frustration of his own limitations and toward his brother and sister who do not have to hold to the same restrictions. Here, he begins to question why only he is sick and why only he can’t eat yogurt. No one can answer the former question for obvious reasons, but the latter point is simply part of the dietary regimen Master N prescribed for him – of which, at this point, Jean-Christophe no longer “give[s] a shit.”
1970 draws to a close. This is the year my brother revolts. He’s fourteen years old. I’m twelve, Florence, eleven.

How come, I’m sick on them aren’t?

HUH? HOW COME?

How come, I can’t eat yogurt?

Now, you know it’s not good for you. Master N. was very firm on that point.

I don’t give a shit!
Unlike the bottom two panels of this page – which, like most of David’s panels in this comic, are conventionally square-shaped with thin black borders – the top panel stands out for its wavy shape and layers of thin borders. What is also visually striking is that our familiar serpentine symbol becomes the border of this panel, just as Jean-Christophe’s epilepsy shapes his family’s life and relationship to him, now entrapping them all under the overwhelming force of his own frustrations. With its body facing inwards through the wavy shape of the panel, the snake’s patterning takes on a new connotation outside of simply ‘communicating’ white dots and triangles to the reader. Specifically, in having the majority of the white triangles in this panels face inwards – and thus toward the characters within the interior of the panel – this heightens the sense of tension and hostility in this scene. The snake is closing in on the family, and the triangles point our attention to the chaos within this scene and create the impression of teeth surrounding these characters – they are already within the mouth of the monster, so to speak.

This larger top panel prominently displays the snake and its convoluted, surreal presence in the lives of David, his sister, and parents by being physically framed by this symbolic creature, and the size of the panel provides more space in which to have it slither – both in and outside of Jean-Christophe's body, and below and above the rest of the other family members. Though the latter two panels bring the scene into a more realistic, domestic context of Jean-Christophe sitting at a dining room table at what appears to be a recently-completed meal, they nevertheless keep the snake looming behind David's brother in the black background. Comparing the top panel with the two bottom ones, we can begin to gauge how the snake has become an entity deeply internal to Jean-Christophe that simultaneously impacts those around him – looming outside of him as an imminent threat to both himself and others.

As the snake wraps around on all sides of the image and coils into itself, it also interacts with the characters inside of this scene. Here, Jean-Christophe is enlarged so as to appear looming impossibly high over his parents and siblings. While he interrogates his mother and father – asking “How come I’m sick an’ they aren’t?” in one speech bubble and “HUH? HOW COME?” in another
– and at the same time points to David (costumed in his Genghis Khan inspired suit of armor, which signifies David's desire to fight his brother's epilepsy), the snake is up to a whole lot in this panel and acts through its lanky body and many arms. Two arms hold Jean-Christophe’s head in place, as if to fix his gaze toward his parents, while another pair of arms grips his legs together – providing him with the foundation to stand and voice his anger while also holding him back; he’s stuck in its grip and couldn’t get out of this state even if he tried. Meanwhile, David and his sister Florence stand in front and behind of Jean-Christophe respectively, David held up by another one of the serpentine creature’s endless supply of arms while Florence stands on part of the serpent’s body that curves away from the border and toward the interior of the panel. Aside from maintaining a formal coherence to the panel (i.e. not squishing too many people together into a single corner), raising David and Florence on separate 'platforms' of the snake also speaks to how Jean-Christophe is singling them out through his words; he's sick but they aren't. Additionally, all three siblings are at roughly the same eye level, but there is an obvious disconnect by having Jean-Christophe juxtaposed to them in proportion and size; as siblings and as children they are all supposed to be on same plane, seeing eye-to-eye, but Jean-Christophe is becoming increasingly separate from his brother and sister through his illness.

The panel's positioning of the parents adds to the symbolic connotations of David's subjective interpretation of this scene in his memory. They are standing on the snake creature's head, perhaps indicating that as his parents, they are implicated to be at 'the head of' Jean-Christophe's problems to some extent: they are the ones that continued to reinforce the macrobiotic narrative of his illness. In comparison, the children are on safer higher-ground, albeit inescapably entrapped within the snake and its associations to Jean-Christophe's condition as it frames their family life. Separate from the children, the parents crouch in the bottom right corner of the panel as the serpent's body closes in on them from different directions; three of the serpentine creature's arms additionally enclose the space and heighten the impression of their claustrophobia. Just as Jean-Christophe towers over them, the snake too is an overwhelming and threatening presence.
Symbolically this suggests that as caretakers, the task to tend to him is becoming progressively more demanding and is threatening to overtake them – where the snake emerges out of Jean-Christophe toward his parents as if it were an extension of the force of his frustrations impacting the parents' connection to their child. It pierces out of him in such a way that the pain he experiences from the violence of his condition also threatens to inflict those who are close to him.

What is most symbolically potent in this top panel in its disturbing yet understated quality (and what I mentioned offhandedly in previous paragraphs) is how the snake’s body penetrates Jean-Christophe's. It's not a very gory detail, as it’s not piercing him in a literal way as say a sword might with resulting blood and gore. But we can still register that the snake pierces through him; despite the relative visual chaos of this panel in its manipulation of space and size as well as the abundance of patterns (white dots and triangles) framing the scene and moving through its interior, we can tell where Jean-Christophe's plain white shirt ends and the snake's black and patterned body begins. Nevertheless, despite how identifiable this gesture is, the snake’s penetration of his body does not have a clear and singular meaning. Just as the snake itself slinks and slithers away from concretely representing something specific (it is and is not epilepsy), so too is it difficult to describe what this penetration means because the different contexts in which the snake has appeared throughout the comic alter the reader’s interpretation of this symbol: it has accumulated a ‘play’ of meanings that influence our reading of this instance.

This representation holds its own ambiguity, then: the snake, in piercing through Jean-Christophe, seems to act as an extension of the brother’s anger and thus could be read as the two beginning to ‘fuse’ with one another; at the same time, we cannot help but view this representation as an act of violence. This connotation of the snake subduing Jean-Christophe is furthered in part by the little arms that, while holding him upright, still seem to be forcefully gripping him and controlling his posture and motions. But as readers, we feel this violence because it has been signaled to us through earlier representations: in the violence of epileptic seizures, and as a monstrous force that David has taken upon himself to fend off (indicated here by the Mongolian
garb and arms). By having the snake appear in multiple forms in separate instances in the comic – inside and outside David’s brother, sometimes small and other times large, and with a frequently shifting amount of arms – and, within these separate appearances, interacting with different characters in different contexts, the snake destabilizes a single and static association to epilepsy and instead opens up a dense network of meaning for the reader to interpret.

So at this moment, beyond acting as an extension of his frustrations of which the whole family is implicated, the iconic form of the serpentine symbol emerging out of Jean-Christophe has a range of connotative meanings by visually echoing (i.e. 'citationally' relating to) earlier depictions that have the snake similarly penetrating him. We see this specific type of depiction appear earlier on pages 77 and 78, which take place shortly after David’s grandfather has passed away; when the family returns home at night after having spent time at their grandparents' estate, the author’s brother collapses into a particularly “horrendous” seizure (77). This is Jean-Christophe’s second seizure (or at least the second that David depicts) after a six-month lull of being seemingly cured of his epilepsy; and the macrobiotics guru Master N, in whom David’s brother found comfort, is no longer there to support him and handle his “misery,” (52).
Figure 8

On this page, the panels take on an important role in communicating meaning to the reader through their size and how they move between domestic, ordinary reality and imaginative
‘surreality.’ Typically, the size of the panel helps conveys the amount of time passing: a larger one indicates more of a lingering in time, while a greater number of smaller panels cut quickly through time and space, creating rapid succession of events occurring more immediately after one another. Through six equally-sized panels spaced among three rows and two columns, page 77 emphasizes how rapidly the succession between returning to the home at Olivet and Jean-Christophe’s profoundly violent seizure occurs. Although there is a hint of normalcy in the first panel depicting the family (excluding the mother) driving home, David’s imaginative rendering of his grandfather as a tall, dark, bird-like ghost with an impressively large beak sits in the backseat between Jean-Christophe and Florence,11 facing straight-ahead as if he too were a passenger. Perhaps this is as if to say that the 'surreality' David attributes to his grandfather's death – the strange transformation that he witnesses occurring in his grandfather from being a living human to a corpse with a “gooney-looking bird” head (76) as emphasized in his imagery – can't be shaken off so easily, and thus it travels together with the family until they return home.

But even after the car ride, the surreal quality of having these fantastical creatures exist alongside human David and his family continues into the next panel with the presence of the serpent. Again, aside from this creature inexplicably poking out behind Jean-Christophe, the panel appears unassumingly ordinary: the text of the caption and the image very clearly convey David’s brother standing in front of their home. However, a shift occurs within the third panel. “And he instantly collapses into an epileptic seizure,” reads the caption, but what is depicted does not merely reflect the literal meaning of these words; this disconnect puts the real and ordinary into greater

11 One blogger (Theresa Williams's Comics Lab) suggests that this bird closely resembles an ibis. In his *Disseminations*, Derrida notes that in Egyptian mythology, Thoth – the god of writing – is associated to this bird (88). Extending off its mention in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Derrida at one point states that Thoth is “… never present. Nowhere does he appear in person,” which indeed befits the act of writing under Plato’s idea of how writing marks the absence of the author (93). Derrida also describes Thoth as “[a]lways taking a place not his own, a place one could call that of the dead or the dummy, he has neither a proper place nor a proper name. His propriety or property is impropriety or inappropriateness, the Boating indetermination that allows for substitution and play.” That David’s grandfather is associated to this figure that occupies a “dead,” indeterminate space and that symbolizes the play inherent in writing because of the very ‘death’ of a stable location is certainly an interesting connection that points to David’s own act of storytelling, perhaps influencing the very indeterminacy of his symbolism. Still, this visual allusion is still used in a way so as to further open up meaning, rather than limit our understanding of this representation as ‘just Thoth.’ After all, it’s not ‘just Thoth’: it’s David’s grandfather, and fusing his representation with that of an ibis compels us to think more about this association – which, ultimately, invites a type of ‘play’ of meaning that both concepts (grandfather and bird) share in one image.
tension with the surreal. In this panel and the two that follow, we witness Jean-Christophe’s very

*real* involuntary behaviors induced by this epileptic episode in contrast to the very symbolic snake
as it increasingly grows in size, intertwines with his body and becomes a more prominent visual
presence through the progression of these panels. We move away from the house in Olivet and
darkness instead overtakes the background. All in all, David heavily inks many of his panels to
create a very high-contrast cartooning style, but he seems to apply plain black backgrounds at
different points throughout the comic that often coincide with his representations of the fantastical
and surreal, as if to further indicate that what he is depicting is not necessarily taking place in a
physical plane of reality: we’re placed into the dark theater of an interior perspective, and we
witness characters seemingly floating within a pitch-black stage. And even blackness, too, contains
a multiplicity of meanings. In this case, the black background not only heightens the surreal quality
of this representation but it further signals a descent into an abyss David imagines Jean-Christophe
falling and writhing within.

It is in the first panel of this progression within this dark ‘abyss’ of a seizure where the
snake begins to penetrate Jean-Christophe’s body, it itself a creature of darkness. Here, within this
darkness, we can read more into the proximity of death to this episode: the grandfather’s passing
perhaps signifies to David how his brother’s epileptic fits seems as if to plunge him closer to the
blackness of death, embodied in his illustrations by how the serpent hunts its prey – Jean-
Christophe. The snake’s jaw clasps his head within its mouth, as if sending Jean-Christophe into a
new (and terrifying) plane of perceptual reality through this fateful bite. After this moment, he no
longer has any conscious control over his body; just as he cannot fend off this epileptic fit, so too
does the serpent monster overtake him in a symbolic manner. “This one is horrendous,” David
narrates in the next panel, and the serpent accordingly begins to appear more frightening and acts
more violently toward his brother. As the panels go on, the snake’s contortions get more and more
complex as it entangles Jean-Christophe’s limbs and grips his body with its many hands, as if the
snake is what is violently inflicting him and causing the twisting movements of his epileptic fit.
Ultimately, the brother’s relationship to the snake in this instance is that of submission and entrapment as its prey, and the creature’s penetration of Jean-Christophe’s body establishes a relationship to epilepsy as both painful and menacing. This is markedly unlike the depiction we see later on page 113, where David’s brother gets to at least maintain his dignity and sense of strength by standing in an upright posture (albeit held in place by the many-armed serpentine creature); here, Jean-Christophe is instead convulsing on the floor, his body bent in all directions, and is subjected to the tortures of his epileptic seizure like that of a trapped animal to its predator.

