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# A Commentary on David Mazzucchelli's Asterios Polyp

Matthew Brien Bennett

Wesleyan University, pseudalous732@yahoo.com

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A COMMENTARY ON DAVID MAZZUCHELLI'S *ASTERIOS POLYP*

by

Matthew B. Bennett

Submitted to Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Liberal Arts

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Stephanie Kuduk Weiner  
Wesleyan University  
Associate Professor of English

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## **A Commentary on *Asterios Polyp***

### **A Note on the Commentary**

Commentary has been an accepted form of literary criticism for over two thousand years. The first literary commentaries appear as notes on manuscripts from the *Iliad*, which are dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. From that time onward critics have been writing commentaries on multitudes of works. From Richmond Lattimore's commentary on the *Iliad* to Nabokov's commentary on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, commentary has been a vehicle for literary criticism. With a commentary, a critic can engage the text in a wide variety of ways: he can explain literary structures throughout the work, fully explain references and allusions in the work, discuss possible variant versions of the work (if he is working from a translation or if there are multiple manuscripts), etc. Indeed, commentaries allow a critic to explore all of the philosophical, classical, literary, artistic, and structural elements of a text without being constrained by any specific limitations.

Each of my comments on *Asterios Polyp* will appear with a page number and a short description of the panel, or panels, involved. For commentary on more universal themes throughout the novel, such as Mazzucchelli's use of color to determine character and function, I will give a self contained essay which elucidates the technique on a broader level with reference to the entire work. These essays appear after the introduction and include: a timeline of events in the novel and notes on time, color, foreshadowing, Asterios' apartment, the *Odyssey*, Plato's *Symposium*, *Asterios Polyp* According to Nietzsche, and Orpheus.

**Introduction:**

This commentary seeks to create a method and apparatus for reading *Asterios Polyp*. It offers a way of reading, a method; it also offers essays which facilitate an understanding of the novel; and it offers interpretations and analyses. On one level, it appeals to the reader in us, desperate for a way to come to grips with a work which by its very nature defies traditionally held beliefs about comics and what constitutes a novel. On another level, it serves as a way for teachers and students to gain insight and knowledge of the text through a deeper understanding of the content and context of the novel.

At its heart, *Asterios Polyp* is both a tragic play and an epic poem in the manner of Sophocles and Homer. Much like its titular character, who is one half of a whole and through his journey becomes a union of two disparate yet linked classical philosophies, i.e. the Apollonian and Dionysian, *Asterios Polyp* unites two diametrically opposed genres in the ancient world, tragedy and epic. The discussion of a union between Apollo and Dionysus allows Mazzucchelli to create complex literary allusions and comparisons as well as to create characters that are rich, complex, and multi-faceted. The complex system of duality embodied by Apollo and Dionysus is embodied in Asterios himself, and Mazzucchelli uses a number of systems of duality throughout *Asterios Polyp* to illustrate Asterios' dualistic nature. Indeed, the theme of duality and its representation through systems which are governed only by their own internal logic are central to *Asterios Polyp*. I take up these issues in the commentary in notes on Nietzsche and in chapter 9.

Although *Asterios Polyp* looks and feels much like a tragedy with its union of the Apollonian and Dionysian, its epic heritage cannot be overlooked. Mazzucchelli alludes to Homer's *Odyssey* throughout *Asterios Polyp*, and the novel can also be viewed as Asterios'

epic journey to reclaim his sense of identity and reunite with his wife. *Asterios Polyp* conforms to the structure of the hero's journey that Joseph Campbell famously outlined: departure, initiation and return.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the novel also contains a number of other philosophies that both enhance and complicate its reading. It is in part a philosophical treatise on the nature of being, an issue it mainly approaches through a discussion of Plato's *Symposium*; it raises questions about the existence and passage of time and the formation of memory; and it explores the nature of perception through Mazzucchelli's use of color as well through allusions to the five Platonic solids. In addition to its references to classical philosophies, Mazzucchelli also explores post-modernist architectural theory by alluding to Louis Sullivan's maxim that "form ever follows function" and by making Asterios a paper-architect, an architect whose designs, although praised for their creativity and inventiveness, have never been built. Finally, Mazzucchelli pays homage to comic creators and artists such as Chester Gould and Charles Schulz, progenitors of the comic's world, in order to imbue *Asterios Polyp* with a sense of history and importance.

In its complexity and depth, *Asterios Polyp* represents the culmination of Mazzucchelli's career as an artist and a writer. He enjoyed an unusual level of freedom as the creator of this graphic novel, exercising control over every aspect of the book, from the page layout, size of the book itself, color choices, to the font used for each specific character. Indeed, it seems as if everything he did before *Asterios Polyp* served as preparation, enabling

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<sup>1</sup> For a more complete and detailed explication of the mono-myth, see:

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. 3rd ed. Novato: New World Library, 2008. Print.

him to create a novel that melds the physical and the metaphysical, the real and the ideal as well as the formal and aesthetic qualities of making comics.<sup>2</sup>

Asked in an interview when he started working on comics, David Mazzucchelli said that he began writing and drawing comic books as a boy (Mazzucchelli, *Sounds and Pauses*). David was always interested in art and earned a BFA from the Rhode Island School of design. A painter by trade, it was at RISD that he first began working in comic books, specifically in the genre of superhero comics. Mazzucchelli first achieved recognition for his artistic talents when he collaborated "with Frank Miller on the critically acclaimed *Batman: Year One* and *Daredevil: Born Again*, both of which showcased his naturalistic, yet expressive, approach to his art" (Mackay, qtd. in Contemporary Authors Online). MacKay continues in his article "A Master of Reinvention and his Masterpiece," "his stark moody art for Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One*, for example, contributed to his reputation as an innovator and remains a touchstone for many cartoonists today. (It also served as one of the

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<sup>2</sup> The information in this section of the introduction comes from four main sources:

Contemporary Authors Online. *David Mazzucchelli*. 2010. Gale Literary Databases. Web. 25 July 2013.

<<http://galenet.galegroup.com.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu/servlet/GLD/hits?r=d&origSearch=true&o=DataType&n=10&l=d&c=1&locID=31841&secondary=false&u=CA&t=KW&s=2&NA=Mazzucchelli>>.

Gravett, Paul. *Creator Profile: David Mazzucchelli*. n.d. Web. 25 January 2013.

<[http://paulgravett.com/index.php/profiles/creator/david\\_mazzucchelli](http://paulgravett.com/index.php/profiles/creator/david_mazzucchelli)>.

Mazzucchelli, David. *Sounds and Pauses: The Comics of David Mazzucchelli* Dan Nadel. 30 September 2009.

Print.

*David Mazzucchelli*. 25 January 2013. Lambiek. Web. 25 January 2013.

<<http://www.lambiek.net/artists/m/mazzucchelli.htm>>.

chief - if unheralded - inspirations for the 2005 blockbuster movie *Batman Begins*)" (MacKay). Comic artists like Chester Gould, Hergé, Alex Toth and Harvey Kurtzman all influenced Mazzucchelli's work on *Batman: Year One* (Mazzucchelli, qtd. in Gravett). However, Kurtzman's work featured the "simplicity of shape and expressiveness" which Mazzucchelli would carry into his own projects *City of Glass* and *Asterios Polyp*.

Mazzucchelli then moved away from superhero comics and began working with alternative comics. In the alternative comic's world, Mazzucchelli had more opportunities for taking artistic chances and exercising creative control. Although less lucrative, alternative comics were more serious and exciting. Mazzucchelli was the editor, with his wife, of the three-issue comic's anthology *Rubber Blanket*. According to Gil Roth, *Rubber Blanket* made Image Comics co-founder Rob Liefeld's head "blow off" (Roth). *Rubber Blanket*, a compilation of stories from separate authors, also included some of Mazzucchelli's own work. As he continued to edit *Rubber Blanket*, Mazzucchelli's contributions began taking up more of the magazine and he wanted more space for a longer story. The longer story that Mazzucchelli envisioned for the 4th issue of *Rubber Blanket* was *Asterios Polyp* (Mazzucchelli, *Sounds and Pauses*). That 4th issue of *Rubber Blanket* never materialized.

According to a *Publishers Weekly* contributor, with *City of Glass*, an adaption of Paul Auster's book published in 1994 on which Mazzucchelli collaborated with Paul Karasik, Mazzucchelli had introduced "a whole new set of resonances to Auster's story, about the things images can and can't represent when language fails" (Contemporary Authors Online). Mazzucchelli, in an interview at the Museum of Comics and Cartoon Art, talked about how the collaboration with Karasik informed and influenced his work on *Asterios Polyp*. While working on *City of Glass*, Mazzucchelli realized that the non-visual metaphysical nature of

Auster's novel made creating the book a good idea and that his job with *City of Glass* was to visualize things that by their very nature could not be visualized (Mazzucchelli, *Sounds and Pauses*). While working with Karasik, Mazzucchelli was able to combine Karasik's metaphorical and allegorical writing style with his own art, creating a work in *City of Glass* that earned Mazzucchelli the respect of the comic's world at large. He would use the same techniques in *Asterios Polyp*.

Published in 2009, early reviews hailed *Asterios Polyp* as “a masterpiece, the culmination of 25 years of promise,” in the words of Brad MacKay of the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (MacKay). Reviewers credit the novel with a technical and emotional maturity that is surprising in a first effort. Christopher Borell of the *Chicago Tribune* writes, “this is his first solo work . . . nothing in [his] background suggests the deft handling of time and regret that permeates *Asterios Polyp*” (Borell). “What Mazzucchelli accomplishes . . . with remarkable clarity and a jazzy pop-culture eye, and which the written word has a tougher time with, is portraying silence, moments between something said and something to come – even thought itself”; he continues, “Mazzucchelli is committed to tackling Big Ideas page by page, panel by panel and design by design, without the sweaty need for literary respect that drowns many promising graphic novels” (Borrell). MacKay calls it “an epic, emotionally rich, symbol-laden work that promises to redefine the graphic novel,” adding “Mazzucchelli has made a beautiful, elaborate construction that coyly juggles style and content in a way few cartoonists are capable of. . . There is so much going on in *Polyp* that it not only holds up to repeated readings, it kind of demands them” (MacKay).

Part of what makes *Asterios Polyp* so appealing to a wide reading audience is how Mazzucchelli was able to create a graphic novel that was uniquely his. Mazzucchelli

achieved this because he is obsessed with the "process of making comics" (MacKay). Mazzucchelli, having worked in the traditional comics business for some time, was well aware of the assembly line process of making comics and wanted to create something entirely his own with *Asterios Polyp*. In the traditional process of comic book making, first the writer of the comic creates a script from which the artist then begins to make sketches. Once the artist is done with the sketches, an inker takes the sketches and layers ink over them to provide depth and to fill out the visual elements of the comic. Finally, a colorer goes through the comic and adds color. Thus, there are no fewer than four people involved in creating any commercially published comic book. Mazzucchelli said in an interview at MoCCA that the last person who gets their hands on the artwork of a comic book is the one who ultimately determines what the comic looks like (Mazzucchelli, *Sounds and Pauses*). He had worked in each separate part of the comic book building process: as a penciler, inker, colorer and writer, and he longed to be in control of all of those aspects of the process.

Not only the physical aspects of comic's creation are important to Mazzucchelli, but also the formal and aesthetic elements of story structure and function. In an interview with Bill Kartalopoulos, Mazzucchelli said, "in a successful work of art, formal and aesthetic elements are inextricably linked; this was not only our goal with *City of Glass*, it continues to be my goal with all the work I do..." (qtd. in *Contemporary Authors*). Indeed, *Asterios Polyp* looks much different artistically from *City of Glass* or Mazzucchelli's previous collaborative work with Frank Miller on *Batman: Year One* and *Daredevil: Born Again*. According to Timothy Callahan,

If the "about the author" blurb was written by Mazzucchelli himself, which is highly likely, then it's telling that he would boldly differentiate between what

he's done in the past, "making comics," and this hardcover "graphic novel."

But "*Asterios Polyp*" is different, and as Mazzucchelli's first major solo project, it deserves to be treated differently. (Callahan)

Callahan points out that Mazzucchelli himself wants to differentiate what he has done in the past from what *Asterios Polyp* does as a novel. Another one of the byproducts of Mazzucchelli's focus on the formal and aesthetic elements of structure and function, according to Clough, is that "there's a hyperawareness of the way color in particular appears and interacts with other elements on the page. Very few cartoonists really think about color as the primary way of imparting information to the reader, and doing so in a way that is not an homage to past uses of color"(cf. a note on color) (Clough). Mazzucchelli constantly reinvents himself within his own artwork and *Asterios Polyp* expresses that reinvention because Mazzucchelli uses such different techniques in drawing, inking and coloring each of the characters in *Asterios Polyp*. He does not maintain any single style, but allows style to dictate meaning and function, which is one of the more expressive aspects of the novel.

*Asterios Polyp* is a multivalent work and as such requires a way of reading with which we are perhaps unfamiliar. This project at once defies and enriches the reading experience *Asterios Polyp* imagines for its readers. This commentary defies that reading experience by disentangling the strands that Mazzucchelli has artfully interwoven in the text and by making clear what is deliberately allusive, ambiguous, and obscured. My aim is to enrich reading by giving the reader a clear picture of the literary and artistic techniques that Mazzucchelli uses to create a story that weaves together spatial elements, literary ideas, a sense of silence, symbolism, believable characters and a gripping story—all of the elements of an excellent novel.

**A Note on Time and Pagination:**

The chapters of *Asterios Polyp* switch between present and past time, with odd numbered chapters in the present and even numbered chapters in the past. Only chapters 1, 17, and 18 deviate from this pattern. Chapters 1 and 17 take place both in the past and the present and chapter 18 takes place in neither the past nor the present, for it is a vision or dream sequence. The chronology of the novel is difficult to determine, so I have listed here important dates which appear in the novel.

Additionally, Mazzucchelli did not paginate *Asterios Polyp*, so any page number references correspond to my pagination of the book. I began my pagination with the page in which Asterios stands on a field of white, facing left, colored blue, and smoking a cigarette. That Mazzucchelli chose not to paginate the book seems to have been a conscious choice on his part. Surely Pantheon, *Asterios Polyp's* publisher, would have wanted Mazzucchelli to paginate the work. Not paginating the book makes the novel more difficult for the reader to engage. Indeed, this choice to increase the difficulty of the reading reflects Mazzucchelli's stance toward the reader. He does not want reading *Asterios Polyp* to be an easy experience. Furthermore, by not paginating the book, Mazzucchelli makes my own process of providing commentary more difficult. In a way, it is as though Mazzucchelli does not want provide the reader with the traditional tools with which to interpret the novel.

**Timeline of events:**

1948 - Hana's parents marry.

June 22, 1950 - Asterios Polyp born.

1959 - Hana is born. This may not be accurate. I have extrapolated this date based on the fact that Hana's parents were married in 1948 and Hana's mother had 4 sons in 5 years and then gave birth to Hana 6 years after. I am working under the assumption that Hana's parents did not wait to have children; however, the possibility remains that she could have been born later, but not that much later given that she is teaching at a University in 1984.

1984 - In the fall, Asterios meets Hana, his future wife, at a faculty party.

February 26, 1985 - Shortly after Hana and Asterios meet, Asterios takes Hana to his apartment in New York City for the first time.

Spring 1986 - Asterios and Hana marry.

Fall 1991 - Willy Ilium appears for the first time on campus in Ithaca.

September / November / December 21, 1993 - Asterios and Hana divorce.

June 22, 2000 - Asterios' apartment destroyed

July 4th, 2000 - Asterios is in Apogee

Late summer 2000 - Asterios travels to Minnesota and reunites with Hana. Moments after they reunite, an asteroid vaporizes both of them.

**A Note on color:**

Color is a very important aspect of *Asterios Polyp*, and Mazzucchelli chooses the colors he uses deliberately to illustrate character, mood, and meaning. Blues in the past and purples in the present characterize Asterios. Likewise, Hana appears in reds. Hana and Asterios are not the only characters who have colors ascribed to them, but it is important to know what Hana and Asterios' colors are as soon as a reader opens the novel.

John Baetans, in his article "From Black & White to Color and Back: What Does it Mean (not) to Use Color," notes,

Black and White, indeed, is often not black and white but *chromatic monochrome*: many comics not considered "in color" are actually not black and white but, for instance, blue or brown (perhaps depending on the price and availability of ink in the printing offices). (Baetans)

Indeed *Asterios Polyp* functions in much the same way as the books that are in chromatic monochrome, as Baetans himself points out,

A variation on this kind of monochromatic work is the combination of a black and white style with one supporting color, as Reinhard Kliest's (1994) *Lovecraft* and many chapters of David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp* (2009). Furthermore, these monochromes were not incompatible: thanks to the use of monochrome layers added to the drawings during the printing process, various monochromes could be combined (this is more particularly Mazzucchelli's approach in *Asterios Polyp*). (Baetans)

Page 3, the title page, shows a melding of two colors, blue and red, which corresponds to Baetans' belief in the structural use of color to denote meaning. For Baetans, this

Enables the reader to link elements across the limits of the panel, [and] is also a means of redefining the relationship between color as a narrative device and color as an anecdotic feature of fictional elements. (Baetans)

The blue and red meld to make purple and the melding of the colors represents the melding of the lives of the two main characters, Asterios and Hana. Another instance of color dictating meaning in *Asterios Polyp* appears on page 43. The woman saying, "when are you going to ask me out to dinner?" is red. In *Asterios Polyp* red is the color of both the seductive and the sentimental. Asterios' sexual activity is a form of sentimentality as all of the sexual activity in the novel takes place in the past. As such, because Asterios is recalling that activity, it reflects his understanding of past events and not necessarily the actuality of those events. Thus, red can also serve as the sentimental hue for Hana, as she appears in red when she appears in the past, but when Asterios reunites with her in the present narrative; she is not depicted in red, but rather in white, green and purple. Additionally, at the bottom of the page, Asterios changes from his blue to a purple as he begins thinking about having sex with the woman, and finally to red in the third small panel. Asterios' physical form also changes as his state of mind morphs from rational to passionate and as he gives into temptation. Indeed, whenever Asterios has sex with a woman, the color palette shifts so that Asterios is blue and the woman completely red, with the exception of Hana. The change in color reflects Asterios' change in thinking, which, in turn, demonstrates that Ignazio's philosophy of the individual's ability to change one's form, outlined on p. 38, is at play here.

Later on pages 62-65, Mazzucchelli colors each page intentionally red to indicate that each page exclusively concerns Hana. Mazzucchelli uses this same technique on pages 198-99. The page colors are red, showing that Asterios is completely in Hana's world. The significance of these changes involves Asterios' capacity—or incapacity—for genuine love.

Mazzucchelli also uses color to display the emotional states of his characters. On page 90, even though Asterios and Hana are equally colored, the blue couch on which they sit demonstrates that Asterios is the dominant member of the couple. The liberal use of blue illustrates Asterios' domination of the conversation and, through both picture and word, Asterios' indifference to Hana's point of view. Mazzucchelli also uses color to show emotion on pages 127, 130 and 131. As Hana's anger rises, the scene turns from a fairly normal depiction of the two characters back to their separate blue lines and red cross hatches. As she calms down, her lines change again from the red cross hatching to her "normal" self. On p. 131, Asterios' blue and Hana's red are muted as they lay together in a yin-yang position. Juxtaposing this with all of Asterios' other interactions with women, the reader sees that Asterios has found his Aristophanian other half (cf. Note on Plato's *Symposium*). The normal template of the novel breaks down again when Asterios and Hana fight over Willy Ilium on pages 230-33 and the reader sees Hana in her red cross hatching and Asterios in his blue line form.

Additionally Mazzucchelli uses color to illustrate a character's biases. On page 159, Asterios wears a red sweater and Hana a blue shirt. The use of color here illustrates that the two have fully melded their lives together. They are married at this point in the narrative and Asterios has, at least on some level, accepted parts of Hana as his own. Interestingly, though, on page 159, on returning home from Asterios' mother's, he takes off his red sweater to

reveal a blue undershirt, which reflects the true nature of his character and his inability to fully think of Hana as his partner. However, Hana is wearing blue underwear, Asterios' color, rather than red, her color. Mazzucchelli uses color to indicate the inequality in Asterios and Hana's relationship. She has fully integrated Asterios into her life but he has only integrated Hana on a superficial layer.

Color also denotes a sense of time. When events occur in the past, they are either in blues or reds, primary comic colors, while events that occur in the present happen in yellows and purples, secondary colors (purple was not a primary color used in comics although yellow was). In Chapter 1, the color palette changes half-way through the chapter, illustrating a time change in the chapter as a whole. The beginning of the chapter appears in the blue of the past until the lightning bolt hits the apartment on page 11. From that moment, the chapter is in purple and yellow, which indicate present time. This mid-chapter color shift only occurs in one other place in *Asterios Polyp*: directly after the bum hits Asterios and he loses one of his eyes. When Asterios awakens on page 302 after his partial-blinding, the color palette of the book has changed from yellows and purples to a much more muted palette of greens, blues and reds. The change in palette reflects the complete change in Asterios. He no longer thinks in terms of two colors, blue red or yellow purple, but rather in a range of colors and hues.

Critics have described color as Mazzucchelli's grammar of visual storytelling (Callahan). Rob Clough, in his review *Two and Three: Asterios Polyp*, says that Mazzucchelli's "character design is stylized to the point of telegraphing each character's purpose in the story immediately upon introduction. Temporality, mood and character interaction are entirely dictated by the very basic colors he employs" (Clough). Mazzucchelli

uses three colors as opposed to two in his work: blue, red and yellow, the three primaries, which function as a way for both Asterios and the reader to "see" who each character is. Although comics traditionally employ blacks, nowhere in this novel does the color black appear. Clough again,

I don't think it's an accident that it was three colors that dominated the book; the unstated importance of three instead of two (in this case, "color" vs "black and white") is repeated throughout the book as a sort of cosmic corrective for the titular protagonist. (Clough)

The use of color is inherently important in all comics, but because Mazzucchelli was the individual ultimately in control of the aspects of color in *Asterios Polyp*, the use of color can take on further meaning.

Mazzucchelli masterfully weaves color together to create a world in which color can illustrate a range of emotions and phenomena to the reader, be it love, anger, indifference, the passage of time, or reconciliation and growth in his characters. Additionally, Mazzucchelli uses color to dictate meaning in *Asterios Polyp*, as Baetans elucidates, and one should not read *Asterios Polyp* without grasping the importance of color as a narrative device rather than an anecdotal element of the novel. *Asterios Polyp* thrives with meaning and color is just one vehicle that Mazzucchelli uses to inform meaning.

### **A Note on Foreshadowing:**

Mazzucchelli foreshadows Asterios' death throughout *Asterios Polyp*. Each instance of foreshadowing helps the reader to realize that Asterios' ultimate end is not comic, but rather tragic; for, although he finds a semblance of meaning and solace in his life, Asterios dies at the end of the novel, which, on some level, makes the reader ask, "if Asterios dies in the end, then what was the point of the journey of self discovery?"

On page 5 the image of the cosmos represents both the instrument of Asterios' salvation and his destruction. Sent metaphorically from the heavens above, the lightning bolt that destroys Asterios' apartment enables him to set out on his journey of self discovery. The cosmos also represents the asteroid that ultimately destroys him.

Steven "Spotty" Drizzle first mentions asteroids on page 77 when discussing the possibility of an asteroid striking the Earth. Moreover, the words Asterios and asteroid share a common etymology. They both come from the Ancient Greek ἀστήρ, *star*, and it is poetic that Asterios should be annihilated, as it were, by himself. Additionally, the name Ursula Major foreshadows Asterios' death if the reader recalls that Ursula Major is a constellation.

The references to asteroids and the cosmos, however, are not enough for Mazzucchelli and he also employs delayed irony in his foreshadowing. Asterios, not knowing that a comet will hit and kill him, tempts the Gods to smite him on page 110, "Let's just say I have trouble with the idea that objects whirling through the firmament have a direct impact on my daily life." The reader does not know the outcome at this point, so the irony of this line does not come into focus until a second reading of *Asterios Polyp*.

Mazzucchelli not only foreshadows Asterios' death, but his partial-blinding as well. Asterios' name itself, Polyp, as a possible foreshortening of Polyphemos, alludes to his

existence as a myopic character as well as to a blinding, for Odysseus blinds Polyphemos in the *Odyssey*. Additionally, on page 271, the poster for "One Eyed Jack's" foreshadows Asterios losing his eye in the bar. Indeed, it is in the chapter where the poster appears that Asterios is partially blinded.

### **A Note on Asterios' Apartment:**

A particular drawing of Asterios' apartment appears in various states of order throughout *Asterios Polyp*. The physical state of the apartment mirrors Asterios' emotional state as well as his character in general.

Asterios' apartment appears for the first time on page 8 in the 2nd panel. The apartment is in disarray: clothes, old food, dead plants, and the detritus of a broken man litter the room. Hana's armoire and table still sit in the room (not that the reader would know this on an initial reading). Mazzucchelli uses a character's physical space to comment on that character's character, much in the same way he uses color. Asterios' space demonstrates that he suffers from a deep and all-consuming depression.

The image of Asterios' apartment burning on page 15 metaphorically and literally illustrates that Asterios has nothing: no home, no wife, no money, nothing. His life has been destroyed by a random act of god. The use of lightning as the instrument of destruction has meaning. Asterios, as the reader will later learn, prefers the Ancient Gods to the God of the Christians (cf. p. 284). Zeus, king of the gods and father of men, controls the lightning bolt and it is no coincidence that the item that sets Asterios on his journey of self discovery is the same item that the god Zeus uses.

The image of Asterios' apartment on page 91 reflects his life before Hana's entrance. Its straight lines and monochromatic blues indicate that the apartment is entirely his. When Hana moves in on page 160, the apartment indicates Hana's presence by taking on tones of reds and items that feature curves and asymmetrical lines. The image of the apartment on page 194 shows the integration of Hana and Asterios' lives into one another. Just as Mazzucchelli achieved this same union through the clever use of blues and reds, he also physically melds together their living environments. Hana's tansu sits in the corner of the room and the kidney shaped table sits in the middle of the apartment. Also, Hana has added plants to lend an organic, natural feeling into the apartment, offsetting the cold, straight lines and colors that Asterios favors.

#### **A Note on Asterios' eyes:**

Asterios almost always appears as half a face. The reader rarely sees images in which both of Asterios' eyes appear on the panel. The myopic view that the reader has of Asterios mirrors Asterios' own myopic worldview. In Asterios' world, things are only ever one way or another. As a man obsessed with duality, it is fitting that Asterios is represented by Mazzucchelli as a man who only ever shows one side of his face. In point of fact, panels in which the viewer sees both of Asterios' eyes only appear five times in the novel, on pages 10, 74, 90, 207 and 267. Both of Asterios' eyes would appear on page 322, but he has lost one of them, so the image of his face on this page is still cyclopean.

### A Note on Homer's *Odyssey*

*Asterios Polyp*, like many narratives that incorporate travel and searching, has parallels to Homer's *Odyssey*. However, Mazzucchelli does not simply write another version of the *Odyssey*. He writes episodes that refer to the *Odyssey* and the reader is asked to interpret the episode with previous knowledge of the *Odyssey*, for Asterios' actions rarely coincide with Odysseus'.

On page 43, Mazzucchelli refers to the sirens in regards to Asterios' amorous encounters. A woman propositions Asterios and he imagines himself as Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship passing by the island of the sirens (cf. p.43). Asterios' home is Ithaca, just as Odysseus' is. There are several references to Polyphemos, the Cyclops whom Odysseus blinds (cf. *Asterios Polyp* According to Nietzsche, p.20 and p.302). Indeed Polyphemos and Asterios are closely linked with one another, which is a departure from a typical re-telling of the *Odyssey*.

After Odysseus wanders the Mediterranean for 10 years after the Trojan War ends, he spends time with and receives help from the Phaeacians. Indeed Stiff's house and Apogee itself function as the island of the Phaeacians does for Odysseus, as a place of respite and reflection. The Phaeacians allow Odysseus to tell his story and refine his version of events just as Stiff's house and Apogee allow Asterios to rebuild his shattered life and complete his journey.

The most striking difference between the *Odyssey* and *Asterios Polyp* is that Odysseus lives after his return home while Asterios dies. For a more detailed discussion on Asterios' death cf. *Asterios Polyp* According to Nietzsche and p. 336-37. Although it shares epic traits and structure with the *Odyssey*, *Asterios Polyp*, is, at its heart, a tragedy and

Mazzucchelli kills Asterios in the end to fulfill his tragic purpose, which is to die directly after reaching his goals without being able to truly enjoy the fruits of his labor.

### ***Asterios Polyp According to Nietzsche***

On page 201, Willy Ilium, Asterios' rival for Hana's affections, states, "How can I hope to succeed surrounded by flaccid imaginations and puny minds, when my head, my head is filled with Nietzsche?" Although this is the first time Nietzsche's name appears in *Asterios Polyp*, his philosophy of Apollonian and Dionysian world views in *The Birth of Tragedy* underpins the whole of the novel.

Nietzsche identifies two forces, or deities who shape the origin of ancient Greek tragedy. He identifies these forces as the gods Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo represents all that is distinct, discrete, and individual; he represents the demarcation of "boundaries and limits" and "teaches an ethic of moderation and self control" (Guess in Nietzsche).

Apollonian artists favor beauty and symmetry in all things. They exult in presenting "attractive images of individual person, things and events" (Guess in Nietzsche). In addition, epic poetry represents the epitome of expression of Apollo in literature. The work of the Homeric is quintessentially Apollonian. Asterios fully embodies the traits of Apollo as an architect; he creates (or at least plans) attractive images of things, and he also makes discrete and distinct categories of things when he thinks of dualities. In direct contrast and competition to Apollo is Dionysus, who represents everything which Apollo does not. He is the transgressor of limits, the dissolver of boundaries, the destroyer of individuality and excess (Guess in Nietzsche). "Quasi-orgiastic forms of music, especially of choral singing

and dancing" represent the most authentic expression of art for the Dionysian (Guess in Nietzsche). I will later detail how Asterios experiences Dionysus in relation to tragedy.

The reader's initial encounter with Asterios illustrates Apollonian catharsis as Nietzsche describes it. This aspect of Nietzsche's account of Apollo connects Asterios to Apollo. According to Nietzsche,

With sublime gestures he [Apollo] shows us that the whole world of agony is needed in order to compel the individual to generate the releasing and redemptive vision and then, lost in contemplation of that vision, to sit calmly in his rocking boat in the midst of the sea. (Nietzsche 26)

Asterios acts just as Apollo in this instance. He suffers unimaginable emotional torment before and after his apartment burns down. He and Hana divorced in 1993 and it is 2000 before he decides, via the gods, to correct his life. The loss of his wife, apartment and all of his worldly possessions provides the "world of agony" that generates Asterios' redemptive vision. He sets out, "lost in contemplation of that vision," by traveling to Apogee. Asterios completes the redemptive vision during his prophetic Orphic vision.

Additionally, Asterios conforms to Nietzsche's description of suffering. Nietzsche says,

The heroic urge of the individual to reach out towards the general, the attempt to cross the fixed boundaries of individuation, and the desire to become the *one* world being-itself, all this leads him to suffer in his own person the primal contradiction hidden within the things of this world, i.e. he commits a great wrong and suffers. (Nietzsche 50)

Asterios, before his divorce from Hana, certainly acts in this way. He is arrogant, self-centered and, shown on page 40 as a colossus, desires "to become the one world being itself." He stands like a god in front of his students, bending them to his will. It is Asterios' hubris that leads him to his downfall and it is his fulfillment of the tragic paradigm that leads to his death. Dionysus and Apollo, although diametrically opposed, are two sides of the same coin. They are both gods of music and the theater, as well as gods who serve as destroyers. Apollo brings the plague in book 1 of the *Iliad* in the aspect of the archer god. Dionysus also embodies a savage nature as often his followers commit acts of unbelievable violence. The Maenads tear Pentheus to pieces in Euripides' *Bacchae* because of Dionysus' ministrations (Euripides, *Bacchae*). Nietzsche writes,

In this existence as a dismembered god, Dionysos has a double nature; he is both cruel, savage demon and mild, gentle ruler... The fundamental recognition that everything which exists is a unity; the view that individuation is the primal source of all evil; and art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation can be broken, a premonition of unity restored... is the doctrine of the Mysteries taught by tragedy. (Nietzsche 52)

Nietzsche eschews the idea that a clear set of dualities exist. By pointing out that Dionysus embodies his own duality, Nietzsche points out that dualities are in fact unities. Such a reading of Apollonian and Dionysian dynamics complicates Asterios' value system.

Nietzsche argues, "indeed he [the ancient Greek] was bound to feel more than this: his entire existence, with all of its beauty and moderation, rested on a hidden ground by the Dionysiac. And behold! Apollo could not live without Dionysos" (Nietzsche 27). Asterios, as a twin and as an Apollonian, embodies a dual nature of his own, which explains why he cherishes

the dualities he observes in nature. Yet Asterios, like Apollo, cannot live without Dionysus—and indeed he is like Dionysus, for Dionysus is like Apollo. Both Dionysus and Apollo are gods of music and theatre. Furthermore, perhaps the entire point of *Asterios Polyp* is that Asterios, because of his dual nature, can fulfill the doctrine of the Mysteries taught by tragedy. Asterios, through Hana and his own designs, experiences art "as the joyous hope" that can break the spell of individuation and restore the unity which Asterios seeks.

There are two forms of Greek theatre and, indeed, one could argue that all stories fall into one of two categories: comedy or tragedy. *Asterios Polyp* conforms to the traditional tragic structure. In a tragedy, a great problem typically leads the protagonist to reach beyond himself and then to fall to ruin, which the ancient Greeks called the *ōtē* cycle. Often, redemption comes for the hero, although he inevitably dies in the end. Oedipus, Hamlet, Romeo and countless other heroes die in the closing moments of their stories. So too, Asterios has already fallen into ruin at the beginning of the novel, which is as much about his fall from grace as it is about his redemptive odyssey. However, unlike Odysseus, Asterios does not survive to enjoy his redemption. In this way, *Asterios Polyp* is both tragic drama and epic poetry, two genres, which, in Nietzsche's mind, are opposed to one another. Thus *Asterios Polyp* becomes a unity of two disparate genres that generally stand in oppositional duality to one another.