However, it’s not that David is arguing through his imagery that his brother’s epilepsy is caused in truth by this monstrous snake creature piercing his body. And we as readers do not need to be reminded of this. The comic has and continues to communicate this snake as more of a symbolic presence that reflects David’s own understanding of Jean-Christophe’s condition, which has been put into relation with many different themes and ideas – including war, rage, misery, his family history, macrobiotics, David’s artistic development and interest in fantastical/occult imagery, etc. – and thus invites a ‘play’ of interpretation and understanding on our part. In this type of interaction with the text, we readers project meaning onto what is intentionally left ambiguous (e.g. the snake symbol) based off of the themes and perspectives the text has already imprinted onto us. In this case, the comic emphasizes different aspects of the snake at different moments; as an artist, David can manipulate how it appears and thus what meaning we might derive from it. By progressing through the comic as readers, we can't help but consider these aspects altogether, and in our attempt to synthesize a stable notion as to what the snake really ‘means,’ we have to reconcile with the impossibility of this very task. That is, in interpreting the snake, we encounter a symbol that is rich with many meanings and that adds thematic weight to whatever context in which it is placed; in its rich, multivalent quality, we can come to a broad, complex understanding of the snake (i.e. we acknowledge the ‘play’ inherent in this symbol) rather than try to pin it down to a single idea or meaning.
In this sense, the symbol of the snake *is* and *is not* an illustration of epilepsy as a *pharmakon*-like sign that is self-contradictory. It metaphorically informs our understanding of what this experience could be like (or how David interprets this experience), where Jean-Christophe’s symptoms start to seem *as if* he were being attacked by some treacherous serpentine creature. But metaphors only approximate through comparison, and this visual metaphor in particular extends *beyond* associations to merely epilepsy and its physical manifestations being ‘snake-like’ because it is put into different contexts throughout the comic that complicate this single association to epilepsy. The reader continues to trace metaphor and symbol in order to derive meaning and synthesize a more complex understanding of Jean-Christophe's condition and the way David as an artist (and brother) interprets this all.

Thus, the snake and the motley crew of fantastical creatures that also appear as symbolic representations throughout the comic are in their own way quite apt in relating to the larger subject matter at hand in *Epileptic*: autobiographical memories and family history. This seems at first counter-intuitive – after all, what do symbolic snakes and all-around dark, creepy, mythical and esoteric images have to do with personal history? In David’s case, he embraces these symbols and mode of storytelling as a means of processing his past memories of himself, his brother and his family as a whole struggling to come to terms with Jean-Christophe’s condition. Any shared family history is necessarily complicated by containing different (and often conflicting) perspectives of those involved, which makes it resist any easy narrativization; similarly, Jean-Christophe’s specific form of epilepsy is particularly unruly and difficult to understand and treat, where the family’s desperate and unsuccessful search for treatment among Western medicine, alternative treatment communities, and occult practices can be seen as them attempting to fix a narrative onto Jean-Christophe’s condition, and the continual shortcomings of these narratives only shows just how ‘slippery’ epilepsy is in resisting narrativization.
Ending in dreams, almost: indeterminate symbols near David closer to Jean-Christophe

Fittingly, for a comic concerned with the reinterpretation of past memories through the lens of myth and imagination, allowing associations from different points in time to merge on the space of the page, David ends *Epileptic* with a short epilogue set in a fantastical, dream-like world that occurs independent of any stable sense of time.
“Saddle up!” and away David and Jean-Christophe go horse-back riding through an imaginative, fragmented landscape as they retread symbolically-rendered images of the past threaded together in this sequence. Within this page in particular, we can view them as retracing David's development as
a storyteller and how it has been deeply linked to Jean-Christophe's epilepsy over the years: “I didn't realize I was writing about you,” says David in the top panel, though illustrated as though he were severely wounded or burned, perhaps from battle (a motif of their past). Together, within this dark, strange, and surreal realm of David's imagery – and simultaneously through imagery formative to how David has ordered his memories (horses, battle-scenes, the external appearance of an epileptic fit, and the familiar snake creature) – they reinterpret their past and openly express themselves. Located at the bottom of the page, the symbol of the serpent acquires all the connotations built up in the earlier panels – namely, David's immersion into storytelling as a means of processing the “darkness and “violence” he sees in Jean-Christophe's condition. But beyond trying to make sense of his own emotional turmoil experienced in response to Jean-Christophe's illness, David's dialogue reveals his desire to maintain his relationship with his brother through the symbolism that he conjures, where the snake here comes to additionally represent David's desire for Jean-Christophe to “prevail against the disease” so that he could remain his big brother.

In this way, these unfixed symbols connect David to his brother by nearing him to Jean-Christophe's unstable perspective and their shared past. Though David grants significance to the subjective interpretation of memory through indeterminate symbols as the most emotionally earnest way for him to dig into his past, the ultimate interpretation he is left with is instability of meaning. Ultimately, coming to terms with his uncertainty through his creation of the comic allows David to similarly accept the instability and chaos of Jean-Christophe's illness. By drawing about his brother through open-ended imagery that reinterprets their shared memories, David can continue to identify with his brother through this indeterminacy. Using multivalent symbols, with associations of myth and personal memory, David honors his complicated connection to his brother by using the comic form in a way that draws out this complexity.
Chapter Two: Orpheus and the Paper-Architect: Reconstructing Memories in Asterios Polyp

We begin, simply, with a blister on a foot. Throughout David Mazzucchelli’s *Asterios Polyp*, a two-page spread – the left-hand side a blank white page, the right side largely blank but containing a rectangular image hinting at an idea or theme explored in the upcoming content – establishes an entry into a new section. In the beginning of what I call section 23 of this comic, a clean, flat, yellow image shaped into the basic form of a foot, with a dark purple arrow placed to its left and pointing to a small white circle on the ball of this golden foot, greets the reader. Centered on the page and surrounded by blank space, this magnified emphasis on such a small, seemingly-inconsequential detail (a blister, of all things) keys us in to the title character's perspective and how this specific physical detail ultimately transports him from his physical, current reality into the dense, non-linear workings of his memories of Hana, his ex-wife.

This hyper-focus on a single detail extracted from a larger context that provides insight into a character's subjective interpretation of a memory speaks to the narrative's overarching thematic concerns: how reinterpretation is crucial to the experience of memory and that, instead of attempting to recollect the past in an objective, totalizing manner, embracing and honing in on the

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12 *Asterios Polyp* has no section titles or page numbers, so for convenience's sake I counted the number of two-page spreads as described above in order to separate the book into distinct sections.
subjective quality of memory is more conducive to self-reflection through the way subjective perspectives on individual details are recombined to grant new interpretations of old experiences. This tension between notions of clearly defined objectivity and chaotic, complex subjectivity characterizes Asterios's own internal dilemma to step outside of his narrow framework, fixated in the world of theoretical abstractions and idealized forms, and consider the viewpoints of others – especially that of his ex-wife Hana. Because Asterios, previously a celebrated professor of architecture, was solely focused on his own perceived intellectual greatness and failed to take into account Hana's perspective, reinterpreting his memories of their past together is crucial in enabling him to realize how his habit of imposing his rigid framework and dismissing Hana's viewpoint impacted her emotionally and ultimately drove her away.

The reinterpretation of memory is thus central to the narrative of Asterios Polyp and to the formal elements of this comic by reflecting on the medium's unique ways of representing the cerebral, intangible experiences of memory on the physical page. That is, the very interpretative qualities of a comic make it an apt medium for a narrative concerned with the act of remembering and the importance of embracing the underlying emotional, subjective valences of a memory through reinterpretation. Mazzucchelli, writer and illustrator of Asterios Polyp, takes advantage of the inherently fragmentary quality of comic paneling to heighten attention to significant details within Asterios's memories through the cropped image. Though the comic medium is typically oriented toward linear narrative sequences, Mazzucchelli removes Asterios's memories from the sequence of linear time and shuffles them in order to imply that the protagonist is examining his past experiences from a different perspective and developing a new interpretation of his memories as the comic progresses. Even the physicality of the book and the handling of its pages becomes a crucial component in drawing the reader into Asterios's interior perspective. Thus, if Asterios's mode of interpreting the world (and thus his past, too) is flawed for how it narrowly organizes experiences under clean, static categories and theories, then the comic itself represents a trajectory of Asterios's changing perspective formed through revisiting his memories. All in all, the comic
enacts his shifting interpretative mode from a staunchly idealistic, and self-oriented viewpoint toward a perspective that more readily acknowledges the messy complexity of reality and the subjective experiences of others through its formal elements.

In elaborating on these themes, this chapter will explore three moments in the comic that follow one another in the latter portions of Asterios Polyp and that speak to the formal elements which draw out the larger narrative concerns of this comic, the comic medium in general, the experience and reinterpretation of memory, and the nuances of interpersonal relationships. Within my analysis, Asterios will at first jump into the realm of memory via a blister on his foot, then stumble into a rush of memories he has of his ex-wife Hana's physical presence, and lastly find himself and Hana cast as Orpheus and Eurydice respectively in a section that reinterprets this classic Greek myth. This progression of moments – occurring after a defining moment of the couple's marriage is reflected upon – indicate through major stylistic shifts that Asterios's perspective on his relationship with Hana is, after revisiting a fair amount of their past together, finally undergoing a serious change. He begins to realize that his memories of Hana are constructed anew each time he recalls her, and that focusing in on the subjective, highly changeable nature of his memories is the only true way to access his past through reinterpreting it.

Videotapes, scattered shards, and mythological structures: models of memory at play

Throughout Asterios Polyp, different models of and attitudes toward memory are put into tension with one another: the inclination toward an objective, totalizing understanding of one's self through revisiting stable memories; the embracing of the fragmentation and reconstruction inherent in the act of remembering, recombining subjective elements of memories to form new interpretations of the past; and the framing of past experiences within an overarching narrative structure that collapses the personal with the mythical.

The medium of film, or specifically video-tape recordings from fixed positions, stands in as a representation of the first model of memory within the narrative. Without even realizing the
gravity of it upon our initial reading, we encounter this model right at the start of the book. Here, we
meet Asterios on a stormy night, witnessing him emotionally deteriorating in his unkempt, decrepit
apartment. Sprawled out on his bed, visibly wearied and dejected, he watches old videotapes in the
darkness of his room – the view of which is blocked from the perspective of the reader. The comic
later reveals that Asterios had installed cameras in every room of his apartment, recording twenty-
four hours a day, and that what he is watching in this beginning scene is a moment where Hana is
captivated by Asterios's cooking. As obsessive as recording every moment of his life within his
apartment might sound, this strange set up comes out of a deep sense of existential incompleteness
that Asterios harbors within himself and that had intensified after learning that he was supposed to
have had an identical twin brother. In attempt to fill this hole, this missing half of himself, he
records his life in these videotapes so as to create what he sees as an identical image of his life – his
own “video doppelgänger.”

Thus, by going back and watching these video recordings within his decrepit and desperate
state, alone and forlorn in his apartment, Asterios is trying to hold onto his past and understand how
his relationship with Hana fell apart through what he views as an objective, identical mirroring of
his life: video technology – film's original electronic cousin. Film critic and theorist André Bazin
extends these implications of film as an impartial, mechanical process with a distinct relationship to
time. He writes that “...photography embalms time, rescuing it from its proper corruption,” and that
from this perspective, “cinema is objectivity in time... the image of things is likewise the image of
their duration, change mummified, as it were” (Bazin, 162). In recording every instance of his life
(at least within his apartment) from fixed perspectives, Asterios preoccupies himself with this desire
to objectively capture his experiences, the details of which would normally degrade over the course
of time; even change becomes a constant, available to be observed again and again.