Paradoxically, tragedy brings Dionysus and Apollo into an alliance. The result of that alliance is the unity of which Nietzsche speaks. The purpose of tragedy is to bring the audience "close to the basic horror of things," in order to bring about a cathartic change in the audience (Nietzsche). This change is not a "demoralization," but rather an

enervation which allows those audience members who can tolerate the message of tragedy to live their lives "more vividly," just as Nietzsche wants them to (Guess in Nietzsche).

*Asterios Polyp*, like Greek tragedy, brings together Dionysus and Apollo in Asterios to energize the audience. Viewed through this lens, the ending of *Asterios Polyp* makes a great deal more sense. Asterios dies at the end of his journey and at his moment of happiness to show the reader the "basic horror of things," which, if they are able to tolerate it, results in "an increase in one's ability to live vividly."

*Asterios Polyp* can, then, be understood as a tragedy. The success of tragedy hinges upon the cooperation of both Dionysus and Apollo. Dionysian music and Apollonian illusions must be combined to produce successful tragedies; however, tragedy can only exist in cultures in which the citizenry is "physically vital and robust enough to tolerate engagement with the truth which tragedy submits" (Guess in Nietzsche). So tragedy requires the cooperation of two gods, or two forces, which are diametrically opposed as well as a citizenry that can tolerate engagement with that tragedy. *Asterios Polyp* corresponds to this particular tragic structure.

Yet Nietzsche also touches on the idea of Plato's ideal form, which also informs the themes and purpose of *Asterios Polyp*. Nietzsche again,

If we ignore for a moment our own 'reality' and if we take our empirical existence and indeed that of the world in general, to be a representation (*Vorstellung*) generated at each moment by the primordial unity, we must now regard the dream as a *semblance of the semblance* and thus as a yet higher satisfaction of the original desire for semblance. (Nietzsche 26)

When Nietzsche talks about the semblance, he is speaking about the theory of Plato's ideal form, i.e. the notion that that which humans perceive to be an object is not that object's true form. Plato argues that when people look at a chair, they see what they perceive to be a chair rather than the chair's ideal or unperceivable form. Plato also argues that the only people who can discern that form are wise philosopher kings (Plato, *Republic*). Nietzsche's semblances, by contrast, are those things that humans do perceive, while dreams offer a deeper layer for understanding an object than waking observation. Ignazio says much the same thing in chapter four (cf. p.38).

In addition to Plato's ideal forms, Nietzsche also defines how tragedy fits into Asterios' love of platonic solids,

Using Plato's terminology, one would have to say something like this about the tragic figures of the Hellenic stage: the one, truly real Dionysos manifests himself in a multiplicity of figures, in the mask of a fighting hero and, as it were, entangled in the net of the individual will. In the way that he now speaks and acts, the god who appears resembles an erring, striving, suffering individual; and the fact that he *appears* at all with such epic definiteness and clarity, is the effect of Apollo, the interpreter of dreams, who interprets to the chorus its Dionysiac condition by means of the chorus. In truth, however, this hero is the suffering Dionysos of the Mysteries, the god who experiences the sufferings of individuation in his own person, of whom wonderful myths recount that he was torn to pieces by the Titans... at the same time, it is indicated that his being torn into pieces, the genuinely Dionysiac *suffering*, is like a transformation into air, water, earth, and fire, so that we are to regard

the state of individuation as the source and primal cause of all suffering, as something inherently to be rejected. (Nietzsche 52)

The platonic solids, especially the tetrahedron, fire, octahedron, water, and icosahedron, air, are easily broken into pieces and reconstituted into other forms because of their basic form, the equilateral triangle. Thus Dionysian suffering is the same as the changing forms of the platonic solids, which are the "best and most beautiful" forms in the universe.

Nietzsche also argues that the hero of the story often gives in to the pessimism of Silenus' prophecy, which states that the best thing for a man is not to be born, and if he is indeed born, to die as soon as possible. But Asterios, once he is partially blinded, does not. Nietzsche writes,

Once truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks; now he understands the symbolism of Ophelia's fate, now he grasps the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus: he feels revulsion. (Nietzsche 40)

Asterios' partial-blinding, although it enables him to finally "see the truth," as Nietzsche says, does not make him feel the pessimism that Nietzsche describes here; rather, it renews him and enables him to complete his journey. Asterios needed to experience the realities of both Apollo and Dionysus. He lived as an Apollonian up to the point of his divorce. After his divorce, though, during his time of suffering, Asterios is more Dionysian. To truly realize his Dionysian side and thus complete the unity of tragedy and his own story, Asterios needed to be intoxicated and at least listening to, if not participating in, Dionysian music, which he was while Celtic Skelter was playing in the bar. Asterios completes his suffering when the bum partially blinds him and he realizes that he should travel to Minnesota and vie again for

Hana. So, departing from Nietzsche's philosophy of pessimism, Asterios embraces optimism.

For Nietzsche, in addition, transformations and enchantment are not only essential to all stories but to tragedy in particular,

Enchantment is the precondition of all dramatic art. In this enchanted state the Dionysiac enthusiast sees himself as a satyr, and *as a satyr he in turn sees the god*, i.e. in his transformed state he sees a new vision outside himself which is the Apolline perfection of his state. With this new vision the drama is complete. (Nietzsche 44)

Although Asterios does not become a satyr when he is partially blinded, he does go through a transformation and is metaphorically turned into another Greek monster, Polyphemos, son of Poseidon and Thoosa. Once half-blinded, Asterios sees that to finish his journey he must travel to Minnesota and Hana in his own "vision outside himself." Indeed it is Asterios' partial blinding that allows him to see the god and receive his "new vision."

Asterios' death at the end of the novel gains meaning and clarity in light of Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche asserts,

[The] primal ground of tragedy radiates, in a succession of discharges, that vision of drama which is entirely a dream appearance, and thus epic in nature; on the other hand, as the objectification of a Dionysiac state, the vision represents not Apolline release and redemption in semblance, but rather the breaking asunder of the individual and its becoming one with the primal being itself. (Nietzsche 44)

Asterios is torn asunder by the asteroid that kills him and becomes one with the primal being. The last image in the novel is the asteroid on a field of stars, which symbolizes Asterios' own ascension to that plane of existence.

Lastly, According to Nietzsche, all heroes of tragedy are in some way derivatives of Dionysus, who was the first and only hero present on stage at the incipience of tragedy,

But one may also say with equal certainty that, right down to Euripides, Dionysos never ceased to be the tragic hero, and that all the famous figures of the Greek stage, Prometheus, Oedipus etc. are merely masks of the original hero, Dionysos. The fact that there is a deity behind all these masks is one of the essential reasons for the 'ideal' quality of those famous figures which has prompted so much astonishment. (Nietzsche 51)

If, then, all tragic heroes are on some level Dionysus, and if both Oedipus and Orpheus the perfect Apollonian are linked to Dionysus through tragedy, then Asterios is connected not only to Oedipus and Orpheus but also to Dionysus. Such a supposition may seem strange given Asterios' strong Apollonian nature, but one must remember that Dionysus and Apollo are two sides of the same divine coin. Asterios is, then, a character who is not opposed to Dionysus, but is rather an amalgamation of both Dionysus and Apollo. Not only is Asterios both Dionysus and Apollo, but he is also his brother Ignazio. In this way, Asterios can fulfill the function of tragedy and unify Apollo and Dionysus to create a state in which the reader can comprehend Asterios' downfall and live his or her own life more fully.

Functionally, the novel leads readers through Asterios' own progression that breaks down binary focalization into a unity of binaries.

By drawing a clear and discrete link between Apollo and Dionysus, Nietzsche enables a reader of *Asterios Polyp* to draw a clearer link between Asterios and Apollo and therefore Dionysus. Indeed, Nietzsche allows us to solve the problem of Asterios' dual identity in the novel. Asterios spends the novel searching for his twin, his Aristophanian other half, not realizing that he always had exactly what he needed.

### **The Orphic Vision**

Following the idea that Asterios' ethical leaning is towards duality and Apollonian reality, Mazzucchelli uses the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as his most extended mythological allusion. The Orphic vision serves as an opportunity for Mazzucchelli to weave together Asterios' duality with a specific mythological allusion. By equating Orpheus and Asterios, Mazzucchelli imbues Asterios with even more concrete ties to Apollo.

Mythologically, Orpheus represents Apollo, and in some traditions he is Apollo's son as well as an archetypal poet, musician, and architect. Indeed, duality exists in both Orpheus and Apollo, and Orpheus does not conform to a single belief structure, but rather embodies a collection of belief structures. Indeed, Orpheus' nature is as blurred as Apollo's, Dionysus' and Asterios'. As Simon Hornblower writes, "his [Orpheus'] powerful song encompasses epic poetry, healing songs, oracles and initiatory rites" (Hornblower). The similarities of the two should not be ignored, but, according to the *Life of Apollonius Tyana*, Apollo silenced Orpheus' oracle for it encroached on Apollo's own oracular sphere (Philostratus). Other elements of Orpheus' legend are similar to the legends of Dionysus: both Orpheus and Dionysus are torn to pieces, Orpheus by Maenads and Dionysus by the Titans (Guthrie, Hornblower). Additionally, Orpheus and Dionysus both descend into the underworld to save

a woman: Orpheus for Eurydice and Dionysus for Semele (Hornblower). These aspects of the Orpheus story mirror Asterios' search for duality in all things. Asterios, however, is wrong, according to Apollonian mythology, to look for the duality of polar opposites; Apollo is not Dionysus' polar opposite, for Apollo embodies both positive and negative traits. Apollo himself has an internal duality, as does Orpheus, who is both Apollonian and Dionysian. Asterios worships the real of Apollo while refusing to recognize Apollo's Dionysian side. Apollo is often depicted not only as the god of music and poetry; in book I of the *Iliad*, Apollo is responsible for the plague. It is the same with Orpheus, who, according to Apollodorus, originally was a follower of Dionysus and who was torn to pieces by Maenads for not giving Dionysus the proper honors (Apollodorus). Thus Orpheus, father of music and poetry, shares the dual nature of Apollo and Dionysus. Asterios then, as a corollary to Orpheus and Apollo, must also share their dual natures.

Asterios, in chapter 18, imagines himself as Orpheus, traveling into the underworld to retrieve Eurydice/Hana from the clutches of Hades/Willy. Asterios, armed with his T-square turned lyre, sings for Cerberus—a group of three dogs—and passes down into the underworld—the New York subway. The subway track represents the river Styx and the subway car serves as the ferryboat to Hades. During his descent he sees the spirits of those who were in his life. He uses his art, singing, to soothe these spirits. He then enters a theatre and begins to play his lyre, replaying the death of Eurydice on the stage. Willy arrives and is so moved that he weeps. Asterios then asks for Hana back and Willy assents, but warns Asterios not to look at Hana until they reach the upper world. Hana does not know this and continually attempts to get Asterios to look at her. He does not, until he realizes she is slipping away from him. He turns to look at her, and she is gone, hurled back to Hades and the arms of

Willy. The twist on the Orpheus myth here is that in the original Orpheus myth Eurydice does not coax Orpheus to look at her. Hana's attempts to get Asterios to look at her in the dream mirror those same attempts in reality, and just as in reality, Asterios does not open his eyes to truly see Hana until it is too late. Unlike Orpheus, however, Asterios' experience is just a dream and it provides him the opportunity to find his Eurydice again. The Orphic vision makes both the reader and Asterios reflect on his decisions to this point in the narrative and it illustrates Asterios' and Hana's relationship in another way.

### **A Note on Plato's *Symposium***

On pages 82-83, Mazzucchelli invites the reader to view Asterios' world through a different lens: the philosophical world view of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. This reference also distances the novel from a formulaic plot in which the hero achieves his goals and lives happily ever after.

Ignazio refers to Plato's *Symposium* and Aristophanes' theory of the original human form. The reference serves as a theory for the driving force behind human behavior. According to Aristophanes, humans were initially "spherical, with four arms, four legs, and two faces on either side of a single head." Humans were then split and forced to spend their whole lives trying to find their lost counterparts. Ignazio says, "men and women have been running around in a panic, searching for their lost counterparts in a desire to be whole again." Indeed the entire theme of Aristophanes' story in the *Symposium*, according to K.J. Dover, is

The origin of sexual love ... a type prominent in many different cultures, including preliterate cultures, in the Old and the New World alike. Motifs belonging to this type include: changes in the size and shape of human beings,

changes in the position of the genitals and breasts or in the texture of the skin, changes from double people to single people, and the origins of sex differentiation. (Dover 42)

Mazzucchelli thus juxtaposes Aristophanes' story with images of Asterios having sex with several women. The German literary philosopher Georg Lukacs, in his book *The Theory of the Novel* asserts that all characters in the novel are seekers (Lukacs). Asterios provides an exemplar of a character who seeks to derive meaning in his life from a world that does not necessarily make sense. Mazzucchelli establishes, using both Aristophanes' theory and Asterios' duality as well as his search for Ignazio or a mate with whom he is compatible, that Asterios too is a seeker.

Aristophanes also warns in his speech of angering the gods. Given that the gods, or coincidence, capriciously kill Asterios and Hana, Dover's interpretation of Aristophanes' words has more weight,

Aristophanes is made to say (193a 3-b 6) 'there is, then, a danger that if we do not behave as we should towards the gods we shall be cut in two again, and go round like figures in relief'. The warning has affinities with the moral which is normally the point of a fable, the contrition often expressed at the end by a character in a folktale, and, rather strikingly. (Dover 44)

In Dover's view, the way to appease the gods is to fulfill their wishes and act with contrition. Even though Asterios does this by completing his odyssey and reconciling with Hana, in the end, he still perishes. Although Asterios does not specifically transgress into the realm of the gods, and as such, should not arouse their wrath as Aristophanes posits in the *Symposium*, he still suffers from their capricious nature and is punished for seemingly doing the right thing.

It is possible that Asterios' hubris and belief in himself is what caused the gods to smite him. But, considering that he changes and learns to see past his own myopic world-view, Aristophanes' assertion and the ending of the novel become more problematic. I think, though, that the answer is simple; Mazzucchelli has no interest in telling a hero story, so he makes sure that Asterios does not enjoy the fruits of his odyssey. His death proves Lukacs' point because Asterios is never really given the opportunity to stop seeking. Instead, the moment he reaches what he thinks is his destination, he dies. Perhaps, then, Asterios had not in fact fulfilled his quest.

### **Commentary on *Asterios Polyp***

#### **Front and back pages:**

The front page is blue, the color in which Asterios generally appears; the back page is red, the color in which Hana generally appears. On both pages are flowers. The flowers represent Hana, as her name means flower in Japanese. On the front page Mazzucchelli has already told the trained reader how to look at the novel. It is possible that the color blue on the front page stands in metonymy for Asterios and the flowers are metonymy for Hana. Asterios literally surrounds Hana on the front page and Mazzucchelli demonstrates, through his deft use of color, how Asterios overshadows Hana.

p. 1 and 2 - The first two pages of the novel serve as a mirror of sorts of the title character. On page 1, the reader sees Asterios as an incarnation of his past self, arrogant and egocentric. He stands with an expression of indifference, cigarette in hand. On the second page, Asterios

is an incarnation of his present self, missing the arrogance and bravado of his past self. He no longer wears a suit and has his hands in his pockets and his shirt sleeves rolled up. He is also yellow now as opposed to blue. The two pages of Asterios that appear before the main title page of the novel indicate to the reader that the story in *Asterios Polyp* concerns one character, but in two different states of being.

## **Chapter 1:**

### **Synopsis and themes:**

Asterios watches tapes of his ex-wife Hana in his disheveled apartment. A lightning bolt strikes the apartment and all of Asterios' worldly possessions are destroyed. Asterios escapes the fire with three items: a watch, a pocket knife, and a lighter. Mazzucchelli sets up several motifs which reoccur throughout the novel, namely the three possessions. Asterios' twin towered apartment also begins to establish a key theme of the novel, duality.

p.5 - The cosmos (cf. a note on foreshadowing).

p.8 - 2nd panel, - Asterios' apartment, cf. note on Asterios' apartment.

p.9 - 2nd and 3rd panels: There are 47 messages on Asterios' answering machine and his coffee cup has the number 13 on it.

The number 47 has cultural significance in the United States to two specific sets of the populace: those who attended Pomona College in Claremont, California, or those versed in the lore of the science fiction franchise *Star Trek*. In the summer of 1964, two students

from Pomona College, Laurens Mets '68 and Bruce Elgin '68, sought to determine whether or not the number 47 was the most often occurring random number in the universe.<sup>3</sup> Because the number 47 was so prevalent on and around the Pomona campus, Elgin and Mets theorized that it was the secret to the universe. Mets and Elgin received some unexpected help that summer from statistician Donald Bentley, who "showed his students a parody of a proof illustrating that all numbers are equal. Although it was meant to be used as a classroom lesson on statistical computing, leave it to the 47-hunters to twist the proof to mean that all numbers equal 47" (Dolinar). Using Bentley's proof as a guide, graduates of Pomona have surreptitiously added 47 to representational media since the summer of 1964. For example, Joe Menosky, a graduate of Pomona, worked as a writer on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and added the number 47 into almost every episode on which he worked. Once other writers on *Star Trek* learned what Menosky was doing, they too began adding 47 into their own writing. The result was that almost every episode of *Star Trek* written since Joe Menosky began writing for the series has a reference to the number 47. It is possible that Mazzucchelli added 47 into the narrative as an homage to the 47 hunters of Pomona.

The number 13 serves as a foreshadowing to the reader that something terribly unlucky is about to befall Asterios. From months that have a Friday the 13th and builders' avoidance of 13th floors in their building or rooms numbered 13, the number 13 represents superstition and mysticism. Reasons for this superstition are varied, but they seem to stem

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<sup>3</sup> The information in this section comes from:

Dolinar, Sarah. "The Mystery of 47." *PCM Online* Fall 2000. Web. 1 July 2013.

<<http://www.pomona.edu/Magazine/pcmfl00/1.shtml>>.

from the Christian tradition in which 13 men sat and ate at last supper and Jesus was then later betrayed by Judas Iscariot.

p.10 - all panels: Asterios watches a video on his TV. He looks forlorn and dirty. Clearly depressed, the entirety of Asterios' face appears on the top panel (cf. note on Asterios' eyes). At first, Mazzucchelli leads the reader to believe that Asterios is watching a sex tape of himself and some woman. Certainly the tapes strewn around the bed and the sound coming from the TV, "mmm... oohh... that's good..." indicate that possibility. In actuality, the tape Asterios watches depicts the first time in which he brought his wife Hana to his apartment in New York to share a meal. The sounds emanating from the TV, "mmm... it's soo good..." come from Hana as she marvels at the food, not at a sex act. Mazzucchelli intentionally challenges the reader's perceptions of his characters. Here, he wants the reader to believe that Asterios is some type of degenerate, watching pornography alone in his apartment; however, when the reader learns the truth, Asterios becomes a much more sympathetic character and the depth of his pathos increases. Mazzucchelli does not want to create characters who are one dimensional; he wants to create characters that are complex and multi-faceted. Distorting the reader's perception of a character helps Mazzucchelli achieve this goal.

P.10 - 2nd panel. See note on page p.20.

p.11- whole page. There are 3 different Asterioses on this page. One appears in the negative space of the white of the lightning bolt, a second in the dark space of his shape, and a third

thrown as a shadow on the wall. It is as if the lightning bolt metaphorically splits Asterios, reflecting Mazzucchelli's desire to illustrate a change in Asterios from a character that believes in duality into a character that sees more than two sides to an issue (cf. a note on color). From this point on, when the narrative is in the present time, Asterios is no longer blue but yellow with purple lines, except in the last chapter of the novel.

p.13 - Of all of Asterios' possessions, he takes a Swiss army knife, a watch and a lighter. These three items are also not simply lying around, but are buried among Asterios' possessions. He takes time to find them before escaping his apartment. The significance of these three items should not be ignored. Each serves a specific function in Asterios' life. The watch was the first he had ever fixed; the knife, found on the beach by Hana, is a perfect union of beauty and utility; and the lighter was his father's. The fact that Asterios takes three items is also indicative of a conversation that he has with Hana on page 161 in which she asks him, "What if you had to leave [the apartment] suddenly and you could only take three things -- what would they be?" Asterios' response is, "I don't think in terms of three." Mazzucchelli sets up early Asterios' desire for duality in his life, but also alludes to his ability to think outside of dualistic terms (cf. p.11 and a note on color).

p.15 - Asterios' living room: devoured by flames, cf. note on Asterios' apartment.

p.16-17 - The fire consumes Asterios' library of tapes. The reader will learn later that the tapes in this room represent the totality of Asterios' life. He videotapes his life because it makes him feel as if there is always someone watching him, namely, his dead twin brother

Ignazio. Once the flames engulf the tapes, the entire record of Asterios' life is obliterated. Losing the tapes and his apartment gives Asterios the ability to start anew and to begin the redemptive journey that ultimately results in his death (cf. *Asterios Polyp* According to Nietzsche).

## **Chapter 2:** The past

### **Synopsis and Themes:**

Mazzucchelli clarifies Asterios' past. Asterios, a paper architect, had won many awards for his designs, but none of them had ever been built. He taught in Ithaca, New York and met his wife Hana while teaching. Ignazio is introduced both as the narrator of the story and as Asterios' dead twin brother. Mazzucchelli furthers the discourse of duality in this chapter and shows Asterios' *modus operandi*. Mazzucchelli also explores how Asterios' existence as a surviving twin informs and explains his belief in duality.

p.19-20 - The chapter heading has a circle with a picture of past Asterios and the next page, has, in another circle, a picture of present Asterios as his apartment is burning in exactly the same place, surrounded by the first narrative text of the novel. The two circles represent a coin that the reader can see by flipping both pages back and forth. On the one side, there is Asterios the tenured professor at a prestigious college in upstate New York and on the other there is the broken, present day Asterios. Asterios believes in duality and that there are "two sides to every coin"—or, more accurately, that there are two sides to everything, *only* two (cf. *Asterios Polyp* in Nietzsche and a note on Plato's *Symposium*).

p. 20 - "If it were possible for me to narrate this story..." The present contrary-to-fact, conditional statement tells the reader that it is not possible for the narrator, Ignazio, Asterios' dead twin, to narrate the story—yet he *is* the narrator. Mazzucchelli does not use himself as the narrator because Ignazio renders Asterios a physical representation of duality: he was split in two in utero.

From a meta-fictional standpoint, that Ignazio tells the story is of utmost importance. As Atkinson explains in his article "The Graphic Novel as Metafiction", "[the] uncertainty as to who is speaking and from where they are speaking is central to metafiction, which, like 'surfiction', leads the reader to reflect upon the text's artificiality and, in doing so, question the structure of referentiality and the boundary that separates fictional and non-fictional worlds" (Atkinson). Ignazio certainly adds Atkinson's uncertainty into *Asterios Polyp*. If Ignazio is dead and cannot tell the story, is the story being told? Yes, Ignazio tells the story, but by his own admission he cannot tell the story. Thus, the question then becomes, who tells Asterios' story? Is it Asterios himself or David Mazzucchelli?

p.20 - "This is Asterios Polyp." Asterios Polyp, the name of the titular character, is an etymological allusion. Asterios' name comes from the Ancient Greek ἀστήρ, *star*, and Polyp means *many*. So, Asterios' name means *many stars*. A sun is, of course, a star, and Asterios, a student of form and theory in architecture, has a decidedly Apollonian view of the world. Apollo, as well as being the god of music, intelligence, healing, and architecture is also the god of the sun. Thus the name Asterios Polyp—many Apollos—illustrates that Asterios is concerned with order and intelligence and that he, like the sun, is self-centered.

There is another possibility to the meaning of Polyp. On page 24, Ignazio states that "an exasperated Ellis island official had cut the family name in half, leaving only the first five letters." There was more to Asterios' surname, but like he himself, it was cut in half. If, as the statement suggests, there were another 5 letters to Polyp, , one can infer, given the number of references to Greek mythology, the number of times we see only one of Asterios' eyes, and Asterios' eventual loss of an eye, that the missing letters are *-hemos*, which means Asterios' last name is really Polyphemos. Polyphemos is the Cyclops of Homer's *Odyssey* and Asterios is metaphorically myopic, so the name is apropos. Very rarely does the reader see both of Asterios' eyes in a picture; it is as if he only has one eye, just like the Cyclops (cf. note on Asterios' eyes). Later in the narrative (cf p. 279), Asterios becomes monocular just like a Cyclops when a bum partially blinds him by smashing a beer bottle in his face. Mazzucchelli ties in all these elements to show his interest in the *Odyssey* as well as to develop the theme of Asterios' duality, and to create characters that are multi-faceted. Asterios' name alone tells us that he is both Odysseus and Polyphemos (cf. note on the *Odyssey*).

p.21 - "He spent most of his time upstate, teaching at a university in Ithaca." The university, never named, must be Cornell. Ithaca college is also in Ithaca, but it is not a university, and a man of Asterios' educational stature and arrogance would not teach anywhere other than an ivy-league school. He is too elitist to teach elsewhere. Ithaca is a clear reference to the home of Odysseus, hero of Homer's *Odyssey* and an ubiquitous symbol in both homecoming and travel narratives. *Asterios Polyp* is, in essence, a tale of homecoming as the narrative ends with Asterios reuniting with Hana after his return from Apogee.

p. 24 - Top panel. In Asterios' boyhood bedroom there are illustrative examples of his dual nature. His bed has the double-helix structure of DNA. A picture of Tweedledum and Tweedledee as well as a picture of the statue of Romulus and Remus suckling on the she-wolf appear. Each of these images represents a physical depiction of twins, of which Asterios is the living twin.

Tweedledee and Tweedledum, best known for their appearance in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, published in 1871, are not only twins, but have an older literary tradition as well. They first appear in an epigram by John Byrom that satirizes the arguments between George Frideric Handel and Giovanni Battista Bononcini (Thomas). Tweedledum and Tweedledee were closer than any of the other twins that Asterios has on display in his room and I believe Mazzucchelli uses them not only to show that Asterios lacks his twin but to emphasize the point that twin pairings are very close by nature.

The theme of twins resonates with Asterios because he himself is a twin, although his brother Ignazio was stillborn. However, there is a sequence at the beginning of chapter 19 (cf. p.294-301) in which Asterios imagines driving into Apogee and finding Ignazio fixing cars, having taken up the life that Asterios has been living. Like Romulus who slew Remus, Asterios, in a fit of rage, slays Ignazio. The use of the Romulus and Remus imagery reinforces Asterios' belief in duality, and foreshadows the metaphorical murder of his brother.

In addition to the picture of the she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus, there are also copies of *The Prince and the Pauper* by Mark Twain as well as *The Man in the Iron Mask* by

Alexander Dumas. Both novels are stories of role reversals in which one character is replaced by someone who resembles him. In *The Man in the Iron Mask*, the usurper is King Louis XIVth's twin brother Phillippe and in *The Prince and the Pauper*, the two characters, Edward and Tom, simply look alike. The presence of these books in Asterios' room serves as a reminder of Asterios' obsession with his own twin as well as his feeling that he may not be complete; they also indicate his own role reversal. He shifts from a respected architect and husband to a broken man alone in his apartment.

Note also the plane that appears outside of Asterios' window. Whenever Asterios thinks of Ignazio or has a dream with Ignazio, a plane appears somewhere in the panel. Mazzucchelli uses the plane to indicate either Ignazio's presence or the reader traveling to a realm in which Ignazio himself might exist, i.e. the realm of the unreal or, as McCloud calls it, the realm of conception rather than the realm of sensation.

p.24 - Asterios' parents' names are also allusive. Eugenios comes from the Greek εὐγένεια, *noble of birth*. The name illustrates two of the three things we learn of him: that he was Greek and that he was a man of high standards and of noble birth. His mother's name, Aglia Olio, is actually an Italian pasta dish. Aglia is garlic and Olio is olive oil. The name provides the reader with a clue as to Asterios' mother's heritage; she is Italian. If Asterios' parents are Greek and Italian respectively, then Asterios is half Greek and half Italian, a melding of the two great western classical societies. Indeed, because of his heritage, Asterios himself becomes an homage to the classical world. Mazzucchelli illustrates Asterios' dual nature in another way here, for Asterios himself is two ethnicities melded together, just as he

was at one time melded with Ignazio. Mazzucchelli imbues Asterios with multiple layers of duality: Asterios to Ignazio, Greek to Roman, Apollo to Dionysus.

p.24 - "The dead one would have been called Ignazio, that's me." Ignazio, Asterios' stillborn brother, also has a name with allusive meaning. His name seems to come from the Latin *ignotus*, *unknown*, which makes sense considering the fact that in the narrative he is dead, and thus, unknowable because of his absence in reality. However, Asterios dreams of Ignazio and the reader also gets to know Ignazio through his narration. However, the question remains, how do you know someone if they never really existed?

### **Chapter 3: The present**

#### **Synopsis and Themes:**

Asterios begins his journey, and, like the *Odyssey*, travel is a key theme of this chapter. Asterios' travels take him to the outskirts of reality and finally back home, not to Ithaca, but to Hana. Additionally, Mazzucchelli continues to explore the theme of duality through the dotted line drawing that follows Asterios in the subway as well as the imagery of Asterios' twin towered apartment building.

p. 27-28 - Asterios' twin towered apartment building smokes in the background and Asterios walks alone in the foreground, underneath the shadow of the non-smoking tower. It is as if there should be another figure standing next to Asterios. As he walks into the subway, a dotted line appears around him which represents Ignazio. There is also a Siamese standpipe, a pipe with two outlets for hoses. Mazzucchelli uses a visual metaphor to illustrate Asterios'

feelings of emptiness and loss. Asterios has no one with whom to share his life. He should have had Ignazio, and he did have Hana, but in the present narrative, they are both gone.

p.29- Full page - there are twin rats and two turnstiles at the bottom of the stairs.

Mazzucchelli shows the reader that Asterios was meant to go through life with someone else, but that someone is physically, but not metaphysically gone. Indeed, from a metaphysical standpoint, Asterios' story would never be told if not for Ignazio because Ignazio is the narrator of the story and because, if Ignazio had lived, Asterios would not have had the emptiness inside him that caused him to recognize and contemplate all things in the universe as dualistic in nature. Ignazio also serves as Asterios' other self, a mirror that reflects the choices and life Asterios could have lived.

p.31 - "splittin' me in two with a smile so Euclidean." As Asterios moves down into the subway, he begins to hear a street performer singing. He sings of Euclid of Alexandria, born in 325BCE, the Greek mathematician and father of geometry. Euclid was a very common name in the ancient world and Euclid of Alexandria was often confused with Euclid of Megara, a philosopher who lived 100 years before Euclid of Alexandria. In modern times, Euclid, like Asterios, suffers from a crisis of identity and Mazzucchelli mentions Euclid to enhance Asterios' own identity crisis (O'Connor and Robinson). It is not that Asterios does not know who he is, but rather that he feels as if he is somehow one half of a whole that will never exist.

p. 32 - Middle panels - as Asterios gets on the train, Ignazio's "ghost" does not follow. This is an indication that Asterios will be making this journey alone. Like Odysseus when he travels the underworld, Asterios makes the journey without his crew.

#### **Chapter 4: The past**

##### **Synopsis and Themes:**

Chapter four explores the perception of reality and draws heavily on Plato's allegory of the cave without directly referring to Plato except in the allusion to the five Platonic solids on page 40. Additionally, the chapter fleshes out Asterios' teaching style, which is colored by his predilection for duality. Mazzucchelli also explores Asterios' sexuality and how it feeds his arrogance and ego. The chapter has little chronological narrative; rather each page has a self contained story on it that helps to create the structure of the chapter.

p.37 - A square is cut into many smaller squares each with a representation of an apple within. Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, describes icons as "any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea," and calls pictures, "images designed to actually resemble their subjects" (*Understanding Comics* 27). However, any picture may look either more or less like the thing that it resembles. He continues, saying, "meaning [in pictures] is fluid and variable according to appearance. They differ from 'real-life' appearance to varying degrees" (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 28). Each of the apples represents an apple, but in a variety of ways and styles. They are either more abstract or more realistic and each shows a different way of "seeing," or perceiving the world, a key theme of the chapter.

p.38 - "What if reality (as perceived) were simply an extension of the self? Wouldn't that color the way each individual experiences the world?" Ignazio alludes to the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. Plato asserts that all men are like those chained to the wall in the cave, only seeing shadows and never seeing the true form of that which they view. So too in *Asterios Polyp* does Mazzucchelli set forth a Platonic philosophy in which every character is stuck in his own personal allegorical cave. Mazzucchelli echoes Plato's philosophy, except that in Mazzucchelli's view people can recognize the ideal form of other people who share the same ideal form.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, Scott McCloud speaks on this very subject in *Understanding Comics*. He asserts, like Ignazio, that humans "extend our identities into inanimate objects," and that,

Our constant awareness of self flows outward to include the object of our extended identity. And just as our awareness of our biological selves are simplified conceptualized images, so too is our awareness of these extensions greatly simplified. All the things we experience in life can be separated into two realms, the realm of the concept and the realm of the senses. Our identities belong permanently to the conceptual world. They can't be seen, heard, smelled, touched or tasted. They're merely ideas. And everything else—at the start—belongs to the sensual world, the world outside of us. Gradually we reach beyond ourselves. We encounter the sight, smell touch, taste of our own bodies. And of the world around us. And soon we discover that objects

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly enough, Ignazio uses the subjunctive in a present contrary-to-fact, conditional statement when he describes this philosophy. He says "What if reality were..." The use of the subjunctive here implies that reality is not in fact the way that Ignazio presents it.

of the physical world can also cross over and possess identities of their own. Or, as our extensions, begin to glow with the life we lend them. By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts. (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 40)

McCloud explains that human perception has two aspects, conceptual and sensual. The conceptual realm cannot be perceived by the traditional senses and indeed can only be perceived by its own interaction with the realm of the senses. In this way, concepts become sensual and vice versa. He also says that once an object is known through the realm of the senses it can then be metamorphosed into a conceptual object. In this way, a real object such as an apple becomes a construct of the conceptual and thus achieves its ideal Platonic form.

p. 40 - The ability to influence others' ideal forms is a central theme to *Asterios Polyp* that Mazzucchelli explores on this page. Asterios appears as a blue line drawing in a colossal state. As he speaks to a class, Ignazio's narrates, "maybe one person's construction of the world could influence someone else's." The imagery of the page has several of the students looking exactly like Asterios. Ignazio continues, "you would have to imagine that these constructions, whatever their origins, are not immutable." Mazzucchelli uses the blue line representations to demonstrate that Asterios has influenced some of his students into thinking like him.