However, the narrative and stylistic progression of the comic hints that relying on this
'video-tape objectivity' isn't conducive to self-reflection because of its very fixed and unchanging
viewpoint (after all, it's “mummified”). The book thus eschews objectivity and embraces the
“corruption” that occurs in how we experience our past memories over time by emphasizing the reconstructive aspects of memory. That is, you can't just look back at 'embalmed' images in your mind's eye, but retrieving memories is itself an act of rearranging scattered shards of experiences and impressions into a unique matrix, which in itself creates a new interpretation of them.

Mazzucchelli enacts this scattering of memory by arranging particular details from Asterios's past experiences in a non-linear order throughout the comic, and he demonstrates how the very nature of conjuring these fragments of memories into the mind inflects a subjective interpretation onto them through the stylistic idiosyncrasies of these images. When taken together, these fragmented qualities heighten our understanding of the underlying emotional tenors of Asterios's relationship with Hana.

In his demonstration of memory through the comic form, Mazzucchelli appears to be drawing on cognitive psychology perspectives that suggest an act of 'construction' occurs in the brain when attempting to bring a memory from past experience into conscious awareness. In Daniel L. Schacter explains how neurologist Antonio Damasio and others have argued that “there is no single location or area in the brain that contains the engram [the stored fragments] of a particular past experience,” (66). One area may hold onto sensory perceptions, “bits and pieces of sights and sounds from everyday episodes,” while various other regions (which Damasio calls convergence zones) “contain codes that bind sensory fragments to one another and to preexisting knowledge,” altogether creating complex records of information stored in the brain (66). According to Damasio's model, signals from these convergence zones “trigger the simultaneous activation of sensory fragments that were once linked together,” thus enacting the experience of remembering. Basically, when we 'retrieve' a memory, we are not extracting a single record stored away in one stable location and placing it on display in our conscious awareness: “we do not shine a spotlight on a stored picture,” like a projector illuminating a film (Bazin's “mummified change”) onto a screen (71). Instead, we are dealing with bits and pieces of past experiences, where “a neural network combines information in the present environment with patterns that have been stored in the past, and the resulting mixture of the two is what the network remembers,” (71). Thus, when we
remember, we recombine stored fragments and reconstruct a pattern anew each time that best resembles the original recorded memory. Influenced by the amount of time that has passed from the episode being remembered and our current circumstances during a moment of recollection, what results when we remember the past is indeed, as Mazzucchelli writes toward the end of the comic, “a re-creation, not a playback,” that uniquely takes place “at the moment it is called up in the mind.”

This model of memory, the reorganization of fragments into a new pattern during recollection, highlights how remembering is inherently an act of reinterpretation the past by putting the pieces of one's subjective experiences together in a new way. This is of central importance to understanding the narrative of Asterios Polyp: how this is a book about a man struggling to step outside of his narrow viewpoint in order to comprehend how his relationship with his ex-wife fell apart through reinterpreting his memories from a new perspective (both geographical, as he spontaneously travels to a new town after his apartment burns down, and psychological).

At the same time, considering that this is a work of fiction, the book is perhaps even more invested in a model of memory that seeks to place past experiences within a larger narrative – that is, within the framework of mythology. Our sense of the past retains personal significance when we are able to reorder the scattered shards of our experiences into a “myth” or narrative. Asterios Polyp invokes the Ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as a plot-point (Hana creates the set design for a new interpretation of this tragedy) and dedicates a section of the book entirely to its own rendition of this myth as a way of commenting on the narrative as a whole and organizing Asterios's past relationship with Hana under themes related to this legend (love, loss, memory, etc.). In keeping with the notion of reinterpretation central to this narrative, the comic is not wedded to traditional articulations of this myth. It instead uses it to reflect how Asterios perceived his relationship with Hana, and the ways that it diverges from the typical legend (neither he nor Hana are quite Orpheus or Eurydice) grant us deeper insight into the dynamic between the couple, expose Asterios's shortcomings in the relationship, and highlight his needs to reinterpret his idealized
memories of the past in order to see himself and Hana more clearly and honestly. In this way, *Asterios Polyp* demonstrates how myth and narrative can be useful in structuring experiences, but in not being wedded to a single interpretation of the myth, it indicates that strict fidelity to a narrative can be limiting.

Thus, the three moments of the comic that I have chosen to highlight – Asterios 'stepping' into a memory by acknowledging his blistered foot, a rush of memories centered around Hana's bodily presence, and the section where he and Hana are cast as Orpheus and Eurydice respectively in a sequence taking place neither in Asterios's present nor past – address these three models of memory I have outlined. While the first two step in to counter the “video-tape” objectivity perspective on memory and demonstrate through the comic form how the reorganization of scattered shards of memories constructs a new interpretation of past experiences and is inherent to the act of remembering; the third builds on these ideas and inflects the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice onto the past events of the comic as an important way of ordering and understanding Asterios's memories of the past. Altogether, in disrupting the pattern of storytelling that this comic has established (both on a formal and narrative level), these three moments represent a notable shift in Asterios's perspective on his memories.

*Jumping into memory, one blistered foot at a time*

Toward the latter portion of *Asterios Polyp*, in what I call section 23, comes a notable break in the clear and alternating structure that has been assumed by the comic up until this point. Before this moment in the comic, each section would switch between depicting Asterios’ past childhood and marriage and the present tense story-line of Asterios leaving his recently inflamed apartment and beginning anew in a small town called Apogee. The two types of sections also differ stylistically: whereas the past episodes are somehow narrated by Ignazio, his unborn twin brother – a framing device that indeed places these sections of the comic into a strange, indeterminate relationship with Asterios's interior perspective – and colored in blues, pinks and purples, the
events occurring in the present lack any verbal narration, and are colored in various shades of yellow and purple. Following the pattern up until this point, readers anticipate this section to be another series of pages that depicts Asterios navigating life in Apogee and slowly opening himself up to the new perspectives of the characters in this town, most notably his hosts Ursula and Stiffly Major, as it appears after what we have learned to identify as a ‘memory-section’ through the aforementioned stylistic ‘codes’. However, the clean, reliable back-and-forth structuring of time from one section to another that we readers have assumed as the 'organizing principle' of the comic is shaken out of its rigidity to communicate how memory can suddenly activate and interrupt the present and, on another level, how the comic medium can work outside of the constraints of linear time to create this impression of memory flooding into the present.

Even the act of turning the page becomes a significant part of the storytelling in this section by linking the repetitive arrangement of the four pages that follow to achieve a sense of movement from Asterios's present reality into his interior memories. Flipping the front “footed” page of this section, on the other side we see Asterios depicted in a seated position – yet he appears to be sitting on nothing, as his entire backdrop (which takes up the majority of the page) is entirely blank.

13 It is worth clarifying that the sections set in the past are ever completely linear: for example, one memory might be explored for a few pages, then perhaps the next moment depicted will be an entirely new memory occurring before what was just shown. What's more, the progression between one memory-section to another is not necessarily linearly advancing in time, unlike with the Apogee 'present-tense' narrative whose events depicted seem to follow one another sequentially – both within and between the different present-tense sections.
Slightly curved downward and looking intently at his left foot gripped and pulled toward him with both hands, he acknowledges to himself: “I have a blister on my foot.” We readers have not seen an image like this before in our experience of the text up until this point, where a character is not framed by a panel nor drawn into a context through background details that suggest a particular setting framed by the edges of the page; instead, Asterios exists alone in the utter blankness of this page. By placing Asterios as more explicitly a figure on a page, rather than in an illustrated setting that creates the impression of another, fictional space, this draws attention to the physicality of the comic medium itself. Thus, this stands out as an image and cues to readers that the comic is about to do something that it hasn't done before: examine how isolated physical experiences (sitting and declaring “I have a blister”) can transport the character into a dense network of memories. Working in concert with Asterios's physical phenomena, the physical page is hence invoked as a key element in creating this effect of fluidity between time and space.
Of course, the image on this page does not exist merely in isolation – the book is, after all, open, and it displays two pages at once. Mazzucchelli takes advantage of this bookish format that readers (and writers) might take for granted to create a direct relationship between the two open pages. On the page adjacent to 'floating' Asterios in seated position, we see him rendered in identical dimensions to the previous image, placed in approximately the same physical location of the prior page (toward the bottom-left), seated in nearly the same position, and wearing the same clothing. However, he is now depicted sitting in a context that we readers can readily identify as his guestroom with Ursula and Stiffly – contained within a panel and colored in characteristically 'present-tense' hues and mixtures of yellow and purple – and looking upward toward the door.
Because Asterios’ proportions, posture, and position in space are replicated on both pages, a reader can’t help but view these two illustrations as informing one another – as if his world suddenly appears into existence only after he recognizes his blister and looks up. Altogether, the juxtaposition of these two pages places Asterios’ acknowledgment of his blister as both inside and outside the present-tense by isolating him initially from any context – only floating in the white space of the
page that neither speaks explicitly to the present nor past\textsuperscript{14} – while immediately thereafter returning him to a familiar setting.

The two pages that follow this sequence extend the significance of placing Asterios outside his presumed narrative moment and setting by suddenly shifting the focus to that of his memories, thus depending on the our interaction with the physical medium to pull us into Asterios's subjective perspective. When readers flip the page after viewing Asterios sitting in his room at Apogee, they encounter two new pages that mirror the basic formal qualities of the aforementioned pages (for convenience's sake, let's number these pages three and four). Page three depicts Asterios seated in blank nothingness, remarking “I have a blister on my foot” (essentially a replica of page one in this sequence); to its right, page four shows what we can presume to be a memory of Asterios sitting in his old apartment, looking upward toward an open door whose frame Hana stands within (a direct mirroring of the composition within page two, where he is similarly looking upward in a bedroom).

\textsuperscript{14} The colors he is depicted in also characterize him as neither set in the past nor present – as both white and purple are shared by these 'tenses.'
Throughout all four pages described, Asterios is depicted from the same perspective, is wearing the same clothing, and is placed in the same space of the page. Flipping the page deliberately bridges these four pages together, and we cannot help but view pages three and four as a continuation of the formal theme introduced in pages one and two of Asterios absent of context then placed into space.

Again, our reading of Asterios's subjectivity is informed by the act of turning the physical page because of the motion implied in this activity; through this movement, we (alongside Asterios) are transported into the realm of his memory. In this way, flipping does more than just move the
pages of a book forward and place Asterios into the context of a memory: it replaces what the reader views by folding the face of a page over the prior, *imposing* itself onto the same physical space as what came before it. In this way, page three not only mirrors page one, but it *replaces* it in our visual experience of the book, which also allows page four to visually occupy the same space in the open book as page two previously did. In flipping page two over, pages one and two 'transform' into new visuals by being replaced by pages three and four, and as I mentioned, we can read this as a deliberate replacement through the repetition of a visual theme. Unlike in an animated flip-book, whose pages the reader folds over rapidly in order to discern a state of change in a figure – a boy swings a bat to hit a baseball, for example, or Tom and Jerry get to complete their brief slapstick encounter through the guidance of your flipping fingers, etc. – this transformation doesn't move us toward a moment implied as taking place in the future. Instead, the pages move us forward into Asterios's *past* memories – and this forward-backward movement interrupts the steady past/present alternating structure that we readers have assumed of the comic's sections. The act of turning the page becomes part of the storytelling by facilitating this break within the structure of the sections, where memories suddenly interrupt the present; by jarring Asterios out of the present, this transports him into the past.

Thus, the physicality of the book actively invokes Asterios's memory and points to the very physical experience that transports Asterios into the subjective space of memory. By overlaying an image that is recognizably taking place in the present with one that we can understand as set in the past – with its purple, blue and pink color scheme, located in Asterios's prior mod-style apartment, and Hana's presence – we can also read this as Asterios's memory of Hana 'overlaying' or *imposing* itself over his viewpoint. That she stands in the doorway within his apartment, positioned approximately in the same area of the page that Asterios gazes up at when he is depicted in Apogee, makes her physical absence feel all the more palpable in the present-tense; she stands in a space that is now empty in Asterios's immediate reality. Combined with the act of turning the page, this repeated formal arrangement of pages two and four – where physical space and 'memory-space' are
made to mirror each other – indicates that the simple instance of recognizing the blister on his foot transports Asterios into another space and time through the strong emotions he associates to his memories related to this specific scenario involving Hana.