Also of note on page 40 are the five platonic solids that appear on the top of the page (cf. p.327).

p. 41 - In the six panels on this page Mazzucchelli demonstrates Asterios' need for duality. Asterios says twice "there are two ways to approach design... there are just two things you need to fix, the interior and the exterior." In the second panel, both characters say the same thing, but in different ways. In the third panel, "anything that's not functional becomes decorative." Not only are there two ways to do everything, but only one of those ways is correct and it has to be Asterios'.

p.42 - The lighter motif appears again and provides a link between Asterios' past and present.

Additionally, Mazzucchelli adds several references to famous comic book artists and writers from the earlier comic's tradition. Asterios drinks Bushmiller Beer, which is an homage to cartoonist Ernie Bushmiller. Born in 1905, Bushmiller rose to fame in the 30s when he took over Larry Whittington's *Fritzi Ritz* comic strip. Bushmiller renamed the strip *Nancy* in 1933 when he introduced Fritzi's niece. Bushmiller continued working on *Nancy* until his death in 1982 (Bushmiller). Many contemporary comic artists think very highly of Bushmiller and *Nancy* is one of the most iconic and influential comic strips of the 20th century. Scott McCloud called *Nancy* "a landmark achievement" (McCloud, *Five Card Nancy*). For an excellent analysis of *Nancy* and Bushmiller's genius, see Mark NewGarden and Paul Karasik's article "How to Read Nancy."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Newgarden, Mark and Paul Karasik. "How to Read Nancy." 1988. *Laffpix.com*. Web. 8 July 2013.

<<http://www.laffpix.com/howtoreadnancy.pdf>>.

In the 2nd panel, Asterios again shows his propensity for duality. He says, "there are two kinds of students, those who can't draw and those who can't think, and the amount of confidence they have seems to be inversely proportional to their talent."

p.43 - cf. note on color.

In the middle panel of p. 43, Mazzucchelli imagines Asterios as Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship trying to resist the Siren's song. However, unlike Odysseus, he does not resist the song and demonstrates his amorous encounters with his female students over the next several pages.<sup>6</sup> On page 83, there are several more panels illustrating Asterios engaging in coitus with several women. The juxtaposition of Asterios and Odysseus illustrates the differences between the two men. It also clearly shows that Mazzucchelli is not interested in drawing direct parallels between Asterios and mythical characters but rather in exposing certain of Asterios' traits through negative comparisons with classical exemplars. In this case, Mazzucchelli shows Asterios' womanizing through Odysseus' restraint.<sup>7</sup>

p.44 - Mazzucchelli lays out page 44 with four panels, 2 blue, 2 red. The items that are purely rational and real are blue bordered panels, indicating that they spring directly from Asterios' own recollection of events. The two red panels have no borders and are more amorphous. The red indicates that Asterios remembers these instances differently from how they actually occurred. It is also possible that the red panels represent femininity.

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<sup>6</sup> Odysseus is not without blame though. He may have resisted the Siren's song, but he certainly didn't resist Calypso when she detained him on her island for many years.

<sup>7</sup> albeit if only with the Sirens.

Additionally, the red reveals something that, because it is not blue, Asterios cannot understand. To add to the abstract and amorphous nature of the top red panel, it seems as if Asterios and the girl are almost one form. The image has no real delineation of form beneath the blanket. When juxtaposed with the image of Asterios and Hana in post-coital bliss on page 131, it is clear from the color that the intercourse between Asterios and this woman did not bring the emotional fulfillment or completeness for which he searches.

p.45 - middle panel. This panel, taken out of context, seems to have little bearing on the narrative at this particular point other than that we see another woman, red, angry at Asterios. In chapter 6, the discerning reader realizes that the woman in this panel is Hana, Asterios' estranged wife, and that this panel depicts a turbulent point in their relationship. In fact, this exact moment plays out on p. 230, 2nd panel in the middle row with more context. Mazzucchelli places the panel out of time on p. 45 to show one of Asterios' patterns of behavior. He lives in a world in which he is always right and anyone who has a contrary opinion to his own is an idiot.

Ignazio asks, on the bottom of the page, "Wouldn't that be nice?" The rhetorical question functions as the answer to two questions: the first, Ignazio's own question on p. 38, "What if reality (as perceived) were simply an extension of the self," and as an answer to Hana's question to Asterios "What makes you think you're always right?"

In addition to creating dramatic juxtaposition, comics are able to bridge gaps of time in short spaces as well as convey multiple ideas through the placement of words and pictures. The panels on the top of page 45 show how comics are able to switch time seamlessly as four

different women complete the same sentence at different times, but directly next to one another.

## **Chapter 5: The present**

### **Synopsis and Themes:**

After a dream that explores Asterios' relationship with Ignazio, he continues his sojourn and arrives in Apogee. Mazzucchelli continues Asterios' present narrative and Apogee itself functions as the furthest physical point of Asterios' odyssey. It is in Apogee that Asterios must embark upon a journey of the soul in order to rebuild his shattered world.

p. 47 - The Parthenon in the Acropolis at Athens. Mazzucchelli uses the Parthenon both as an homage to Asterios' cultural heritage and as a place that exists extemporaneously for the purposes of the dream. Mazzucchelli, because Asterios is Greek, chooses the emblem of Greece, the Parthenon, to head this chapter.

p. 48-49 - cf. note on p.24

p.54 - 1st panel - Welcome to Apogee. An apogee is the furthest point at which something may go before it has to turn back. Therefore, Asterios' journey away from Ithaca must end in Apogee. There is no other choice.

**Chapter 6:** The past**Synopsis and Themes:**

Asterios meets Hana, and, through her narrative, the reader learns that she has suffered from indifference for her entire life. That indifference drives Hana's actions. The structure of the chapter informs its meaning as Mazzucchelli explores the idea that people's forms are not static, but rather fluid and mutable.

p.59 Hana stands in red and purple, surrounded by a circle and then a square. She casts a shadow that indicates that the circle is not just a circle, but rather a spotlight on Hana (cf. a note on color).

p.61 - Middle panel. "It's Hana actually. It's a Japanese name. It means 'flower.'" She is unique in that she is the only character who actually says what her name means.

Mazzucchelli requires a reader to discover all of the other names' meanings on their own. Hana herself is much like a flower, beautiful and delicate. She needs light to grow and is often deprived of that light. Mazzucchelli illustrates Hana's lack of light, or rather recognition on page 63 (cf. note on p.63).

p.62-65 - cf. A Note on Color.

p.62 - "Ernst Sonnenschein." "German and Japanese? Where did your parents meet - at an axis powers reunion?" Hana, like Asterios, is of twin origins. Whereas he is Italian and Greek, she is German and Japanese. Their similar origins make it seem as if, on an

Aristophanian level, they are more compatible. Additionally, Hana's last name, Sonnenshein, is German for sunshine. Asterios often calls Hana daisy, which is the literal translation of her name, sunshine flower. Asterios' reference to Hana as Daisy could also be an allusion to Daisy Buchanan of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. (cf. comment on p. 84)

p.63 - Hana stands in the background of the page, with a spotlight next to her. In the panels above Hana shows her mother her achievements, but her mother focuses on Hana's brothers. Hana is the girl who is amazing in her own right, but never sits in the spotlight.

Mazzucchelli deftly juxtaposes the middle panels showing Hana's achievements with Hana standing on a field of red below, with the spotlight running the length of the entire red page.

p. 64 - "Hana attended a prestigious college of art in Rhode Island on a full scholarship."

The prestigious college to which Ignazio refers is most likely the Rhode Island School of Design, Mazzucchelli's own alma mater.

p.65 - is a mirror of page 63 that demonstrates how Hana's achievements have been ignored by her parents for the majority of her life. Indifference is a major thematic device in the narrative as ultimately, it is indifference that causes Asterios and Hana's divorce.

p.67 - Hana's red and Asterios' blue meld together as they continue to talk while all of the other people at the party are represented in abstract forms. Hana and Asterios become one as their conversation continues, reflecting their own emotional melding and proving Ignazio's

point that people's characters are mutable on a fundamental level. By melding the two colors together, the reader sees the connection between Asterios and Hana on a visual level.

## **Chapter 7: The present**

### **Synopsis and Themes:**

Stiff drives Asterios to his house and Asterios kills a mosquito and asks "do you think Francis of Assisi ever swatted a mosquito?" The Mosquito motif appears in the beginning of the chapter and again on p.70 and p.85. Asterios' continued travels lead him to the local coffee shop, where Mazzucchelli foreshadows Asterios' death.

p.69 - Title page - A mosquito. When folded in half, the mosquito makes a mirror of itself.

The mosquito functions as another twin. Mazzucchelli uses the mosquito as a plot motif later (cf. p.70 and p.85).

p.70 - "Do you think Francis of Assisi ever swatted a mosquito?" Hana asks Asterios this same question on page 85 (cf. comment on p.78-79).

p.71 - The outside of Stiff's house is flooded, turning it into an island. Following the *Odyssey* metaphor, Stiff's house represents one of the islands to which Odysseus goes on his journey back to Ithaca. However, with the exception of the island of the Phaeacians, the islands to which Odysseus travels, such as Circe's, Calypso's and the Cyclops', are quite dangerous and lead Odysseus to danger (cf. Note on the *Odyssey*).

p.72 - Stiff's living room stands in stark contrast to Asterios'. His living room is physically the same size as Asterios', but Stiff's is littered with toys and mismatched cultural objects. The living room reflects the occupants.

p.73 - Stiff's son, Jackson, watches a show called *Poppyseed Avenue*. *Poppyseed Avenue* appears in a movie length episode of the Nickelodeon TV series *The Fairly Odd Parents* called *Channel Chasers*. In the episode, Timmy loses his TV privileges because he was imitating a violent anime show called *Maho Mushi*. He acquires a magical TV remote that allows him to travel through time and space to the fictional worlds of his favorite TV shows. During one of his trips, he arrives in *Poppyseed Avenue*, a parody of *Sesame Street*. The interesting thing here is not that Jackson is watching *Poppyseed Avenue*, but that this episode of *The Fairly Odd Parents* is asynchronous to Asterios' timeline. Asterios takes his journey to Apogee directly after his apartment is destroyed on his 50th birthday, June 22, 2000. The episode *Channel Chasers* did not air until 2004. Mazzucchelli, usually very careful and exact in his chronology, deliberately places a TV show that could not yet exist into the narrative to demonstrate that there is something mystical about Stiff's house. Indeed, although generally *Asterios Polyp* is a work grounded in reality, there are places in which Mazzucchelli subtly imbues a modicum of mysticism and this is one of them. Indeed, on the bottom panel of p. 73, the words from the TV are the most prominent icons in the panel. They say "Under the rainbow, a place with a different view - everything's groovy on Poppyseed Avenue!" The TV show invites Asterios to view his life from a different viewpoint and to perhaps open his mind to the possibility that the world does not exist only in dualities and polar opposites.

p. 77 - cf. Note on Foreshadowing.

p. 79 - Bottom panel. The coffee shop owner, Mañana, swats attempts to swat a fly.

Juxtaposed with the conversation that Asterios had with Stiff and Steve and the question "do you think Francis of Assisi ever swatted a mosquito," Mañana's action takes on additional meaning in the context of an indiscriminate asteroid. She, like an asteroid, acts arbitrarily and with indifference. Asterios and Hana will become like that mosquito, crushed and destroyed for no other reason than being in the wrong place at the wrong time (cf. p.336-7).

**Chapter 8:** The past

**Synopsis and Themes:**

Chapter 8 begins with a discussion of Plato's *Symposium* (cf. a note on Plato's *Symposium*). Asterios and Hana engage in early courtship ritual while Mazzucchelli continues to explore the re-telling of narrative, the Swiss army knife, mosquito, and the apartment motifs.

p. 81 - Title page - the "original" human form according to Aristophanes (cf. note on Plato's *Symposium*).

p.82-83 - cf. Note on Plato's *Symposium*.

p.84 - Asterios calls Hana "Daisy" - Although Hana simply means "flower," Asterios insists on calling her Daisy. A daisy's scientific name is *bellis perennis*, *everlasting beauty*, which is apropos to Hana in all ways. However, all daisies come from the family *asteraceae*, which has its root in the Greek ἀστήρ, star. Asterios calls her daisy because a daisy, etymologically, is really a star. Thus, Asterios turns Hana into a vision of himself by calling her Daisy.

p.85 - Hana asks the question "Did Francis of Assisi ever swat a mosquito?" This is the same question that Asterios asks Stiff on p. 70. Francis of Assisi is the Catholic patron saint of animals and had a great respect for all creatures in the animal kingdom (Bonaventure). When Asterios replies, "now, that would be a crisis of faith." He glibly illustrates his indifference toward the mosquito and the crisis of faith that Assisi would have indeed felt.

Additionally Hana's speech to Asterios about the pine-cone creates the idea for Asterios' next book, which the reader sees on p. 186. She further states,

You're always talking about transparency, right? How it's important in design that form comes from structure, but not in a cold, mechanical way? Well, even the humble pine cone has a lot to say about that. Nature gets it right every time. (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 85)

Louis Sullivan, the father of modern architecture and the mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright, echoes Hana's philosophy in his article "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered." He says,

Whether it be the sweeping eagle in his flight or the open apple blossom, the toiling work horse, the blithe swan, the branching oak, the winding stream at

its base, the drifting clouds, over all the coursing sun, form ever follows function, and this is the law. Where function does not change form does not change. The granite rocks, the ever brooding hills, remain for ages; the lightning lives, comes into shape, and dies in a twinkling. (Sullivan)

Asterios echoes Sullivan in his own modernist architectural philosophy when he says, on page 41, "Yes, I did say anything not functional becomes decorative." He repeats the mantra on p.119 and Ignazio says that he uses that "truthfulness" as his polestar.

p. 86 - Hana's apartment, like Asterios', reflects her character. While Asterios' is structured, ordered, and blue, Hana's is red and less ordered.

Noguchi the cat, named after Isamu Noguchi, a 20th century Japanese sculptor and landscape architect, appears for the first time. Isamu Noguchi, like Asterios and Hana, was the child of parents of different cultural heritages. Isamu's father was American and his mother was Japanese. A document from the Noguchi Museum's website says this about him,

Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) was one of the twentieth century's most important and critically acclaimed sculptors. Through a lifetime of artistic experimentation, he created sculptures, gardens, furniture and lighting designs, ceramics, architecture, and set designs. His work, at once subtle and bold, traditional and modern, set a new standard for the reintegration of the arts. (Biography: The Noguchi Museum)

Noguchi the cat serves as an homage to Noguchi the sculptor. Both Hana and Noguchi are sculptors and Hana's style of art accords with Noguchi's own creative work. Noguchi also serves as a melding of both Asterios and Hana for he is both a sculptor and an architect.

p.89 - Hana finds the Swiss army knife, the perfect melding of structure and form and for Asterios "Still good." As the only item of the three that Asterios keeps until the end of the novel, it functions as Asterios' last link to Hana once they divorce.

p.90 - cf. a note on color and a note on Asterios' eyes.

p.91. cf. a note on Asterios' apartment.

p.93 - Asterios' view on dining was "of a piece with his view of architecture: four walls and a roof make a shelter, but exquisite design is transporting." Asterios' philosophy of food and design is rooted in the Platonic philosophy of the 5 ideal solids (cf. p. 327).

p. 95 - This is the second time in which a reader views this scene. The first is on p. 9-10 when Asterios watches the video in his bed. The bottom right frame on p. 95 is date stamped 02-26-85 and the video tape case lying on Asterios' bed on page 10 is also date stamped 2-26-85. Ignazio rhetorically says, "that was a night he would never forget." The statement is laced with irony as the reader knows that this in one of the many nights that Asterios recorded.

**Chapter 9:** The present**Synopsis and Themes:**

The chapter begins with a dream in which Asterios and Ignazio are Siamese twins on a row boat in the middle of the ocean. A wave overcomes them and Asterios awakens on Stiff's couch with Jackson standing over him. Ursula introduces herself to Asterios as he pulls on his pants. Voluptuous in her flower print dress, Ursula represents a system of beliefs and logic that is antithetical to Asterios' logic. Ursula believes in astrology, conspiracy theories, and native American mysticism, belief systems that only ring true in the light of their own internal logic. The Apollonian Asterios rejects such systems of belief, but Asterios has yet to realize that his own belief systems function in the same way. Ursula serves the important purpose of providing a foil with which Asterios can judge his own assertions about existence. At the auto-body shop, Asterios meets Gerry, Mañana's boyfriend and a communist revolutionary. Indeed, he even wears a t-shirt with Karl Marx's face on it. Gerry and Asterios discuss Maoist philosophy while Stiff fixes Gerry's car. Based on the number of different belief systems that Ursula embodies though, Mazzucchelli gives the reader no indication which goddess Ursula represents.

p. 97 - Asterios, or Ignazio, sleeps.

p.98-99 - Asterios' 2nd dream - The second dream deals with the confusion of the self. Asterios is not necessarily sure who he is, and Mazzucchelli reflects this by physically attaching Asterios to Ignazio. Furthermore, Asterios is left handed and in the dream, he is on the right side of the boat, using his off hand. The exchange of sides on the boat confuses

Asterios' identity. Additionally, just as Asterios has difficulty recognizing himself, so too does the reader have difficulty recognizing Asterios.

p.100 - Stiff Major sings the Scorpions' *Rock You Like a Hurricane* in the morning. Often in classical mythology, storms cause great distress for heroes. Juno shipwrecks Aeneas on Carthage by means of a storm in the *Aeneid*; Poseidon sends storms against Odysseus in the *Odyssey* to keep him away from his homeland, Ithaca. So too has a storm caused Asterios to take his own journey, or odyssey, and Stiff's song reminds the reader why.

p.103 - Middle panels and bottom panel. Asterios leaves his wallet, knife and watch on the toilet seat. His wallet has taken the place of the lighter as one of his possessions. Although Asterios will later say that he does not think in terms of threes, subconsciously he does indeed.

p.104 - top panel - A stereotypical conservative car has an offensive bumper sticker about murdering one's wife, an NRA sticker and an ictus fish. The sticker begins the political discourse that Gerry continues on page 106 in a light vein.

p.106 - Geronimo speaks about Maoist philosophy and the communist revolution. He says "Like Mao said, there are two kinds of war: just and unjust... and the new can't be built till the old is wiped clean." Gerry takes this quote from Mao's *On Protracted War* but uses it out of context. To Mao, a just war is progressive and an unjust war impedes progress. Mao continues, saying,

We Communists oppose all unjust wars that impede progress, but we do not oppose progressive, just wars. Not only do we Communists not oppose just wars; we actively participate in them. As for unjust wars, World War I is an instance in which both sides fought for imperialist interests; therefore, the Communists of the whole world firmly opposed that war. The way to oppose a war of this kind is to do everything possible to prevent it before it breaks out and, once it breaks out, to oppose war with war, to oppose unjust war with just war, whenever possible. (Tse-Tung)

The problem with Maoist philosophy is simple; what is progress? To a communist, progress is communism. However, democratic progress, in that it serves the interests of capitalism, is completely antithetical to communist progress. In this way, Gerry, spouting communist rhetoric, errs. As much as he touts the communist philosophy, he also participates in the capitalistic machine. When Asterios asks him about his current job, Gerry responds, "I do some freelance repair. Plus, I started a band." Gerry may no longer work for the "man", but like most contemporary American "revolutionaries," his rhetoric conflates his sense of righteousness. He does not engage in any real revolutionary activity. He does freelance repair and is in a band, not leading a Marxist revolution. Gerry functions as a pastiche of the hippie movements in the 60s, which touted the ideals of peaceful revolution, but accomplished fairly little in terms of discernible change.

Asterios, in the context of that revolution paraphrases Mao's work *Introducing a Cooperative*, saying "on a blank sheet can be written the most beautiful characters." Asterios himself, having lost everything in his life, has become that blank sheet.

p. 109 - bottom panel - Ursula has decorated Asterios' room in a less than aesthetically pleasing way. An earlier version of Asterios would have had a problem, architecturally speaking, with the layout of the room. However, this new Asterios, a man in transition, takes the changes in stride and allows Ursula to set things up in the way she wants.

p. 110-111 - cf. Note on Foreshadowing

p.112 - Ursula explains why the Chaldeans, the originators of astrology, were on to something,

Look, y'know scientists took mollusks and found that even in the lab, they orient their movement according to the phase of a lunar month. Solar activity creates extremely low frequency electromagnetic waves, and they affect all kinds of things, like the way wheat sprouts, and the way bacteria grows, and the way insects behave... And oysters taken from long island and relocated to dark tanks in the mid-west alter their opening and closing to coincide with tides that, like, could exist in that location, but don't. (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 112)

Asterios does not take Ursula to task for her viewpoint although scientists have roundly debunked astrology as science. In 1975 a group of 186 scientists issued a statement objecting to astrology. They say,

It is simply a mistake to imagine that the forces exerted by stars and planets at the moment of birth can in any way shape our futures. Neither is it true that the position of distant heavenly bodies make certain days or periods more

favorable to particular kinds of action, or that the sign under which one was born determines one's compatibility or incompatibility with other people.

(Bok, Lawrence and Kurtz)

Asterios, a man of Apollonian logic and rational thought, would agree with the scientific community on this subject and would roundly criticize someone who believed in astrology. Yet he does not criticize Ursula. He listens to her and engages in healthy debate with her on the subject, and he never says that she is wrong. At the end of the conversation, he simply says, "it's worth considering." The Asterios of the present is a different man from the Asterios of the past. Ursula, a character so antithetical to Asterios the Apollonian, serves as a way for him to test his assumptions about people based on their beliefs and move past his earlier myopic views on the way the world functions.

## **Chapter 10:** The past -

### **Synopsis and Themes:**

The chapter switches between Asterios' thoughts on abstractions and how these thoughts manifested themselves with Hana. The panels in which Hana and Asterios interact in the beginning show how condescending Asterios can be. On page 121, Hana says "Do you think I'm stupid," and Asterios responds, "What? No? Of course not! No!" Hana finishes, "Then why do you always assume I'm wrong." Hana points out a key problem with Asterios' world-view that persists until he embarks on his odyssey. Later, after they have spent their first night together, Asterios confesses that he has videotaped their encounter together and she slaps him. He then explains that he has always felt different and that he had a twin who died when he was born. He explains that the feeling of difference haunted him

until he put the cameras in the house. He has never watched the tapes, but they comfort him. Hana somehow understands and says, "It's like... the tomb of the first Chinese emperor –all those clay soldiers lined up in rows... like a shadow of the living world." In a way, she comes to see the tapes as art –as a representation of reality, the word "shadow" reminding us again of Plato's ideas about art as a copy of a copy, and of the allegory of the cave– rather than as surveillance or pornography.

p. 115 - The tomb of the first Chinese Emperor (cf. p. 131 and 288).

p. 116 - "Abstractions have always appealed to my brother - especially systems and sequences that are governed by their own internal logic."

The systems and sequences that Ignazio mentions fill the page: the periodic table, a Fibonacci line in a panel, the yin-yang, positive and negative battery terminals, a panel representing North, South, East and West, the days of the week, and finally a panel that has overlapping arrows which say, "thesis, antithesis" and finally, "synthesis." Each of these pictures represent a system that is governed by its own logic but also that seems to have an inherent duality. Each icon represents an idea, or a set of ideas that is impossible to classify in simple words; thus, icons are required. Underpinning all of these systems is Asterios' belief in Apollonian philosophy and the dichotomy between Apollonian and Dionysian world views.

An amphora also appears on the page, and underneath it is the label, Apollo; on the right side, next to the amphora, is an amorphous blob labeled Dionysus. Near this image is a similar pedestal with an apple on the left and a sphere on the right, labeled real and ideal.

The reader is to make the inference that Apollo and the apple can be interchanged as well as Dionysus and the sphere. Thus Apollo stands by metonymy for the real and discrete, while Dionysus stands for the abstract and ideal. Asterios sets up Apollo to be the antithesis of Dionysus and Asterios sees himself as Apollonian, yet he revels in the realm of the abstract and ideal. Ignazio himself says of Asterios that "abstractions have always appealed to my brother." However, Apollo himself is a complex god with many different traits and could himself be both Apollonian and Dionysian, both real and abstract, thus ruining the symmetry of duality for which Asterios so desperately searches (cf. *Asterios Polyp* According to Nietzsche). Apollo has a very complex nature and diverse functions, "purification, prophesy, care for young citizens, poetry, and music are prominent (see Pl. *Cra.* 404c-405e)" (Hornblower). Additionally "Apolline prophecy was usually ecstatic: the Delphic Python was possessed by the god (in NT Greek, πῦθών is 'ventriloquist'), as were the Sibyls (see Verg. *Aen.* 6. 77–80), Cassandra, young Branchus (Callim. fr. 229 Pf.), and Bacis; and the priest of Claros attained ecstasy through drinking water (Tac. *Ann.* 2. 54). Apollo's supreme wisdom is beyond human rationality" (Hornblower). In the epic tradition Apollo takes on the aspect of destroyer, "in *Iliad* 1, he is responsible both for sending and for averting the plague... his cult has to do with military and athletic training " (Hornblower). Apollo, like Asterios, is a complex character with many different aspects and functions and that character "sums up the many contradictions in the tragic dilemma of human existence... He knows by experience the dangers of excess. From a sea of blood and guilt Apollo brings enlightenment, atonement and purification wherever he may be" (Morford and Lenardon).

p. 119 - the scales - Asterios clearly identifies himself with the rational side of the Apollonian worldview as evidenced on page 119 when Asterios sits on the left side of a set of scales on which he explicates Apollonian and Dionysian views. By metonymy, the left side stands for the real and Apollonian worldview. Asterios weighs down the left side as Ignazio states "but elaboration often exposes Asterios' predilections," and Asterios says "anything that is not functional, is merely decorative." Mazzucchelli uses the allusion to Apollo here to illustrate the standards to which Asterios holds himself and to help explain Asterios' ethos and ontology. In fact, later on the page, when Asterios is looking at a shoe his words reveal his desire for the ideal Platonic form "... the way the function dictates the form... elegant lines... nothing extraneous... this shoe perfectly expresses the essence of shoeness." The panel also calls into question how seriously the reader is supposed to view Asterios at this juncture. Given the tone of the rest of the chapter, Asterios is comically failing to recognize the gap between his aesthetic principles and his quotidian existence. The next two pages focus on his quotidian existence and at every juncture, Asterios fails to recognize that gap. On page 120, Hana tries to talk about a painting at which they are looking. Asterios says that it is "inconsequential" and has "trenchant pedestrianism." Hana responds that she thought it had a "nice color palette." Asterios' responses to everyday stimuli are a manifestation of his "aspiration toward the true," as Ignazio calls it.

p. 123 - A conversation on the nature of the existence of dualities. Asterios argues his philosophy of duality when he says, "duality is rooted in nature: the brain is divided into left and right hemispheres, electrical current is either positive or negative - our very existence is the result of humans being male and female. It's yin and yang." Asterios fails to realize that

each of the dualities he has described are not inherently dualities at all. The brain, although divided into left and right hemispheres, works together to form one unit. Electrical currents rely on their polar differences for their actual function and do not work unless both positive and negative toil together. Our existence is not the result of humans being male and female, but rather of the unity of male and female in the same way that Asterios himself functions as the unity of Apollo and Dionysus. Asterios responds to his friend's objection saying, "Ah! But it's one or the other, right?" He still misses the point as the examples he cites do not rely on things being one or the other, but again, they rely on the unity of the two opposites. Asterios the Apollonian does not accept that the world can be anything but a duality.

To Asterios duality exists because the cosmos is constructed in such a way that duality exists everywhere. His friend rightly points out that the world only exists that way because humans have classified it as such. Therefore, his reality is a construction of his own worldview. Much like the subject chained to the wall of the cave in Plato's allegory, Asterios' "truth" colors his perceptions of the universe. He assumes that what he perceives is real and he does not take into account the possibility that his perceptions may not echo reality.

p.125 - In response to Ignazio's accusation that he thinks too much in terms of twos, Asterios says that exploring subjects in opposition gives an understanding of both. He uses literary examples of this opposition to prove his point. Each of the novels that Asterios mentions as exaggerations deals with the duality of man in one way or another.

Asterios chooses these novels as a way to "explore two aspects of a subject that appear to be in opposition." However, Asterios wants to understand in respect to Ignazio

what it means to be half of a duality that will never exist. To this end, he studies human nature through literature. According to Asterios, Herman Hesse's *Narcissus and Goldmund*, "explores human nature by contrasting the life of a hedonist with that of an ascetic." He further explains that in Italo Calvino's *The Cloven Viscount*, "Calvino bisects his character into a 'kind' half and a 'Cruel' half to show the good or ill effects each quality can produce unchecked." Both novels explore human nature but even more than that, they split their main characters either metaphorically or physically.

The other novels shown on the page share the same characteristics as *Narcissus and Goldmund* and *The Cloven Viscount*: [*The Man and the Iron Mask*], by Alexander D[umas] (cf. p. 24), *Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyd[e]*, by Robert Lewis Stevenson]. *Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde* revolves around the idea of men living double lives. Dr. Jeckyl creates a potion that allows his evil half, Mr. Edward Hyde, to subjugate the personality of Jeckyl and live in the world. Too late, Jeckyl learns that Hyde is overpowering his personality and Jeckyl kills himself in the end. A story about the nature of good and evil in men, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde* appeals to Asterios for that very reason. It deals with dualities, even though he places it among those novels that exaggerate a subject in opposition. For Asterios though, there is even more significance because Hyde and Jeckyl are the same person. Asterios sometimes wonders if he is Ignazio or if Ignazio had survived, would he live the same life as Asterios. The novel calls into question Asterios' very sense of being or if Ignazio ever existed.

[*The Prince and the Paup[er]*], by Mark Twa[in] (cf. p. 24) and *The Fall [of] the Hou[se] of Ush[er]*, by Edgar [Allen Poe] also appear on the page. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is another story about twins, Roderick and Madeline. Roderick entombs a live

Madeline in the house until she breaks out and falls upon Roderick and the house cracks in two. Another exaggeration of opposites, *The Fall of the House of Usher* appeals to Asterios because it deals with twins and homicidal twins at that. Asterios says on p. 129 "or had I somehow suffocated the poor bastard [Ignazio]." Asterios is very concerned with the idea that he was somehow responsible for Ignazio's death.

p. 127, 130, 131 - cf. A Note on Color.

## **Chapter 11: The present**

### **Synopsis and Themes:**

Asterios settles into life in Apogee and accompanies Ursula to the annual 4th of July parade on Main Street. Ursula engages in a discourse on governmental conspiracy theories and offers a version of the United States in which the government has purposely kept education a low priority in order to prevent the populace from questioning governmental authority. The usually verbose Asterios remains generally passive in this chapter, allowing Ursula to take the majority of the dialogue. Asterios begins to understand how to allow others to express their opinions without disagreement or comment –a skill that he lacked when he was married.

p. 133 - The Washington monument - Mazzucchelli introduces another famous landmark, like the Parthenon in Athens in chapter 5. The Washington monument appears both on the title page of the chapter as well as in the dream, just as the Parthenon does. Both structures

represent a fantasy space for Asterios to experience visions of his brother. Their universal recognition helps to ground the reader in the space of Asterios' dreams.

p.145 - cf. A Note on Foreshadowing.

## **Chapter 12:** The past

### **Synopsis and Themes:**

Asterios and Hana travel to Asterios' parents' home. Along the way he explains to her that Adam and Eve were actually twins. The main theme of the chapter is faith and religion. The episode in which Hana tells Asterios about her own upbringing illustrates this theme as does her vegetarianism vs. Noguchi's carnivorous nature. Asterios' mother furthers the argument when she speaks about the power of prayer and the interpretation of divine will. Asterios tells Hana he does not think in terms of three and the scene shifts to the drive back from Asterios' parents. Asterios explains that for his mother, "illness does not transcend death, so in heaven everyone is whole again." Mazzucchelli provides the quotidian affairs of Asterios and Hana's relationship in a way that informs the reader about sorts of discourses in which Hana and Asterios engage. These discourses illuminate the ethos of both characters. Asterios questions everything and has trouble adapting to his changing world, while Hana, although highly insecure and unsure of her own importance in the world, adapts more easily to the world. For example, she accepts Asterios as her Aristophanian other half despite all of his flaws.

p.147 - St. Francis of Assisi; a plot motif used throughout the narrative, appears in blue and red lines, indicating his link to both Asterios and Hana. St. Francis, the patron saint of animals, illustrates that all life is precious, which, given that Asterios and Hana are killed at the end of the novel, seems fairly ironic.

p. 148 - Asterios supposes that the Christian creation story makes Adam and Eve twins. Again his belief in duality shows itself. Very rarely do people consider the two twins, yet Asterios, because of his predilection to duality, creates it where it might not even exist. Mazzucchelli has spent a large portion of *Asterios Polyp* exploring Asterios' duality and the development of his character through literary and classical allusions. Indeed, the narrative centers around showing the reader that Asterios sees duality everywhere. All of his conversations, actions and philosophies in the past focus on what Ignazio calls Asterios' "desire to superimpose a rational system on to its [the universe's] seeming randomness" (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 118). This world view is what ultimately dooms Asterios' marriage and leads to his ruin. It is only when he spends time in Apogee and learns to see the world in a different way, that he is able to rebuild his shattered existence.

p.154. In the top left panel Hana prepares Herriman cat food for Noguchi. Herriman cat food serves as an homage to George Joseph Herriman, creator of *Krazy Kat*, an influential comic strip. Born in 1880 in New Orleans, George Herriman worked on the *Krazy Kat* comic strip from its inception in 1913 until his death in 1944.<sup>8</sup> The story of an androgynous cat who has

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<sup>8</sup> The source material for this comment comes from:

unrequited feelings of love for a mouse named Ignatz, who enjoys throwing bricks at Krazy, the *Krazy Kat* strip was never truly popular with the reading public at large. The series owed its success to two things: one, its "subtleties and surrealism" gave it "an enthusiastic following among artistic and intellectual circles," and two, its "most ardent supporter" was William Randolph Hearst, builder of the United States' largest newspaper chain, who refused to cancel *Krazy Kat* even when it was circulated in less than 50 papers nationwide (Gussoni). Indeed, in praise of the comic strip, cultural critic and author of *The Seven Lively Arts* Gilbert Seldes called *Krazy Kat* "the counterpart of Chaplin in the comic film" (Seldes qtd. in Gussoni).

p.160 - cf. A Note on Asterios' Apartment.

p.161 - cf. p.13 and p. 103.