*Adopting Asterios's lens on the past: memory as fragmentation of experience*

And where Asterios's foot transports him is into a collection of memories that focus on Hana's physical behaviors and quirks, meditating even further on her bodily absence through a largely unorganized stream-of-consciousness flooding of brief images intimate to the day-to-day life they shared together. In this way, our physical interaction with the book is linked to Asterios's recollection of Hana's physical presence, and this intimacy into Asterios's perspective on her body gets heightened through the fragmentation enacted in the panels. When we turn page four over, which contains a large square panel cleanly centered on the page depicting a memory of Asterios and Hana, what we see on the following two pages displaces us even further from Asterios's present context in Apogee.
Figure 14: Memory multiplies

We are no longer merely watching him as he slips into the realm of memory via his blistered foot; rather, through the collection of smaller square panels arranged on these two pages up until the second-to-last page of this section, we are witnessing his memories multiply on the page. It's as if...
the larger square panel that preceded these images has fragmented and subdivided into different but related memories: a linear, light-hearted narrative of Asterios dislodging the end of a Q-Tip from Hana's ear that is depicted sequentially throughout the middle row of the next few pages; and a collection of isolated memories placed above and below the the continuous narrative that are loosely associated to one another. Altogether, the linear and free-association memories tell of Asterios's emotional connection to Hana's bodily presence.

The way the panels crop these images of Hana bring us even closer to Asterios's perspective and magnify his feelings of intimacy toward Hana. The breakdown of a single memory – the day Asterios got a blister on his foot\(^\text{15}\) – begins with an emphasis on the objects Hana touched following his remark. Just barely recognizable in the large panel of the couple together is a box of band-aids in Hana's hands, and we see the continuation of this image within a small panel on the flip-side. Instead of depicting Hana from the same perspective as the large panel, or even squeezing her proportions down so as to fit her within this tiny panel, Mazzucchelli cuts off the image in order to only partially show one hand holding the box of band-aids and the other gripping a single bandage. The focused view of this panel shows us how Hana holds a bandage, just as the cropped images on the same page depict the way she brushes her teeth or removes a Q-Tip (or, in this case, the “pseudo-somebody brand” Z-Swab) from its container. Taken together, these first few panels emphasize her hands and the distinct manner in which she uses them, extending on how Asterios begins to reflect on and experience her absence through the memories of her touch.

What's more, the cropping of the panels grant us a closeness to Asterios's subjective perspective by depicting viewpoints that evoke Asterios's physical orientation in space in relation to

\(^{15}\) Significantly, this episode is indicated to have occurred on the same day as an anecdote depicted earlier in the book of Hana and Asterios spending time at a beach, over which Ignazio narrates “And so they were married in the spring of 1986.” Mazzucchelli hints at this connection to the attentive reader: in the selected section that I analyze above, Asterios later asks Hana in the overarching memory depicted “…Where's that thing you found today?” referring, as we find out a panel later, to the Swiss army knife she uncovered from the sand when they were at the beach earlier. Linked to this day that Ignazio associates with the beginning of Asterios and Hana's marriage, this light-hearted episode of Asterios dislodging the end of a Q-Tip from Hana's ear (with Hana understandably freaking out all the while) takes on greater emotional weight when we as readers can assemble these pieces of the narrative together. Interestingly, in order for us to better understand the connections Asterios draws in his memory, we need to tap into our own memory of the comic up until this point; in this way, the comic compels us to remember Hana alongside Asterios.
Hana. The particularity of the depictions of Hana throughout these pages suggests that we are viewing her directly from Asterios's perspective – after all, who else would have such intimate knowledge of the way she moves her hand, or how a strand of her hair falls on a bar of soap that touched her hand? Further, that we never see her fully implies that the point of view comes from someone who must have spent a lot of time physically close to Hana's body – as if these panels represent different angles at which Asterios's eyes might have viewed Hana and the items associated to her physical touch. In fact, aside from in the one fully consistent narrative thread being followed in this series of pages, Asterios is barely present. Occasionally his hand appears within these fragmented panels – for example, in separate instances we see it zipping up the back of a dress for Hana, holding a cigarette in front of her displeased face, and touching her body intimately – but the focus within each of these panels is clearly on Hana.
Figure 6: Snapshot perspectives of Asterios’s memories
These perspectives on Hana, emulating the eye's limited field of vision and how it focus on particular details, signify Asterios's prior physical closeness to her. Almost like photographic snapshots of memory, these small square panels of varying dimensions tell of the distinct emotional valence each memory might have to Asterios, as if taken by a camera filtered through his subjective interpretation of his past with Hana. These focused and particular views that the small shape of the panels grant us of Hana allow the various images of her to take up the bulk of space within each panel and become magnified, each depiction of her imbued with significance in its own way by being isolated into separate panels. Having Hana’s image take up much of each panel creates a sense of both a physical and emotional intimacy toward her; what we’re seeing is Asterios’ subjective emphasis on Hana, where his memories are informed by his fondness for her by cutting out all extraneous details that would detract from this emphasis. Altogether, the panels containing these brief images of his memories grant us a closeness to Asterios's perspective, allowing us to peak into his interior view while creating an intimate tone through the partial and magnified 'snapshots' of Hana. The use of the panel, a formal element typical to the comic medium that readers generally take for granted, is thus crucial for creating this intimacy to Asterios's emotional viewpoint: it helps us readers gauge that, in remembering his physical and emotional bond with Hana, Asterios experiences and reinterprets his memories through a nostalgic, affectionate, and sentimental lens.

Beyond these isolated panels providing direct insight into Asterios's point of view on Hana as well as capturing the different scenarios in which he experienced her, our sense of Asterios's affection toward Hana is enhanced through how color is applied to these snapshot-like images. Although the basic color palette used here (pinks, purples and blues) has been established throughout the comic to indicate events taking place in the past, the application of these colors and the particular tones used here mark this series of pages as doing something decidedly different from other depictions of memory in this comic. Different tones of the color pink, for example, are used to
communicate particular emotional tones or sentiments. A bright, bold fuchsia is used every so often in the comic to indicate high intensity emotions, such as the lust expressed by Asterios's prior student, or Hana’s frustration with Asterios's self-conceit at particular moments; the combination of this fuchsia with a deep cyan (indicative, generally, of Asterios's unsympathetic coldness) creates a sense of tension and distance between Asterios and Hana through the striking contrast of these colors. The tones of pink, purple and blue used in this section throughout the linear memory, on the other hand, are more subtle, harmonious and metaphorically speak to the periods of harmony between Asterios and Hana.

Similarly, the fragmented and intimate memories of Hana's physical presence are colored in harmonious and subtle shades of pinks and purples, with the occasional blueish-purple here and there, which borrow thematic color associations internal to the world of the comic. What is distinct about these panels from those of the 'linear narrative' of a memory is the predominance of a rosy-pink color-cast on each of these images. As the color blue has been consistently characteristic to Asterios, it makes sense that his images of Hana would be largely devoid of this color. Still, Hana appears more pink than usual, with even her skin (typically matching the white of the paper) cast in this rose color within many of these panels. Because these different perspectives on her body (and a number of items that would have touched her body) are put into isolated focus through the small panels, the pink tint on these images can't help but be read as similarly reflective of Asterios's subjective emphasis on these memories of her. It feels as if we're viewing these memory-images through the pink-tinted lens of Asterios's subjective camera-eye interpretation of the past – where we experience him fondly remembering these instances with Hana through rose-colored lenses, if you will. In addition, considering that Hana has up to this point been consistently associated to the color pink, we can also read this pink color-cast as reflective of Asterios's fondness to what is characteristic of Hana as a person. Like the warmth and subtlety intoned by this particular, rosy shade of pink, Asterios's memories of Hana's physical presence are colored by his affectionate
feelings toward her as well as his strong emotional ties to what is distinctly, endearingly, 'pinky' Hana.

Overall, the physicality of the page, panel size, the cropping of Hana's image, and the use of color act in unison to depict Asterios moving deeper into the realm of his own subjective experience of his memories as well as transport us readers into his perspective. In this way, Asterios's interior psychological space collapses with the space of the page in order to demonstrate/enact a particular type of remembering. That is, instead of focusing on one memory at a time in a sequential order, exploring them as wholly and objectively as possible in order to derive a totality of meaning, the comic instead freezes key moments, gestures, images, expressions from Asterios's mental 'snapshot' perspective. Organized not by chronological logic or direct cause and effect but by loose emotional associations evoked from the main memory that begins this section (“I have a blister on my foot”), these memories relate to one another on these series of pages through their shared, affectionate emphasis on Hana's physical presence. Altogether, they compile into one overarching emotional impression – that of love and, implicitly, of longing for what is no longer physically present – and the authenticity of this impression depends on the fragmented quality of these depictions enacted through the comic form. Although these images are not arranged on a perfect grid of straight columns and rows (which is what you might see in conventional comic paneling), they are still each distinguishable from each other; they are observations perhaps etched onto Asterios's mind that cannot be forgotten, only recombined and articulated in new ways. In other words, what this section represents is a mode of remembering that – through recombining these emotionally significant, subjective fragments of memories into a unique matrix – seeks to reinterpret past experiences and develop a new perspective on them instead of trying to retrieve an objective image of the past. When taken together, these isolated memories help Asterios see how much he cared for Hana and her individual quirks, and how deeply her absence continues to affect him.

Moving from fragmentation to structure: memory and the myth of Orpheus
This section indeed marks a significant shift in Asterios's way of thinking about his past. Moving away from the inclination to comprehensively observe his life through his video-tapes and view his memories as something stable, linear, and capable of being understood objectively, the images in this section emphasize the subjective qualities of his memories; they imply that Asterios is beginning to understand the greater value in reinterpreting the past through a more subjective lens that embraces the fragmentation of experience as a means of accessing its underlying emotional content. That Asterios is engaging with this way of remembering at this moment of the comic is significant, as it appears right after a memory of the couple having an especially tense, emotional fight that undeniably exposes how Asterios doesn't hear Hana out and recognize the validity of her perspective. Perhaps, then, the affection and longing Asterios feels toward Hana in recollecting subjectively significant fragments of his memories of her indicates that Asterios is starting to open himself up more to the idea of being sensitive to someone else's subjective viewpoint. However, this realization alone is not enough to change Asterios's perspective on the past: he needs to go beyond recognizing how deeply Hana's physical absence affects him and admit to his shortcomings, i.e. the insensitivity to her perspective that drove her away in the first place.

The reinterpretation of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth – casting Asterios as the talented and beloved male bard and Hana as his female lover who meets a tragic and untimely death – appears within an independent section of the comic immediately after this sequence of the foot blister that transports our protagonist into the realm of memory, and it is here through the context of myth that Asterios can reflect on how he has been trying to understand his past. That is, myth enables him to step outside of time itself – as mythological structures possess their own timelessness, referring to a “once upon a time” that is not bound to any one historical moment and whose characters are similarly untethered to historical notions of time. In imaginatively depicting fragments of Asterios's memories within this mythological structure, the comic presents an episode that exists in neither any particular space nor time in the narrative – placed outside of both Asterios's past with
Hana and his present experiences in Apogee – and thus represents a meta-commentary on how Asterios has been remembering his relationship with Hana.

In many ways, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is a myth about the reconstruction of memory. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, one of the most authoritative versions of the original tale that tends to inform what we think of as the basic elements of story, Orpheus' newlywed bride is “smitten in the ankle by a serpent's tooth” nearly at the start of the poem (Miller, 65). After mourning her death in the earthly realm of the living, the bard of Rhodope makes his way down to the river Styx and into the “unlovely realm” of Hades to ask the lord of the Underworld to bring his wife back to life – to “unravel the fates of [his] Eurydice, too quickly run,” (67). With the poetry of his words accompanied by the music of his lyre, this brings the “bloodless spirits” to tears and captures the sympathies of the king and queen of the Underworld. They agree to allow her to return to the world of the living on one condition: that Orpheus “should not turn his eyes backwards until he had gone forth from the valley of Avernus, or else the gift would be in vain,” (69). But vain the couple's journey upward is indeed; as they near the upper regions of the earth, Orpheus, “afraid that she might fail him, eager for the sight of her, turned back his longing eyes; and instantly she slipped into the depths.” In going to the Underworld and trying to return his wife to life, Orpheus' journey can be seen as metaphor of revisiting the memory of a beloved and the impossibility of trying to capture what is lost. Thinking in terms of memory, this myth also suggests that in the effort to retain a stable image of the past, i.e. to 'reclaim' Eurydice, this necessarily imposes an interpretation onto these memories and reflects on how, in remembering, we often create an idea of what we want to retain in an effort to make it tangible and reclaim it. This seems to be especially salient to feelings of love and affection: how they can make you want to hold onto the past in a certain way, even if the relationship has 'deceased'.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is thus a useful narrative structure under which to place and reinterpret Asterios's memories, both in how its archetypal template matches and diverges with

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16 The other authoritative source is generally Virgil's version of the story in his *Georgics*. 
the reality of Asterios's and Hana's relationship. This reinterpretation underscores the importance of
the myth itself as a means of rehearsing, immortalizing, and mourning specific memories; and in
doing so, it sets the stage for the nuances of Asterios' personality, Hana's perspective, and the
couple's relationship to emerge onto the surface.

*Mythologizing memory through Orpheus and Eurydice*

In this section, Asterios symbolically takes on the role of Orpheus in attempt to bring Hana,
his Eurydice, back from 'the dead.' Given that, well, she is not *actually* dead, and that we readers
have been following Asterios along in his recollections of the past, Asterios's likening to Orpheus
alludes to how he is attempting to revive certain memories of his past. By collapsing the
mythological with Asterios's personal memories, this depiction of the Orpheus myth takes on a
surreal, almost dream-like quality and becomes a space in which different instances from Asterios's
life can all be revisited within the same setting: the 'Hades' of his mind, colored in strictly purple
and white that are shared by both the past and present tense in the narrative world of the comic.
Figure 7: The messy, decrepit, nonlinear world of Hades

Roaming through the Underworld, Asterios also moves through time in a strange, nonlinear way: he confronts images of the distant past (his parents at a younger age), his past as an academic (a fellow professor and a couple of female students he slept with before meeting Hana), his past with Hana (composer Kalvin Kohoutek, choreographer Willy Illum, and Hana herself) and fragments from events of the recent past that occur after his apartment burns down (including the rainy night, the dog outside the subway station, the interior of the station, and particular individuals he passes by on
his way to the Greyhound). This indeed highlights the non-linearity of memory, and how fragments from these different points in the past come together to inform Asterios' perspective on his former experiences.

Although this indeterminate space allows for ghostly, distorted images from different periods in Asteros' life to cohabit the same location, the Underworld setting in which Asterios attempts to bring back his beloved Hana by-and-large mirrors that of the subway station and bus station from the beginning of the narrative. Because the setting and even ordering of some of the panels mirror those in the earlier section where Asterios travels the subways and catches a bus to however far his wad of cash will take him, this puts the story of Orpheus in direct relationship to Asterios's specific decision to change his life and gain perspective on his experiences – willingly (and perhaps out of desperation) embarking on his 'hero's journey' to Apogee, as it were. In this way, by encountering aspects of his memories in new ways (through the framework of myth), Asterios's journeying to Apogee is metaphorically figured as a journey toward a new viewpoint or interpretation of his memories.

At this moment, once the comic has begun to turn away from the established back-and-forth structure between past and present in the storytelling (a break we saw happening in the previous section, where Asterios's memories of Hana's physical presence 'transpose' upon what should be the present-tense in Apogee), it can now take a step back and reflect on what has occurred up until this point within a new structure – mythology. Again, we can think of this section as a meta-commentary of what Asterios has been trying to do up until this point – to confront and reinterpret memories of his personal history and of Hana as he moves forward in the world, attempting through this reflection to understand how their relationship fell apart – that operates through the narrative structure of Orpheus.

The broader implications of what this connection to Orpheus and Eurydice says about Asterios and Hana's relationship, and how our protagonist has been interpreting its dissolution, is condensed within a visual occurring around halfway through this section. This simple moment
captures Asterios' inclination to simplify reality and arrange it into more perfect pleasing forms, such as the timeless, beautiful form of mythological archetypes. Outside of passing by ghosts from his personal past (rendered with somewhat lifeless eyes, faded physical appearance, and in towering proportions relative to Asterios) and monstrous recreations of people from the subway, Asterios encounters his memories in a way we have not seen before: he recreates them through performance arts. After being ferried across the river Styx through a subway car partially submerged underwater in the flooded underground tunnels, arriving at the depths of Hades (depicted as both industrial wasteland and infernal underworld), and subduing the ghosts of his past through song, Asterios enters what appears to be an empty theater. Juxtaposed to the more sketchy or densely marked illustration style that characterizes the aesthetic of Asterios's journey to the Underworld – dark, messy, uncertain – the stage of the theater is clearly illuminated, revealing the clean and simple forms of the lifted curtains and two geometrical props on the floor. Here on this clear stage is where Asterios sings his tale of woe, accompanied by actors (dark silhouettes lacking any depth) who materialize his narrative through movement.

In breaking from the established style of this section, the simple, flat, and high-contrast aesthetic seen in this instance makes the telling and performance of Asterios's song stand out to us readers, where the style itself communicates how Asterios is mythologizing his memory by placing it within this idealized template. Two pages open side-by-side guide us into this stylized, rigid performance that is meant to mirror how the hero Orpheus sings his song to the lord and lady of the Underworld, attempting to convince them to bring Eurydice back to the world of the living. The left-hand page carries Asterios into the space of the theater, where the bottom panel depicts him instructing his performers (one male, the other female) through wisps of songs emanating from his mouth and musical instrument. Rendered as flat, dark-purple silhouettes, and wearing masks in the shape of Asterios and Hana's faces, these two actors also maintain a simplicity of form that the setting of the stage has established. Visually isolating the actors' performance onto its own page,
within a flat purple border that uniquely lines the edges of this page and draws out the high-contrast quality of the images, further accentuates the tale's clean and reduced style.

Figure 8: Asterios’s Orphic song

Through eight panels of equal size organized within two columns and four rows, the performers play out Asterios’ song: the Orphic drama of a man losing his beloved to the fatal bite of a serpent.
Within each panel, the actors assume simplified and exaggerated gestures with their bodies in order to communicate basic, identifiable, and beautified emotions essential to the narrative: joy, shock, pain, and mourning. Through these silhouetted performers, Asterios's song is brought to life (albeit in the Underworld) and thus we readers (or, now figured as members of an audience) can discern that this is an interpretation of the first few formative scenes of the original myth: the love and loss of Eurydice.

That this tale is inserted as a story-within-a-story (*mise en abyme*) through Asterios’ melodious narration and the actors’ performance suggests that Asterios is, in a fashion, telling his own story through another medium, and that it is the act of storytelling (i.e. the telling of one’s own past and memories) that is being reflected upon here. We can see that Asterios is projecting himself onto this ancient Greek narrative through, again, the masks of the performers – the shapes of which through the few but characteristic strokes call to mind Asterios's idiosyncratic, angular, almost beak-like profile, and Hana's more rounded, softer, and smaller profile that we can readily identify after seeing these two figures drawn so often throughout the comic. Thus, the performers, although clearly going through the motions of the beginning of the Orpheus tale, are implied to simultaneously be acting out what Asterios envisions as the drama between himself and Hana by taking on the guise of both of them. Asterios's identification to Orpheus is made all the more apparent in the final panel of this grid-style page, in which the perspective of the panel (which has up to this point displayed the actors from the same distance) now backs away 'downstage' to reveal Asterios kneeling in the same position as the male performer, with his head cast downward identically to his 'shadow' image.

In associating his memories to the myth of Orpheus, this reveals Asterios's own burgeoning awareness of how he has been dealing with the emotional distress of losing Hana as his wife and how he has been interpreting his memories of her. This clean, staged repetition of the myth emphasizes how Asterios had idealized his past as something he tries to maintain as simple and beautiful, as if his memories were as perfectly formed as the gestures of the performers. What's
more, in highlighting the tale of Orpheus through the isolated visual format and the stylistic shift from chaotic to clean, and by breaking the tragedy down into its basic components, the comic suggests that this myth is at the center of how Asterios thinks about his past. Having Asterios sing his 'tale of woe' and align himself with Orpheus implies that he views himself as a beloved tragic hero, ultimately a victim of unfortunate circumstances.

Which, of course, is a conceited, grandiose, and even ridiculous self-presentation when we start to prod at this association further and consider what we know about our 'hero,' Asterios. In having had followed the title character for this long in the narrative – again, this section occurs toward the end of the book, and thus is placed after a collection of formative memories that (aided by Ignazio's critical narration) cumulatively expose Asterios's arrogance over others and insensitivity toward Hana's perspective – we know that Asterios is no Orpheus, at least not in any conventional sense of the heroic character. Unlike the great bard, whose wife was stolen from him by death, Asterios loses Hana because of his own actions and attitude. The manipulation of the Orpheus myth therefore intones a layer of comedy behind this association by demonstrating how Asterios has avoided taking responsibility for the dissolution of his marriage. He attributes blame to a third party (the snake) in explaining how his relationship with Hana fell apart. 'It wasn't any fault of Asterios's,' this likening to Orpheus seems to suggest, 'it was just this great cosmic event he had no control over – oh what a poor unfortunate soul!' This grand, indulgent, and self-pitying characterization describes Asterios's previous mindset before going on his journey to Apogee, and it removes agency from both Asterios and Hana in the involvement of their breakup.

*Prodding further into the relationship dynamics in both the Orpheus myth and Asterios' past*

Thus, in order to derive a deeper understanding of the nuances in Asterios' perspective and the faults in his viewpoint, we alongside Asterios must encounter his memories in relationship to this mythical structure and think back on (i.e. “remember”) earlier events depicted in the comic. Examining how Asterios and Hana fit and distinctly *do not* fit into this mythological structure, as
well as interrogating further the structure of the relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice, ultimately will guide us to reconsider both how myth makes sense of memory fragments and what this sense reveals about the relationship between the comic’s two main characters. The reinterpretation of this myth within the comic therefore invites us to connect it back to the narrative's salient thematic concerns and aid in our own interpretation of the couple's relationship: namely, how Asterios's intellectual conceit and preoccupation with theoretical abstractions causes him to impose his perspective over others', and the necessity for Asterios to reinterpret his memories by constructing them anew in order to realize how he had been viewing his past from a narrow, idealized perspective that cast Hana's integrity as an individual into the shadows.

All in all, the placement of the Orpheus myth in the comic and the identification of this Greek hero to Asterios draws out how our protagonist has straddled two different ways of looking at himself. On the one hand, Asterios considers himself as a complete and fulfilled individual, a successful architect with artistic and intellectual merit in his own right who has risen to the 'pantheon' of great minds in his field and is celebrated within academic circles. This self-conception as a singularly great artistic force, independent of anyone else's contributions and regarded highly above all, can be seen as magnified by his later association to Orpheus. The legacy of this Greek bard and lyre player – able to enchant humans, animals, trees, and spirits alike with his emotionally resonant music – precedes his tragedy with Eurydice: he is referred to as “Orpheus famous of name” *(onomakluton Orphen)* in a 6th century two-word fragment by lyric poet Ibycus, which is some time before his mythology became entangled with Eurydice (Owen Lee, 3). This implies that Orpheus already has a rich history and identity that Greek audiences would recognize as familiar when his character is later put into new narratives about him, such as his tragedy with Eurydice. In other words, “[he] is … memorialized as an artist long before encountering any immortality as a lover” in the story of Eurydice's death (Offen, 49). Considering the legacy of

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17 Later, Orpheus' descent to Hades is mentioned in Euripides' play “Alcestis” and Plato's “Symposium,”: “in every literary reference … for at least three centuries subsequent to the myth, there is no second loss of Eurydice. In Eurypides (Alc), Isokrates, Hermesianax, etc. … Orpheus is clearly thought to have been successful in resurrecting Eurydice,” (Lee, “Mystic Orpheus: Another Note on the Three-Figure Reliefs,” 401-404)
Orpheus, the likening of Asterios to this character draws attention to Asterios's own sense of self-aggrandizement and conceit, as if he views himself as esteemed and uniquely important as this paragon (even apotheosis) of artistic inspiration and ingenuity.