### **Chapter 13:** The present

#### **Synopsis and Themes:**

Asterios goes about his daily activities in Apogee. After a chat with Jackson and Ursula about the internal functions of watches and the nature of sound, he bestows his watch on Jackson. Thematically the watch signifies time passing and transitional space. On a picnic with Ursula and Jackson, he sees an asteroid crater that foreshadows his demise.

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Gussoni, Clizia. *Biography: George Herriman.com*. 2009. Web. 16 July 2013.

<<http://www.georgeherriman.com/biography.html>>.

Ursula and Asterios speak about family and the past. Asterios is guarded and does not give much information. They continue talking while having their picnic and Ursula shows Asterios through her own logic, that Asterios' own logic is not infallible.

p.165 - The Radniks. The symbol on the Radnick's t-shirt is a raised fist holding a pair of drum sticks. There is little scholarly work on poster based iconography, but Lincoln Cushing, co-author of *Agitate! Educate! Organize! American Labor Posters* has created a website in which he explores the different uses and contexts of icons in posters. According to Cushing, the clenched fist represents "a persistent symbol of resistance and unity" and has been used in the propaganda of the Industrial Workers of the World, a group formed in 1905 not on the principal of "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work," but of the "abolition of the wage system" (Cushing; Industrial Workers of the World). The IWW preamble continues, "there can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things in life" (Industrial Workers of the World). The Industrial Workers of the World message is both revolutionary and follows the teachings of Karl Marx's communist manifesto in which Marx advocates for a revolution in which the proletariat overthrows its capitalist oppressors. Philosophically, Gerry and the Radniks agree with Marx and the IWW and as such, it is not surprising that their t-shirt would contain such a symbol.

p. 171-173 - Asterios gives his watch to Jackson. The second of the three items that Asterios took with him from the apartment is gone. Giving away the items has the significance of releasing Asterios from his old life and helping on his journey to the new.

p.166-167 - Ursula discusses Jackson's imaginary friend Ronnie Doug. She says, "If he [Jackson] sees him, if he hears him –hell, even if he did make him up– he must exist somewhere, y'know." She questions the definition of existence on a fundamental level by asserting that just imagining something makes it exist. This is exactly the way in which Ignazio acts in the story. Physically, he only ever existed in Aglia's womb, but in the story, he plays an integral role as the narrator of Asterios' story. He made him up. So, Ronnie Doug is Jackson's imaginary friend just as Ignazio is Asterios'.

p.178 - A two page whole panel layout of the crater of an asteroid marks the middle of the novel as Asterios says "now, that's a hole." The hole could represent the hole that exists within Asterios' life, and as Ursula remarks on page 183, "you've suffered some great loss," which gives credence to this reading. Additionally, Mazzucchelli could be using the hole to foreshadow Asterios' death, (cf. a note on foreshadowing).

p.181 - Ursula says, "in life, things are seldom either / or. It's that kind of thinking that creates fanatics," as the woman with the no smoking t-shirt walks off with child in tow saying "murderer." The juxtaposition of Ursula's words and the woman walking off is something that can only be done with graphical forms of representation and it works best in comics.

In response to Ursula, Asterios says, "Now that you mention it, I've probably engaged in some of that simplistic thinking." Asterios grossly understates his former world-view. Until he came to Apogee on his odyssey, he thought only in terms of dualism and polar

opposites. He may have said that he understood that things lay along a continuum, but understanding something and actually believing it are two different things.

#### **Chapter 14:** The past

##### **Synopsis and Themes:**

Willy Ilium arrives and wants Hana to design the set for his new production. Like the suitors in the *Odyssey*, Willy functions as Asterios' rival for Hana's affections. Hana accepts Willy's offer and the rest of the chapter explores the relationships between Willy, Hana, and Asterios. Hana has no romantic feelings for Willy, yet his presence creates dramatic tension in the narrative. This tension exposes Asterios' indifference to Hana and elucidates his belief that he is always correct.

p.188 - Willy Ilium's name, and the fact that Asterios dubs him "Willy Chimera" have significance. Ilium is the Greek name for Troy, the mythic city in which the Trojan War took place. The Chimera, in classical mythology, although chiefly a monster that Bellerephon slew, was also a monster of many forms. The great grandson of Medusa and Poseidon, the Chimera had the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a snake. Asterios likens Willy to the Chimera because of his style of choreography, described by Ignazio, "essentially, pieces were formed by excising sequences from famous dance compositions and reassembling them into new works." Willy's choreographic technique, a mashing together of different forms, is much like the Chimera and its three parts mashed together. Additionally, Willy often changes his last name, further confusing his identity. So Ilium becomes Illinois, or Iridium, or Illuminato based on the project on which he is working.

Willy is indeed the metaphorical embodiment of a Chimera, changing his form as it suits him. Mazzucchelli, rather than emphasizing the fact that the Chimera is a monster, emphasizes its many forms. Interestingly, the reader does not know whether Ilium is Willy's real name, or if it is just another pseudonym, classical in nature because his new work "*Orpheus (Underground)*," is a retelling of Ovid's Orpheus myth. Also, the name Willy itself is a shortening of William and can be changed to many different forms. It could be Bill, Billy, Will, William, Liam et al. Indeed Willy's entire character reflects Asterios' own identity crisis. He also serves as a physical embodiment of the idea that people's forms are fluid and mutable (cf. p38).

In addition to the significance of Willy's name and Mazzucchelli's penchant for making references to Homer's *Odyssey*, a reader could construe Willy Ilium as one of the suitors come to Ithaca to take Penelope/Hana away from Odysseus/Asterios. Here, Mazzucchelli invites direct comparison between Asterios and Odysseus, but the comparison is negative because Asterios and Odysseus take two distinctly different paths when presented with similar situations. On page 186, Ignazio says "He [Willy] claimed he had come to deliver a lecture, but no one could remember having invited him" (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 186). Like the suitors to Ithaca, Willy too comes uninvited and, like the suitors, has only one thing in mind, gaining a woman. Willy enumerates his desires for Hana with his not so subtle double entendres,

I won't beat around the bush— or anywhere in its vicinity. (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 187)

He [Willy] said he doesn't want to hold me [Hana] back - he wants to see me naked, exposed. (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 193)

He [Willy] said... they [people that is] don't realize that a man of his stature, 'engorged with genius,' is really a giant. (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 193)

I'd [Willy to Hana] like to know more though... about your hirsute pussy. (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 194-95)

Stroke me like that and I'll show you a special relationship. (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 195)

He [Willy] says I'm [Hana] a treasure box he wants to unlock.... (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 197)

One infraction, please, so that I might spank that pert little derrière. (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 221)

Couldn't you go for something firm in your mouth right now? (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 226)

What makes Willy's verbal transgressions so egregious is that Asterios is physically present for most of them. Even more egregious is Asterios' inaction. That he does not respond illustrates his indifference towards his own wife, which, as Willy points out, may be the opposite of love. Contrast Asterios' response to Odysseus' response to the suitors, whom he slaughters, and it more clearly elucidates Asterios' indifference towards Hana.

p.189 - Willy says that *Orpheus (Underground)* will be "so monumental, it will make Ossa like a wart." There are two Mt. Ossas in the world: one in Thessaly and the other in Australia. Given the context of Willy's statement, it makes sense to extrapolate that he is talking about the Mt. Ossa in Thessaly.

Willy says, "All artists revisit the classics." These words, spoken as a response to criticism that his work "*Orpheus (Underground)*" is not original, present a central theme in *Asterios Polyp*, the classical allusion. Mazzucchelli, through deft juxtaposition of both image and word, presents these allusions in three separate categories: etymological, philosophical, and mythological. Classical allusions also serve to remind the reader of stories and themes present outside the main narrative of the story, but still integral to a full understanding of the narrative. Additionally, Mazzucchelli specifically plays with the allusions so that there are no direct corollaries between his characters and classical ones. Thus, the allusions become polyphonic. By using polyphonic allusions, Mazzucchelli creates characters that are more complex than their classical equivalents and therefore more human, and in the end, more compelling. Asterios himself functions in this way as he is at times alluded to as Odysseus, Orpheus, Apollo, Polyphemos, and Dionysus. Such a combination of characters invites a more complex understanding of the character.

p. 194 - cf. A note on Asterios' apartment.

p.198-199 - cf. A note on color.

p.198 - The Gould Tavern refers to Chester Gould, the creator of the *Dick Tracy* comic strip. Like the references to Isamu Noguchi, George Herriman, and Ernest Bushmiller, Mazzucchelli gives honor to another comic great in *Asterios Polyp*.

Gould was born in 1900 and began the *Dick Tracy* comic strip in 1931. *Dick Tracy* continued until Gould retired in 1977. He always wanted to be a comic strip writer and artist

for the *Chicago Tribune*. It took him 10 years working at small papers until *Dick Tracy* was published by the *Tribune* in 1931 (Biography: Chester Gould Dick Tracy Museum). *Dick Tracy* was the first detective comic strip and over its 46 year run featured over 200 different villains with whom Tracy fought.

## **Chapter 15:** The present

### **Synopsis and Themes:**

Asterios dreams that he meets Ignazio in the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. Ignazio explains to Asterios that he is a successful architect and has had many of his designs built—which in fact he has not. When Asterios awakes, the dream leads him to help Stiff build a tree-house for Jackson based on Stiff's design. It is the first thing that Asterios has actually built. The chapter focuses on Asterios' transition from the old to the new. He continues to shed his old existence by not criticizing or trying to improve on Stiff's design for the tree-house as well as by actually building the tree-house. Asterios' conversation with Ursula focuses on the constant resurrection of the Ise shrine, but as he does so, he eats an apple and Ursula says that he must have been a carpenter in a former life. These Christian symbols, that is, the fruit of knowledge and the carpenter, as well as the discourse on the Ise shrine, suggest rebirth and the resurrection of the soul, which is the ultimate goal and result of Asterios' journey to Apogee.

p.204-207 - This dream lays out the culmination of Asterios' idea that twins, even when separated at birth, can lead lives that are similar in structure and form. There are however, some notable differences. Ignazio is an actual architect. He has designed and built his

designs. The Walt Disney Concert Hall has none of the rigidity of Asterios' designs and Ignazio has chosen it as his base of operations. It has both curves and sharp edges. It looks much more like something that Hana would design rather than Asterios. Ignazio has also chosen Los Angeles as his city of work, whereas Asterios chose New York. Also, as with the episode of *The Fairly Odd Parents* (cf. p73), the Walt Disney Concert Hall cannot appear in the narrative as it was not yet finished in the year 2000, when the present action of *Asterios Polyp* takes place. The concert hall, unlike the Parthenon and the Washington monument, the other locations in which Asterios dreams of Ignazio, does not yet exist.

p.207 - "You made me what I am today." Without Asterios, what would the ghost Ignazio have been? Anything that Ignazio is must be Asterios' doing because he created him.

p. 213: Asterios does not swat the fly as Ursula says "nice work." Ostensibly she says nice work because Asterios has just finished building Jackson's tree-house, but it seems that she could also mean that Asterios didn't swat the fly on his face. The non-swatting demonstrates that Asterios has grown as a character because he would have and did gladly swat flies on his face earlier in the novel.

**Chapter 16:** The past**Synopsis and Themes:**

On a trip to the composer of *Orpheus (Underground)*'s apartment, Willy ironically says, "he [the composer] can at times be a rather pompous and a bit of a blowhard." Mazzucchelli, using Willy's voice, pokes fun at both Asterios and Willy here as they are both pompous blowhards. They enter the apartment and Asterios and Calvin, the composer, engage in a philosophical discussion about the nature of the physical representation of time in sheet music. The discussion then turns to music more fundamentally. Asterios attempts to define music in a duality, but Calvin disagrees, saying that music is "about tonal resonance, or the texture of sound within..." (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 225). As Calvin and Asterios speak, Willy makes inappropriate sexual comments to Hana and Asterios sees none of it. Mazzucchelli employs irony in the traditional sense here as Calvin says that things only occur if you pay attention to them. Asterios has never paid attention to what Willy says to Hana, so to him, Willy's verbal assaults never happen. Indeed, Asterios says, as Hana looks on "some things, alas, are probably better left unnoticed." Later, back at their apartment, Asterios and Hana finally argue about Willy, and Hana calls Asterios to task for not defending her, saying, "Why do you always let him [Willy] talk to me like that?" All along, Hana has been waiting for Asterios to defend her honor against Willy's sexual advances. Asterios, though, too indifferent to his wife's pleas, never knew they existed (cf. p.226).

p.222 - Calvin Kohoutek appears for the first time. The name Kohoutek is doubly allusive.

There are several famous men with the surname Kohoutek: the first, Lubos Kohoutek,

astronomer and discoverer of the Comet Kohoutek in 1973 and the second Ctirad Kohoutek, a Czechoslovakian musician and musical theorist. The Comet Kohoutek was supposed to be an excellent comet for viewing and the world awaited its arrival with great anticipation (Whipple). Unfortunately, the comet was less than spectacular. Mazzucchelli wants the reader to understand that comets and asteroids are central to Asterios' fate.

The surname Kohoutek also refers to Ctirad Kohoutek, author of *Projektová Hudebni Kompozice, A Musical Work of a Project*, who came up with an unorthodox method of composing like his namesake Calvin Kohoutek. Ctirad composed his music by,

Drawing up a composition plan in graphic form with a time axis which is realized in concrete sound form in the process of creation. Every composition is given its individual form and stratification of expression in agreement with its message. (Alliance Publications Inc.)

Kalvin also thinks about sheet music as the graphic "record of time passing in a certain way" much as Ctirad composed "in graphic form with a time axis." Calvin's philosophy of musical creation is also unorthodox, mirroring Ctirad's philosophy. The same can be said for the creation of comics and *Asterios Polyp* in particular. A comic, like sheet music, is a "record of time passing in a certain way." Each panel of a comic depicts a specific moment in time and the reader must extrapolate the action in the gutters from one panel to the next. Calvin explains to Hana on p. 224 that for *Orpheus (Underground)* he will write "a simple pattern in each of the Greek modes, layering one on top of the other in descending order." Calvin's structure for *Orpheus (Underground)* corresponds to Ctirad's "stratification of expression" and Mazzucchelli's own process of comic's creation. Pages 225-227 reflect both Ctirad's

"stratification of expression" as well as Calvin's "layering" of one mode of expression on top of another. Fishmann explains that Ctirad followed similar methods while composing,

[Ctirad] attempts to distinguish between an innovation (a positive element which is the factor of evolution in music) and an experiment (a rather negative element, leading nowhere) and arrives at the conclusion that an experiment, in being accepted as successful by the "social conscience," may sometimes be reevaluated as an innovation. (Fischmann)

Mazzucchelli purposefully makes both Kohouteks similar in their methodology and philosophy because he wants Calvin Kohoutek to serve as an homage to Ctirad Kohoutek and his philosophy of musical composition. Also, and most importantly, Mazzucchelli does not like to make one dimensional allusive comparisons in *Asterios Polyp*. Mazzucchelli's creates his characters like the Kohoutek's create their music, as a "layering of many different modes" as well as a "form and stratification of expression in agreement with its message."

p.223 - End of the chapter: See "A Note on Color"

p.223 - Calvin mentions Ives' *The Unanswered Question*. The Ives to whom Calvin refers is Charles Ives, an American composer of the early 20th century. Ives was a visionary in the composing world and wrote music in the early 1900s that would not be produced and performed until the 50s. His musical style was like Calvin and Ctirad Kohoutek's, a layering of sounds over one another, with harmonics and dissonances working together to form a whole that requires the listener to really engage themselves with the music and become part of the interpretive musical experience.

p.225 - Asterios sees music in his characteristic dualistic form as either rhythmic or melodic. Kohoutek disagrees, seeing music as "simultaneity –the, the awareness of so much happening at once– is now the most salient aspect of contemporary life. In a cacophony of information, each listener, by focusing on certain tones and phrases, can become an active participant in creating a unique, unique polyphonic experience." As Kohoutek speaks, 4 panels of the page overlap each other, visually mimicking his definition of music (cf. p.222 on Calvin's philosophy of music and its sources). Indeed, it is as if Mazzucchelli, through Kohoutek's words, is telling the reader how to interpret the novel through many different lenses.

p. 226 - As Kohoutek explains the philosophy behind his music, Mazzucchelli illustrates Asterios' indifference to Willy's advances on Hana. By interposing panels of Willy and Hana's conversation with Asterios and Calvin's, Mazzucchelli shows the reader something that Asterios himself cannot see. The entire scene is ironic as Asterios, in response to Calvin, says "Some things, alas, are probably better left unnoticed."

p.230-233 - See "A Note on Color."