On the other hand, if we think about Orpheus's place in the structure of the myth in question, his role as a tragic character is incomplete without his fallen beloved to mourn and thus in response produce his most emotionally poignant music; this connotation of Orpheus's character reflects back on Asterios's' own sense of incompleteness. As we learn earlier in the comic when Asterios explains the presence of the video cameras in his apartment, he is still searching for a greater sense of totality within himself, a yearning for completeness of his 'other half' that he feels has somehow been lost in existing as a twin with an unborn brother, and this creates an uncertainty of his own being. Asterios's strange task of creating his own “video doppelgänger” thus intones his sense of existential anxiety by wanting to fill this incomplete part of his existence in some way. His desire to counter this sense of emptiness more broadly manifests itself through his preoccupation with organizing reality into static, definitive terms – which as we saw, even influences the way he initially viewed his memories as static, objective images of the past – and is more specifically expressed by Asterios through his academic interests in theoretical abstractions and achieving equilibrium by ordering the chaos of life into polar elements that he can then conveniently balance together.

In these ways, Asterios is like Orpheus if we consider how his significance is, like that of the great bard's, inextricable to his wife yet simultaneously predominates over her in importance within his own personal narrative. Though Orpheus is in a sense incomplete without Eurydice – as she provides the pretense and inspiration for his most poignant lyrical performances to come about – she is certainly still the smaller 'half' that helps complete his overpowering presence in the structure of the myth. As Nora Offen describes of Eurydice's role in this dynamic: “Eclipsed by Feminist scholar Margaret Bruzelius’s reflects on Eurydice’s subordinate presence in the myth: “Eurydice is twice forgotten: forgotten first because she is remembered only as the occasion of Orpheus' first miracle, his descent to the underworld, and forgotten again when her second death endows Orpheus' voice with such overwhelming power that her loss seems nugatory.”
Orpheus' achievements, but at all times their origin, nearly irrelevant and of ultimate relevance, Eurydice is at once bit player and star of the show,” (55). Similarly, Asterios almost ritualistically practices this act of completion by ordering life into dual, polar categories and treats Hana as a lesser, auxiliary presence to himself that helps substantiate his ingenuity as an architect. He ultimately depends on Hana for fulfilling his sense of existential equilibrium and yet overshadows her – treating her as the “bit player” to his greater artistic 'performance' and ignores her own integrity as an individual separate from him.

Still, as hinted at previously, there are certain ways in which Asterios and Hana do not comfortably fit into the roles of Orpheus and Eurydice. In fact, Hana is actually more like Orpheus than Asterios in a few crucial regards – namely, how her art emotionally impacts her audience by extending outside the realm of the theoretical (Asterios's favored domain) and existing in physical form (sculptures). Thinking about how Asterios and Hana diverge from their designated roles as Orpheus and Eurydice therefore brings to mind that their relationship is indeed just one iteration of this classic myth, whose placement in the comic's narrative is no mere coincidence. Another character, Willy Illium – an eccentric dance and theater producer who commissions Hana to create the set for his original production of Orpheus and Eurydice – intrudes on their relationship and on Asterios' theoretical, static mode of interpreting the world by construing this myth as a story that demands reinterpretation. Willy's presence in the comic creates narrative tension and therefore draws out how Hana and Asterios fit and misfit into the roles of Orpheus and Eurydice. Given the myth's relationship to memory and the hero's inability to revive the old image of his wife from the dead, this association simultaneously reflects back on Asterios' need to step outside of his linear, camera-like view of his memories in order to understand how his idealized perspective on the past was lacking. Even the title of Willy's production – “Orpheus (Underground)” – links to the Orpheus section of the comic, which indeed takes place in an imaginative, Hades-like rendering of the underground subway system, and underscores Asterios's' need to reflect on how he had been remembering his past and to reinterpret his memories.
If we think of Willy as a symbolic placeholder for the myth of Orpheus and the drive toward reinterpreting the past by reordering different elements together, the context in which he is introduced into the comic is rather telling of how Hana is indeed “in the spotlight” of creative ingenuity, despite how Asterios ostensibly overshadows her. Around mid-way through the book, where we readers have acquired a strong sense of Asterios and Hana's relationship (overall loving but increasingly aggravated by Asterios's conceited displays), Ignazio (the narrator of the ‘memory sections’) recounts how Willy Ilium visits the university campus in upstate New York that both Asterios and Hana work at as professors. Asterios gives a presentation on his new book (*The Seeds of Design*) to an academic crowd, which congratulates him on his innovative approach to architecture. However, the very 'seeds' of his celebrated designs and theories are rooted in Hana's unique viewpoint on the world, where she draws inspiration from nature in observing how the form of a pine-cone is transparent about its own geometrical structure – “but not in a cold, mechanical way.”

Because Asterios (preoccupied with the pursuit of abstractions) would never think to pay attention to the physical world around him in order to perceive abstract geometrical principles, we can then assume that he drew from Hana's distinctive insights and claims them as his own in order to write a whole book about the intersections between nature and architecture. Even the comic form accentuates how Hana is being blocked from recognition of her substantial creative contribution to Asterios' thinking. In a panel on the top of the page, three professorial types queue up to congratulate Asterios, with Hana standing behind the man of the hour.
Visually, the three men form a straight, horizontal and comically-uniform line with each of their dignified blazers, button-up collared shirts, conservative ties, and hands raised toward Asterios in an imminent handshake all aligned with one another. Altogether, they point toward the man they are celebrating, but this could also be seen as Asterios intercepting their praise – that the insights they are describing of Asterios are truly directed toward Hana without their awareness of it, and the esteemed architect thus visually and conceptually blocks Hana from the praise that she rightfully deserves. What's more, what Asterios says in response to these three enthusiastic academics is nearly word-for-word to what Hana tells him earlier when she articulates the geometrical properties of the “humble pine cone” (another line that Asterios lifts from Hana and puts into his presentation); in this panel, “Well, it's just a matter of paying attention,” looms over Hana's head in a speech bubble emanating from Asterios, reminding the reader of how she was the one who had said this in the first place.

Asterios's appropriation of her ideas can thus be read as an “Orphic” move in one sense of the character of Orpheus: although Asterios's 'craft' here is in no way something produced in the wake of misery for a loved one (such as with Orpheus), it still is in the spirit of his 'Eurydice' by being indebted to her for this creative concept. That he is admired and outshines Hana for his achievements rooted in her individual perspective is a manifestation of the Orphic theme where the
male hero overshadows his lover as a beloved artist, despite the Eurydice character being “star of the show” in terms of what inspires this creative output.

But something changes when Willy approaches Asterios and Hana. Expecting further congratulations from what he presumes to be an attendee of his presentation, Asterios is surprised when Willy asks to collaborate with Hana (and not him, the celebrated architect) for the set design of his production. By recognizing Hana's unique skills as an artist and seeking her out specifically at an event dedicated to Asterios's brilliance, this symbolically draws out how Asterios is not quite as in the “spotlight” of artistic ingenuity as he presumes of himself; it is in fact Hana who, though behind the scenes, is the more palpable artistic presence in the narrative.

Thus, Willy's presence begins to connect and make tangible all these different elements at play: the 'Orphic' aspects of Asterios and Hana's relationship (such as his overshadowing her, despite how she is a major contributor to his celebrated work) and the importance of reinterpreting memories. In his interest in creating a new production of the Orpheus tale, which we learn about a page later he is introduced, the reinterpretation of this classic myth stands as perhaps another *mise en abyme* meant to reflect upon the comic's own encountering of memory. Whereas Willy's version of memory (and consequently Hana’s) has to do with reordering and reinterpretation, Asterios is ultimately aligned with a more linear, objective view of memory, despite might how he might attempt to borrow other perspectives. Willy then enables these elements to emerge by redirecting the “spotlight” (fittingly so, as a producer of dance and theater) away from Asterios and onto Hana in his appreciation of her talent that we see develop further. In shifting the attention away from Asterios, Willy's introduction into the comic reemphasizes the importance of reinterpretation, and in this way hints that Asterios should have been paying greater attention to Hana throughout their relationship. The defining fight that occurs between the couple indeed affirms Asterios's inability to recognize her viewpoint.
Placed right before Asterios 'steps' into memory through his blistered foot, the fight illustrates how cold and unsympathetic he had been to her viewpoint, where their contrasting aesthetics visually articulate how his cleanly defined, diagrammatic contours are not 'porous' of receptive to her emotional expressiveness and needs.

*Asterios's claims to 'Orphic' status fall short*

In his emotional detachment and affinity for clearly defined abstractions that neatly organize the chaos of life, this distances Asterios from traits crucial to the character of Orpheus. Unlike Orpheus – whose singing, poetry and lyre-playing enchants both earthly creatures and spirits of the underworld – Asterios doesn't actually create any tangible art that can be appreciated. As Ignazio informs us in the start of the second section of the book (the first section to provide details about Asterios's personal and academic history), Asterios was renowned as a “paper architect” – or in other words, “he was an esteemed architect whose reputation rested on his designs, rather than on the buildings constructed from them,” though none of his designs had ever been built. Thus, despite
figuring himself as Orpheus in the standalone sequence, he doesn't quite fit into this role – in fact, he comically *misfits* this role in that he favors measured, controlled forms of art adhering to stable principles over more spontaneous, emotional forms of expression (I'm doubtful that his life's craft of architectural designs would make the souls and deities of Hades weep with sympathy).

As such, Asterios *must* adopt Orpheus' musical mode of expression in order to *seem* to communicate emotional depth to his experiences, as the art of a “paper architect” (preoccupied with abstractions internal to the realm of the conceptual) is insufficient to express and *externalize* his sadness and longing for Hana into a tangible form that audiences can experience as well. Even so, he still keeps his expression formally measured and controlled. His songs transmit not through a lyre but through a stringed measuring apparatus,¹⁹ and the tale of woe he sings on the stage of Hades is enacted within a clear aesthetic structure. As I mentioned earlier, the actors and their movements are simplified and exaggerated to create beautiful and exact gestures; their being arranged in identically-measured and evenly-numbered panels that are aligned in a straight grid pattern further emphasizes Asterios's orientation toward imposing rational order onto the seemingly-chaotic (in this case, human relationships). Even identifying his relationship with Hana to that of Orpheus and Eurydice attempts to erase the messy complexity of their dynamic by superimposing an idealized narrative onto their love and fall-out – making it appear both as poetic and as cosmically out of his hands as the tragedy that befalls Orpheus and Eurydice. Thus, through these formal choices, Mazzucchelli draws out how Asterios idealizes the tragedy of his loss without getting to the heart of the issue – that is, without really reflecting on his own actions and attitude and how they might have driven Hana away. Our paper-architect views himself and Hana as silhouettes following a preordained dance, but he doesn't flesh out these abstractions he's created of their relationship.

¹⁹ His instrument appears to resemble an architectural tool called a T-square, used primarily for drafting horizontal lines on plans. This ties in nicely with the isolated grid-page depicting the two actors performing Asterios's song: the grid is made up eight pairs of horizontal lines, not including the edges of the page that make up two more horizontal lines. Overall, this speaks to Asterios's desire to clearly delineate things in an ordered away and achieves this through the hard edges, clear distinctions of forms through the T-square. He likes to order things in a straightforward, *linear* way (i.e. not messy the way real life tends to be).
Asterios's likeness to Orpheus is thus flat in some ways. True, like Orpheus he has experienced emotional loss, wants to revive his memories of his beloved, and he overshadows his partner in prominence within the text. Yet, as seen in the comic, he cannot fully occupy the role of Orpheus without Hana; he needs to have someone to inspire his art in the wake of a personal tragedy. As mentioned, this lacking makes him more like Orpheus in many regards, as the famous bard composes his most emotionally-impacting songs out of his despair for Eurydice. But Mazzucchelli takes this comparison a step further and even builds upon this particular idea of Orpheus' incompleteness by extending his qualities outside of merely one character. That is, in Mazzucchelli's reinterpretation of the myth, the fuller presence of a classic Orpheus character in the text is inextricable to this Eurydice character because she (Hana) uniquely exemplifies a few important Orphic traits that Asterios could never hope to in his self-characterization. Most significantly, she creates art that audiences can tangibly experience and that maintain the integrity of being stand-alone, complete artworks. In contradistinction, Asterios's architectural designs are in a sense incomplete on their own by lacking a manifestation in the world that others can directly experience. In this way, then, he is very unlike Orpheus. The celebrated Greek poet doesn't bring the lords of the underworld to tears by showing them a conceptual version of his song abstracted into its primary constituent parts (think of one of those “mind-maps” and related diagrams, or even a bullet-point version of his lyrics – I know I wouldn't weep); he instead enacts the song itself, to which his audiences can emotionally react.

Similar to Orpheus, Hana's art exists out in the open world by appearing multiple times in the book, and even we readers act as her audience by reacting to her sculptures (albeit they're not so three-dimensional for us). Through her sculptures, Hana shares traits that substantiate Orpheus' charm as a beloved and sympathetic Greek hero: a quality of emotional outpouring through physical expression and, consequently, the ability to influence audiences into emotionally responding to her art. No longer bound to a conventional interpretation of the Orpheus myth, in which we might have initially assumed Asterios to be the Orphic character, we can now think of Hana as more like
Orpheus than Asterios through her emotionally-impacting artistic expression. Her association to the epitome of artistic inspiration is thus a form of reinterpreting the myth of Orpheus, which ultimately points back to the larger narrative of the comic and its concerns with reinterpreting memory in order to move outside a linear, obvious, and limited understanding of the past.

_Hana-as-Orpheus: how her art of discarded objects connects to Orpheus and memory_

Considering this 'Orphic' characterization of Hana, looking briefly into instances where different characters (Asterios and Willy) react to Hana's art can inform the way we think about the Orpheus sequence in the comic and the underlying emotional and interpersonal implications that this comparison to the myth invokes. As the narrator of the 'memory sections' of the book, Ignazio first shows the reader Asterios's reaction to Hana's art. Near the center of the comic, he presents a memory of Asterios and Hana visiting his aging parents – his father withering away from Alzheimer's, and his mother wearied from caring for her degenerating husband yet determined to maintain her faith in God. Ignazio's narration over the events of their visit is sparse, but every so often he interjects himself and breaks the narrative flow by inserting images from a different memory. At one point in the section, after Asterios waves and says hello to his bed-ridden father from the distance of the doorway, Ignazio inserts a memory of when Asterios first saw Hana's sculptures in her campus studio – enacting the type of fragmentation of the past uniquely achieved through the comic form. Asterios at first compliments Hana's pieces (“These are really strong,”) and makes her feel as if he is focusing on her as an artist – an idea extended through the visual metaphor of a spotlight that falls on Hana on the top left panel of the adjacent page, her studio now cast in a deep-blue shadow through the imaginative reconstruction of this memory.
Thank you.

AND I CAN SEE HOW YOU'RE GRAPPLING WITH THE RECONCILIATION OF OPPOSITES.

...I guess that's one way of looking at—

THERE'S THIS PALPABLE TENSION BETWEEN ORDER AND CHAOS, THE CONCRETE AND THE IMAGINED, MAN AND NATURE...

Well, actually, I don't see man and nature as being—

...THE RATIONAL AND THE IRRATIONAL, HUMOR AND HORROR, FRAGILITY AND FORTITUDE...

...uhm...ahem...

...mhmh...
However, we see that Asterios is in fact tooting *his own* horn by fashioning his own interpretation of her art and ignoring her perspective in the following panels, the spotlight progressively shifting toward Asterios and leaving Hana in the shadows. As mentioned, Asterios figuratively pushes Hana out of the spotlight of recognition in order to esteem himself, but the visual spotlight appears here and elsewhere to metaphorically connote Hana being cast outside the light of veneration. Even the blue color of the shadow articulates how Asterios (characteristically associated with various shades of blue, often of a cyan variant) *overshadows* Hana by imbuing her space with his color. This instance also signifies how in parading *his* intellectual-interpretative capacities, Asterios at the same time attempts to possess *Hana's* art through imposing his own viewpoint: her physical artwork becomes just a pretense to his brilliant conceptual interpretations, and he now can lay claim to this art by obscuring any other perspectives. By considering himself as, like Orpheus, one who influences others through his art, he refrains from giving credit to Hana's originality and thus limits himself from accessing Hana through her art (paying attention to only his own ideas instead of the work in front of him) and from realizing that her art has a greater capacity than his to move audiences.

However, a closer look at Asterios's monologue reveals Hana's 'Orpheus-like' success in emotionally stirring her self-possessed viewer. Our “paper architect” exposes his own emotional fixations by projecting his preoccupation with reconciling opposites (a fixation that comes from a deep sense of lacking and imbalance within himself) onto Hana's work. So, although he responds to her sculptures with typical academic, rationalizing distance, Asterios is nevertheless *emotionally reacting* to her work on a more subliminal level; Hana's work draws out deep emotional tensions within Asterios, even if he does not consciously realize it. This incident emphasizes how she is more successful as an artist who emotionally reaches audiences and sets up the irony of Asterios later figuring himself as Orpheus by drawing out his less-than-heroic qualities: his condescension of others' opinions, self-absorption, and lack of sympathy for other perspectives are more anti-hero traits if anything. Asterios is therefore incomplete without Hana in terms of his likeness to Orpheus;
unlike him, she is the more serious creative contributor who can reach audiences more poignantly than Asterios – after all, without her Asterios would not have made the same impact when presenting his *Seeds of Design*. In these ways, Hana distinguishes herself from the typical Eurydice character (who doesn't do much of anything, other than die and ultimately remain dead) and instead transcends to more 'Orphic' levels of significance.

On the other hand, when Hana later shows her art to Willy on the same evening that he explains his interest in reinterpreting Orpheus, he as a viewer is able to access a more intimate part of her by (unlike Asterios) responding to the form of her sculptures free of the preconceptions from a preexisting framework. The paneling subtly shows how Willy intimates underlying emotional depths to Hana through her art, rather than focusing on himself. Specifically, the paneling emphasizes how Willy looks at and experiences Hana's art.
AH, YES... YES! THIS IS-

WHIP

WHIP

-EXACTLY WHAT I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR.

WHO WOULD BELIEVE THAT WITHIN THIS DELICATE FLOWER COULD GERMINATE TITANS THAT SPEAK OF SUCH OPPRESSIVE DECREPITUDE?

Well... I just put discarded things together...

IT'S A VERITABLE VORTEX FOR THE DETRITUS OF INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY!

Figure 12
On the first page of this episode, we see Willy first take in the entirety of her work in the studio space within a larger panel on the top of the page; below, three small panels zoom in on and crop Willy's image to reveal only his face and upper-torso, comically 'whipping' on a pair of glasses (indicated by a fun little sound effect), then turning his head rapidly left to right (visually articulated through a cartoonish blurred 'double-face' indicating this rapid motion), and lastly 'whipping' his glasses off. As exaggerated and silly as his little gestures might appear, they nevertheless emphasize his inclination to view the art in front of him, and suggest that the experiencing of looking is central to forming one's response to a work of art. This almost seems like too obvious of a point to state – after all, how else can you react to a visual work without looking at it closely? And yet this idea appears lost on Asterios: if we look back on when he first encounters Hana's work, we can see that the paneling does not emphasize his experience of looking at her art, and that his gaze toward Hana's pieces is rather unspecific (for all we know, he could be staring into the distance beyond her sculptures, at a scrap of paper on the floor) and instead intones more of an internal gaze, preoccupied with his own interpretation of Hana's art.

Unlike with Asterios, the panels depicting Willy's encounter with Hana's art show how he pays more attention to the actual formal elements of her sculptures and how this enables him to interpret the deeper emotional dimensions of her artwork.\textsuperscript{20} Lined across the top of the page adjacent to when Willy first sees Hana's work, four small rectangular panels crop our view of one of her sculptures.

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\textsuperscript{20} Though Willy makes a number of comments to Hana with lewd implications – such as referring ambiguously to her cat Noguchi as her “hirsute pussy,” or responding to how lovingly Hana pets Noguchi with the forward remark “stroke me like that I'll show you a special relationship,” – he doesn't seem ultimately interested in Hana as an erotic subject and, despite his unseemly comments, is sensitive to the emotions communicated through her art.
The first panel depicts a partial view of Willy standing beside and touching the metal, vine-like, thorny exterior of the piece; the next moves closer and enlarges the view of Willy's hand; the third rotates toward the center to reveal just a portion (“...a spark...”) of a reddish-pink, feathery object at the base of the piece; and the final panel in this sequence moves downward to bring the bulk of the feathery object into view. The perspectives of these panels highlight Willy's close attention to these physical qualities of the sculpture, and they emphasize how his immediate interaction with Hana's artwork allows him to nuance his interpretation: he sees, touches, responds and adjusts his thoughts accordingly with what he experiences. Thus, instead of these artworks communicating merely a sense of “oppressive decrepitude” to Willy, he's able to perceive that there is at the same time “within each piece... a spark of renewal, a hope of salvation... like a wounded bird sheltered by an iron fist.” Willy's perceptive observations enable him to touch upon something quite intimate to Hana's personal history that he sees reflected in her sculptures: a pained, “wounded” aspect of herself shielded by a hardened exterior that nevertheless maintains the potential to heal and move forward from the pain she has experienced.

At least, this is the sense we get when he asks Hana in the following panel if she was abused as a child (although posing such a forward question is perhaps not the most sensitive or subtle way to dig deeper into the emotional content of her artwork). Blunt and forthcoming as Willy may be, there evidently seems to be some truth to his supposition – as Hana appears surprised (but not
offended or confused) when he confronts her with this question. The fact that she doesn't protest Willy's assumption and instead attempts to change the subject ("Shouldn't we start thinking about heading to the restaurant...?"), her head and eyes downcast and font size smaller when she says this, further suggests that Willy's words (his interpretation of her through her art) conjure up a certain sadness in her that she attempts to restrain and distance herself from. But although she attempts to step away from the spotlight, as it were, Willy's close attention to the formal elements and emotional valences of her work fixes her into focus: even though Willy has the most dialogue in this episode, his words draw attention to these underlying qualities of Hana's work, which (as mentioned) is enhanced through the cropped views of one of her sculptures.

The distribution of colors also helps affix the focus onto Hana in this scene and markedly contrasts with when Asterios first views her artwork. Whereas Asterios ultimately has the spotlight on him in this earlier instance by imbuing everything around him with blue and thus casting Hana and her work into a deep cyan shadow, in this episode with Willy the color scheme maintains a palate of light, softer purples and pinks (colors characteristically associated to Hana) and contains very few blues at all. The predominance of colors primary to Hana's character connotes that Willy's interpretations align with Hana's artistic and emotional disposition; he does not impose a color foreign to the palate of her environment as Asterios does. Even the last panel in this sequence has a pinkish color-cast over the environment that Asterios, Hana and Willy are standing within.
Faintly, timidly, Hana imbues her space with her restrained emotions and remains the focus of this scene without forcing a spotlight onto herself and darkening everything and everyone around her. Overall, through his encounter with Hana's art, Willy makes Hana and her psychology center-stage instead of casting her out through his conceptual, self-centered blabbering like a certain architect we know.

How Hana engages with her audience is also revealing of how her art holds emotional relevance to her and even points to the reconstructive idea of memory central to the book if we play close attention to the dialogue in these separate episodes. After Willy dramatically whips on his glasses and glances around Hana's studio space in the city, he announces that this is “... exactly what [he's'] been looking for,” and in astonishment of her creations asks “[w]ho would believe that within this delicate flower could germinate titans that speak of such oppressive decrepitude?” In response, Hana says humbly: “Well... I just put discarded things together...” In emphasizing the “discarded” quality of her materials – forlorn, forgotten, perhaps even decaying – she affirms the “decrepitude” that Willy observes being expressed in her sculptures (which indeed might refer to the decrepitude she experiences within herself, “…like a wounded bird sheltered by an iron fist,”). What's more, her active voice here markedly contrasts how she introduced her art to Asterios previously, in which she says to him “Um... everything here was made from found materials.” The use of “I” indicates her direct involvement in her work and that she is more emotionally engaged in this discussion of her art; whereas with Asterios, her statement is more passive, factual, as if describing someone else's art in a gallery (even including the very sterile term “found materials” that you might see in a plaque or title card next to an artist's work on the wall). This comparison suggests that she tries to avoid showing a personal connection to her art so as to deflect the pain involved in someone discounting her creations – which is, indeed, what Asterios by overshadowing her – and perhaps indicates that she needs reassurance from an audience before she can claim a work as her own.
Still, in both instances, Hana reveals an aspect of what she finds important about her pieces by emphasizing the reconstructive quality of her work to her audiences, drawing attention to how she rearranges discarded objects into new forms and thus draws out new associations than these discarded materials previously had through her unique arrangements. Thus, her artistic process directly parallels the idea of memory central to the comic's narrative: how “every memory is a recreation, not a playback” and requires the reassembling of old, 'discarded' fragments of experience in order to reinterpret them and perceive a new significance of the past. Willy, oriented toward reinterpreting mythological structures and placing new and old dance compositions together in his productions (“so that Balanchine, Perrot, Graham, and Tharp (to name a few) rubbed elbows – and asses – on stage”) fittingly recognize and draw on this very assemblage quality of her work without even needing to be prompted to do so. Asterios, on the other hand, apparently couldn't care less even after Hana explains this element of her work. The paper architect's immersion into the world of ideas (especially that of his own ideas) and disinclination to take this emphasized aspect into account of his interpretation of her art thus symbolically preempts how, before his journey of self-reflection, he approaches the past through a camera-like view – attempting to simply “playback” his static images of his memories instead of reconstructing his impressions by culling together forgotten, discarded shards of experiences.

Hana's deeper psychological dimensions inflect upon Asterios's personal Hades

All in all, comparing the comic’s formal elements alongside the dialogue in these two instances further demonstrates how insulated Asterios is in his own limiting viewpoint and how this precludes him from accessing and appreciating the deeper emotional content in Hana's expression (both artistic and interpersonal) by, right from the get-go, discounting her perspective. And, again, that this is all put into context of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice (and a reinterpretation of these mythic characters’ roles) is significant as a useful way of reflecting on how Asterios viewed his memories of Hana and how his perspective on his past begins to change. He (pompously) thought
he's Orpheus beloved, complete in himself as the highest creative force above all, but has no means of earnest emotional expressiveness. Our paper architect's instrument is a T-square that keeps his ideas in abstract planes, not a lyre or human vocal cord whose use manifests intangible feelings into the physical realm to impact and captivate audiences' emotions. He did not recognize how much of a creative ("Orphic") contributor Hana was to his work and similarly doesn’t recognize Hana’s emotional perspective as his wife. He nevertheless still positions himself as the central artistic figure, the one who influences and whose voice matters (as we often see him assert his authority by talking down on others as well as talking over others). Thus, it is his false assumption of this role (and not cosmic destiny) that fuels his conceit and drives Hana away by treating her as merely an adjunct to himself in his simultaneous conceptual fixation on balancing what he perceives as the dualities of his life. He was stuck in the clouds (a cigarette smoke-shield from the harsh and imperfect reality of others and of himself), couldn’t see (or perhaps willingly wouldn’t see) how cold he had treated Hana in actuality, and failed to recognize the more complex nuances of who Hana was as an individual apart from himself.

Asterios’ failure to recognize Hana’s artistic insights and emotional perspective thus reveals itself as the protagonist's major shortcoming, central to the progression of the narrative, and ultimately dramatizes itself in the comic’s stand-alone Orpheus section, where the various associations between the myth and his memories are able to play out freely. In this way, Asterios's fault in his relationship also becomes simultaneous to his failure to embrace the value in recombining fragmented elements of the past in order to reinterpret his memories from a new viewpoint and rupture his prior, limiting way of interpreting his past experiences. Only after looking back on the events of the comic and considering how Asterios and Hana to some extent fit into the roles of Orpheus and Eurydice and extend beyond the confines of the myth (hence reinterpreting these roles) can we understand the nuances of the Orpheus section’s reinterpretation of both the myth and Asterios’s memories of his relationship to Hana. That is, in failing to recognize Hana as the more ‘Orphic’ character – ignoring her artistic insights, emotional expressiveness, and integrity
as an individual – this metaphorically reflects on how he has in some sense kept the ‘real’ Hana at a distance from himself, an idea made symbolically salient in the Orpheus section by how Asterios's mistrustful glances backwards causes Hana to withdraw from him and cast her face in a deep, impenetrable darkness.

We can now see how the book prefigures Asterios’s failure to access the ‘reality’ of Hana as well as his inability to appreciate the reconstructive quality of memory through considering the two instances in which Asterios and Willy interpret her art in relationship to the interpretation of Orpheus in the comic. By being a stranger to Hana's darker, pained dimensions as expressed through her art (based in the very act of recombining scattered pieces of the world), Asterios simultaneously alienates himself from the reconstructive mode of interpreting memory – implying that his interpretative lens of subjecting reality to clear cut categories and linearity is indeed his Achilles heel and puts him at a distance from intimately understanding Hana, both during their marriage and in his memory of their relationship. In casting Hana as the set designer for Willy’s Orpheus (Underground), Mazzucchelli extends the significance of Asterios’s estrangement from an intimate perspective into Hana’s deeper psychology by illustrating the Underworld in the Orpheus myth in a way that evokes Hana’s idiosyncratic style of sculpture in her design of Hades. Beyond connoting the hazy, indeterminate terrain of memory and imagination through its surreal and sketchy aesthetic, the setting of Asterios's personal Hades looks as if it could have been designed by Hana; as Willy describes of the sculptures in her city studio, this set indeed appears even more-so to be “...a veritable vortex for the detritus of industrial society!” with its heaps of mechanical waste laid about the landscape, train tracks and pipes and gears taken apart from their intended structures and reassembled to form a unique cavernous architecture, and overall sense of desolation intoned by the dark style of this section.

Thus, Hana's designs – the reconstruction of scattered, forgotten objects compiled together to create a new form – color how Asterios had moved through his memories, where what symbolizes a certain, deeper emotional aspect of Hana becomes enlarged as this vast, intimidating,
and foreign atmosphere that Asterios must navigate through. Again, if we think of the Orpheus section as a meta-commentary on how Asterios had been revisiting his memories of his relationship with Hana, then the design of Hades perhaps represents our protagonist's own desolate emotions in trying to recapture a past that is lost; it also emphasizes how he had made himself a stranger to Hana in significant ways – where what is deeply personal and intimate to Hana becomes inaccessible to Asterios. At the same time, in this context of reflecting on his prior, idealized mode of remembering, this section represents how Asterios is beginning to see his journey into his own past as one in which he is trying to *confront* his relationship with his wife, and not simply look back nostalgically. To honestly encounter it means to recognize how he had 'estranged' himself from acknowledging what he had done wrong in his relationship – a recognition which perhaps looms over him and that he can only see clearly after letting go of his linear, idealized story of the past and embracing the fragmented, subjective aspects of his memory that enable this reinterpretation.

Ultimately, like Eurydice, Asterios's previous conception of Hana as his wife remains in the Underworld – and thus remains inaccessible as well – but she finally becomes her own person in Asterios's mind, independent of him and his need to define or categorize her. This is signified by the final few panels in the Orpheus section of the comic in which, with eyes wide open, he sees her in her own, independent spotlight.

Overall, this reinterpretation of the Orpheus myth culls together different dimensions and sources of tension within Asterios and Hana's relationship through the comic medium. The frame of mythology encourages us to compare and contrast Asterios and Hana with these mythological figures while, in complicating their association to these Greek archetypal characters, this deepens our understanding of the couple's relationship. The comic, then, uses the structure of myth to make a point about these characters, but it is still important to realize that Orpheus is just one part of the larger narrative and formal experience of comic. All these elements blend together in order to integrate the myth into the comic as a whole in a way that advances the comic's larger thematic concerns – primarily, that of the importance of reinterpreting one's memories by recombining
subjective elements of memories in order to form a new perspective of the past. So, while the myth of Orpheus informs Asterios and Hana's relationship, their relationship also extends beyond the constraints of this myth: in a sense, the myth invites us to go beyond its simple, archetypal form and invites reinterpretation. In paying attention to the ways that this mythical structure is reinterpreted and deconstructed in the comic, this allows us to glean importance insights into Asterios's prior view of the past and how his perception of his memories changes by taking a step back, recognizing the skewed ways in which he had been remembering, and acknowledging his responsibility in emotionally harming and distancing Hana.

Taking into account all these various dimensions of Asterios and Hana's relationship and how their characters draw upon and modify the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, the representation of this myth is an appropriate and revealing focal point that draws together these different elements of their relationship as well as Asterios's own past through the reinterpretation of this mythic narrative. Just as Willy's production of Orpheus (Underground) provides the pretense through which the underlying tensions between Asterios and Hana become magnified and expressed (namely, Asterios's inability to recognize Hana's perspective and see outside the fog of his own framework), this rendition of Orpheus that Mazzucchelli presents to us in the comic form provides a symbolic space for these tensions to emerge through revisiting fragments of memories within the frame of mythology. The representation of the myth thus draws attention to how remembering is an act of reconstructing disparate elements into a unique, subjective interpretation of past events. By using myth to reimagine the personal narrative within the comic form, Mazzucchelli orders the intangible into an intelligible form while doing away with clear linear structures in order to have the dynamic between Asterios and Hana and his changing viewpoint emerge out of experiencing the text as a whole.
Concluding Remarks

Despite how both *Epileptic* and *Asterios Polyp* illustrate memories (whether they be autobiographical or fictional) in the concrete, tangible form of a comic, the formal elements and narratives of both books attest to the importance of leaving the reconstruction of personal past open-ended – as memories (ethereal matter of the mind) are indeterminate, ever-fluctuating, and constantly reinterpreted. Unable to encapsulate memory as it is – because, well, there is no stable sense of memory to begin with – these comics instead allow us to see an *interpretation* of characters' memories, and recognizing the subjective elements of their memories allows these characters to more honestly unpack their pasts. The formal elements of comics, physical as they are, indeed articulate David B. and Asterios's subjective experiences of memory and grant us insight into their perspectives. But the emphasis on the 'fictive' elements of myth and storytelling in both narratives underscores how these comics only present one way of seeing into these characters' perspectives, as the subjective interpretation of memory cannot be pinned down and made objective: David's indeterminate snake and Mazzucchelli's use of the Orpheus myth highlight this fact. Thus, the 'fiction' of narrative helps to reinterpret of the past; myth informs the subjectivity of memory while structuring it.

These concerns about memory, myth, and personal narrative are, of course, not unique to comics. Other media explore these topics in their own distinctly profound ways, taking advantage of their respective formal elements to draw out something about the nature of memory. I've shown you through my readings, however, that we don't *need* to analyze comics in relation to other art forms in order to make sense of this medium and justify the rigor of the analysis. Instead of trying to prove the legitimacy of the comic form to academia, or worrying about how to properly analyze comics by trying to establish its unique properties from other media, I just read these comics and examined them through my experience of their characters, narrative structure, and formal elements. It was immersive, captivating, and incredibly rewarding for me to encounter *Epileptic* and *Asterios Polyp* in this way – why would I do it any differently?
Works Cited


Lee, M. Owen. “Mystic Orpheus: Another Note on the Three-Figure Reliefs.” Herperia 33 (1964).