**Chapter 17:** The present and the past

**Synopsis and Themes:**

Chapter 17 illustrates the quotidian affairs of Asterios and Hana's life together. Mazzucchelli uses a narrative and illustrative technique in which the main narrative plays out over a six page spread in the middle of the pages, but around the main narrative are asynchronous panels showing quotidian affairs. The technique evokes spontaneous memory recollection in an individual and is an artistic technique exclusive to comics.

p.236 - "I have a blister on my foot." This page is a mirror of page 238 and page 237 is a mirror of 239. Page 236 looks almost exactly like page 247, except that in 247 Asterios has put a band-aid on his foot. The mirrored pages show that Asterios is thinking about Hana and his past life from his present point in time. The blister brings to mind a cacophony of thoughts and feelings that rush into Asterios' mind, as the disjointedness of the images in the chapter illustrate. This is the only chapter that breaks the time barrier (cf. note on time).

**Chapter 18:** Orpheus Underground - neither present nor past

The Orphic vision (cf. note on the Orphic vision).

p.249 Asterios is Orpheus.

p.267 - cf. note on Asterios' eyes.

p.268-269 - Are very similar to p.17, especially the bottom four panels where the flames leap upward across the panels to engulf Hana. On page 17, the same thing happens, except it is Asterios' library of tapes engulfed in flames. The tapes represent Asterios' entire life and replacing the tapes with Hana means that Hana must also represent the entirety of Asterios' life. On p. 269, the lightning bolt cracks across the horizon of Asterios, head lowered in defeat, again foreshadowing Asterios fate at the hands of capricious gods, or rather, affairs beyond his control. The lightning bolt also serves as the main actor in celestial affairs in the novel. It is a lightning bolt that strikes Asterios' apartment and sets him on his sojourn in the first place.

## **Chapter 19:** The present

### **Synopsis and Themes:**

Asterios and Stiff go to One-Eyed Jack's, a bar, to hear the Radnicks first gig. The Radnicks play first to a less than full bar, but Asterios is pleased with their performance. After their performance, Gerry, Mañana, Asterios and Stiff discuss the nature of relationships (cf. p 276-77). During the conversation, Asterios, finally giving into his Dionysian side, gets drunk and then listens to the semi-Dionysian music of Celtic Skelter. The bum to whom Asterios gave his lighter starts throwing cigarettes at Asterios and repeatedly calls him a faggot. Asterios turns to the bum, who hits Asterios in the face with a beer bottle, blinding him in one eye. It is Asterios' physical blinding that enables him to finally open his eyes (cf. 279 and 302, *Asterios Polyp* According to Nietzsche). On some level, the bum represents divine agency in Asterios' life. Like Hermes who went to Calypso and forced her to free Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and Mercury who warned Aeneas to leave Dido and Carthage to

fulfill his destiny in the *Aeneid*, the bum functions as a way for Asterios to continue his quest. Without being partially-blinded, Asterios may never have realized that he needed to leave Apogee in order to complete his quest.

p. 271 - cf. a note on foreshadowing.

Additionally, the band "Othmar's Eggshells" is an homage to the Charles Shultz comic strip *Peanuts*. On October 5th, 1959, Shultz introduced Miss Othmar, Linus' schoolteacher. Linus immediately falls in love with Othmar. When Othmar leaves teaching to get married, Linus gives her a number of eggshells that he was supposed to have brought in for a class project (Shulz).

p. 276-77 - Asterios, Gerry, Mañana and Stiff discuss relationships between lovers. Asterios thinks that "a combination of physical and mental attraction," in true dualistic fashion, are the key. However, Mañana points out that a good relationship has three elements without which a relationship cannot exist: "love, trust, respect." Asterios is astounded by the revelations and Mazzucchelli again elucidates the question of systems of two versus systems of three.

p.279 - The bum certainly uses the term faggot to call Asterios a homosexual, which may suggest that, in one sense, being gay is to seek one's self in a mate, rather than one's opposite. A reading like this relies on a binary belief system of homosexuality and the faggot reference points to the idea of Platonic halves detailed in chapter 8 (cf. note on Plato's *Symposium* p.83).

**Chapter 20: The past****Synopsis and Themes:**

The chapter begins with Asterios thinking, "I am the hero of my own story" (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 282). The images in the chapter are disjointed and do not follow a historical narrative of Asterios' past, but rather illustrate the complex philosophical ideas that Ignazio narrates in the chapter. Ignazio speaks on Asterios' belief in the ancient gods (cf. p.284), death, and humans' impact on the universe around them and the conceptuality of time and its effect on human memory (cf. p.290-91).

p. 281 - The clock. This must be the same clock that Asterios took apart when he was a boy. It was his father's but once Asterios took it apart, he was unable to put it back together.

p. 284 - Another aspect of mythology that Mazzucchelli explores is the capriciousness of the universe. Ignazio, on page 284, says of Asterios,

My brother always preferred the gods of our ancestors. By giving them human personalities, the Ancient Greeks could feel the world made sense... Because only the whims of a bunch of petty bickering deities could explain the random events of joy and tragedy that befall human beings. (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 284-85)

This notion, that there is a certain randomness to divine action, shows itself in two key moments in *Asterios Polyp*: one, at the beginning of the novel when Asterios' apartment building is struck by lightning and burns to the ground, thus setting Asterios on his journey and two, at the end of the novel, after Asterios and Hana have reunited and an asteroid

destroys Hana's house, killing both Asterios and Hana. Mazzucchelli illustrates, with Asterios' belief in the ancient gods, a worldview in which divine agency, both just and unjust, always supersedes human action. For if the gods were always just, they would not have set Asterios on a journey of self discovery and atonement only to kill him after he just barely fulfilled his goal.

p.285 - Above Ignazio's commentary on page 285, there is an illustration of Zeus shooting a lightning bolt at a hapless human. In a very real way, this is how the universe treats Asterios: first by destroying his home and then by killing him.

p.290-91 - Ignazio says, "To live (as I understand it) is to exist within a conception of time. But to remember is to vacate the very notion of time. Every memory, no matter how remote its subject, takes place "now," at the moment it's called up in the mind. The more something is recalled, the more the brain has a chance to refine the original experience, because every memory is a re-creation, not a playback." As Ignazio says this, the clock appears again, this time in pieces as Asterios had taken it apart. Juxtaposed between Ignazio's words on page 291, are four panels of the same moment of time as Hana says a different thing in each of the panels. On the left is what she actually said and as the panels continue, Asterios' version of what Hana said appears in different variations.

Ignazio's assertion that the human mind refines memories the more times they are recalled mirrors William Wordsworth's philosophy that experiences are only fully realized after they have been recalled and reflected upon a number of times. In *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth explores this very theme. He explains that even

when he is away from Tintern Abbey, he still recalls them "in lonely rooms, and mid the din / of towns and cities," and that he owes those recollections "sensations sweet, / felt in the blood, and felt along the heart," (Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey* 26-30). He continues saying that those remembrances incite in him an, "aspect more sublime," which allows him to, "see into the life of things" (Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey* 38, 50). For Wordsworth, the memory of Tintern Abbey has sustained him while he spent years in the city, not being able to return to the sublime beauty of nature. Additionally, upon his return to the Abbey, he understands and appreciates it even more because his mind has had a chance to reflect upon the experience both as a youth and as an adult. Indeed, Wordsworth exists simultaneously in both the past and the present through his memory,

For thou [nature] art with me, here, upon the banks

Of this fair river; thou, my dearest Friend,

My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch

The language of my former heart, and read

My former pleasures in the shooting lights

Of thy wild eyes. (Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey* 115-20)

Wordsworth's reflection on memory creates a more pure and clear version of the events, while Asterios' reflection creates a version far from the truth of the matter. In this way, Wordsworth's theory of memory differs from Asterios'. However, even though they differ, the two ideas share the same root, but have different outcomes.

## **Chapter 21: The present**

### **Synopsis and Themes:**

The chapter begins with a picture of the road and journeying is a theme in this chapter. Asterios dreams of Ignazio for the last time and in the dream, Asterios kills his doppelganger (cf. 294-301). Asterios awakens in the hospital after being partially blinded and the color palette has radically changed, (cf. p.302 and A Note on Color). He purchases Stiff's solar Cadillac and departs Apogee with little fanfare and little chance of return. He arrives at Hana's and she immediately realizes how much he has changed and he notices a sculpture of a pyramid that Hana has created. She then shows him her studio, in which she has sculpted the five platonic solids (cf. p327). Mazzucchelli shows that the solids do have use as they helped to clear Hana's mind and open her to the possibility of the simplicity of form. During their next conversation, as they recall their lives together, their speech becomes intertwined (cf. p.331). As they sit, the scene shifts to the outside of the house and Asterios says, "What's that noise?" The reader must flip the page to learn the nature of the noise, so Mazzucchelli has created a truly suspenseful moment by deliberately placing the following panel on the next page. Once the reader turns the page, a two page spread appears in which an asteroid several times larger than Hana's house is about to destroy them. By not showing the asteroid hit Hana's house, Mazzucchelli forces the reader to extrapolate the logical conclusion of the panel. Asterios has reached the end of his journey, and indeed the end of his and everyone's journey is ultimately death.

p.294-301 - The last dream of Ignazio. Asterios drives a Saab into Major Auto repair and finds Ignazio fixing cars. Ignazio relates Asterios' life back to him, saying many of the same

things to Asterios that he had earlier related to the reader. "I was living in Manhattan... but until about seven years ago, I spent most of my time upstate, teaching at a University in Ithaca. I was a tenured professor of architecture -- a position buttressed by my renown as a "paper architect." It was there at the University that I met my wife. We couldn't have been more different and yet... our lives folded into each other's with barely a wrinkle etc."

Asterios realizes that Ignazio is telling Asterios' story, not his own. Ignazio points out to Asterios through this story that it could have just as easily been Ignazio who lived and not Asterios. Ignazio also calls into question Asterios' identity, something that Asterios has been attempting to redefine throughout the entire novel. Asterios kills Ignazio, finally shedding the last vestiges of his former life and completing the internal part of his journey. He only needs now return to Hana and complete his odyssey.

p.299 - (cf. p.85)

p. 302 - Asterios wakes up in a hospital bed, blind in one eye. The entire color palette has changed as well (cf. A Note on Color).

Following his penchant for complex allusion, Mazzucchelli, by partially blinding Asterios in one eye, turns him into Polyphemos, the Cyclops of the *Odyssey* (cf. note on the *Odyssey*, note on foreshadowing, p.20). Mazzucchelli here inverts the popular narrative in which the hero of the story gains enlightenment through trial by having Asterios' trial culminate in his half-blinding. Certainly though, Mazzucchelli is not alone in representing enlightenment by blindness. Tiresias, the blind seer of ancient Greek tragedy represents wisdom through blindness. Additionally, once Oedipus tears out his eyes in Sophocles'

*Oedipus the King*, he goes into the desert and gains the wisdom that he lacked in his previous life. Paul Atreides, hero of Frank Herbert's *Dune* series and a corollary to Oedipus, after being blinded in an attack also goes to the desert and becomes a prophet.

p.322 - cf. A Note on Asterios' eyes.

p.324 - Asterios tells Hana that he quit smoking. He never smokes after his apartment is set on fire and the lighter, the item most needed for smoking, is the first thing he gives away.

p.327 - The five platonic solids (cf. *Asterios Polyp* According to Nietzsche, a note on Plato's *Symposium* and p.38). Hana changes her artistic style based on her loss of Asterios. It was a way for her to keep something of him after their divorce. Asterios, with a look of amazement on his face as he views Hana's three dimensional representations of the platonic solids is, "they're... wonderful."

The five platonic solids hold special meaning for Asterios, who desires to understand the inner nature of objects. In his dialogue *Timaeus*, Plato describes a craftsman, or demiurge, who fashions the universe after his will, attempting to create order from a state of disorder (Zeyl). The demiurge works with a specific system of duality: order and chaos. Asterios, like the demiurge, works within his own systems of duality: linear vs. plastic, internal vs. external, Apollonian vs. Dionysian, factual vs. fictional, etc. Asterios, according to Ignazio, always searches for "truthfulness," a search that is based on Louis Sullivan's architectural philosophy of "form ever follows function" (cf. p.85) (Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* 119). Asterios spends his earlier life searching for the "true" forms of things, which is

why the five platonic solids, which symbolize the true forms of different phenomena in the universe, appeal so much to him.

Plato describes and defines the platonic solids in terms of their elemental properties. The demiurge asserts that the four elements must be "as perfect and excellent as possible" (Plato qtd. in Zeyl). Each of the platonic solids is associated with a specific element found in the universe,

The tetrahedron for fire, the octahedron for air, the icosahedron for water, and the cube for earth. (The remaining regular solid, the dodecahedron, is "used for the universe as a whole," [55c4–6], since it approaches most nearly the shape of a sphere.) (Zeyl)

The tetrahedron, octahedron and icosahedron all use equilateral triangles as their bases and can be divided infinitely within themselves. Plato assigns them fire, air and water respectively because of the volatile and ever changing nature of those elements. Plato also asserts that it is possible for each of these three solids to transform into the other because the tetrahedron, octahedron and icosahedron are constituted with equilateral triangles. On the other hand, the cube and the dodecahedron, built from squares and pentagons, cannot change into another solid, although they can be broken down. Thus, earth is always earth and the universe is always the universe (Zeyl).

The platonic solids represent the ideal forms of each of the earthly elements and Asterios, obsessed with the structure and order of the universe, finds these five forms to be the most "perfect." Ignazio supports this reading when on page 122 he says of Asterios, "In the certitude of symmetry, the consequence of counterpoise, Asterios found a measure of solace." Ignazio continues, "his own designs echoed this eloquent equilibrium." Asterios'

own designs use simple geometric shapes built upon the platonic solids. Akimbo arms, on page 122, is comprised of two cubes and 2 trapezoidal triangles. Parallel Park, also on page 122, is less platonic in its structure, but it speaks to Asterios' belief that he was cut in two, as Parallel Park is simply one building split into two by what looks very much like a lightning bolt, the weapon of Zeus and the agent of Asterios' initial ruin.

p.328 - Of the three items Asterios took from the apartment, the only one he still possesses is the Swiss army knife. It, of all the items, has the most significance because it was the first thing that Hana ever gave him and it is also a reflection of the perfect modernist architectural form.

p.331 - A direct contrast to the story that Asterios and Hana told on page 90. Hana and Asterios' word balloons intertwine and become one here, illustrating their reconnection.

p.336-337 - An Asteroid hits Hana's house, killing her and Asterios. Stephen Tabachnick explains why comic books can make a shift in reality more readily than other media, "It is very easy for the artist to make the move from the realistic to the fantastic and vice versa in comics" and, moreover, it is easy for comic book readers to accept this shift because reality in the post 9/11 world has become much like the elastic landscape of the comic book (Tabachnick). In a novel or film that portrays a world that mirrors our own in its physics and paradigms, it would be difficult to accept the apparent *deus ex machina* ending of *Asterios Polyp*. However, because *Asterios Polyp* is a graphic novel and graphic novels so easily shift from fantasy to reality, it becomes easier to accept the ending of *Asterios Polyp*.

In the end Asterios achieves his goal of reuniting with Hana, but like many Greek heroes before him, fate prevents him from enjoying his νόστος, *homecoming*. In Greek mythology, especially the νοστοί, travel narratives of returns from the Trojan War, some heroes return home to find those homes irrevocably changed, and others die upon their return. Most famously told in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks at Troy, returns home and is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. Zeus shipwrecks Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother, in Egypt rather than allowing him a return to Greece (Euripides, *Helen*). Indeed, even Odysseus, upon his return, finds it overrun by the suitors vying for the hand of his wife Penelope (Homer). In *The Return of the King*, on his return, Frodo Baggins finds the Shire overrun by ruffians. Even after he and his comrades force out the invaders, Frodo finds that the war has changed him so much that he must leave the Shire and sail into the West (Tolkein). The key component to all of these narratives is the idea that one cannot return to an unchanged landscape after a long absence.

From Spotty Drizzle's discussion of asteroids to Ursula and Asterios' sojourn to an asteroid crater, Mazzucchelli uses the presence of asteroids throughout the narrative to foreshadow Asterios' end. Although the foreshadowing is clearer on a second reading of the novel, one should notice that there is some meaning to all of the references to asteroids and the cosmos. Indeed, even Asterios' own name is etymologically linked to asteroids. On a metaphysical level, it is almost as if Asterios, killed by an asteroid, kills himself (cf. A Note on Foreshadowing).

## Chapter 22: Epilogue

### Synopsis and Themes:

*Asterios Polyp* ends with a scene of familial bliss. The Majors sit in the tree-house that Asterios helped build and reflect on the beautiful night sky. Jackson sees a shooting star, the same asteroid which vaporizes Asterios and Hana. The relative peace of the last three pages contrasts with the horror of Asterios' death.

p. 339 - The tree-house seems to serve as Asterios' legacy to the universe. After losing everything that he owned and then being vaporized by an asteroid, the only thing that he actually had a hand in helping to building is the only thing he leaves behind. And, ironically enough, the design of the tree-house was not even his, but Stiff's.

p. 340 - Jackson sees a shooting star that could be the meteor which hits Hana and Asterios. If this is the case, then seeing the asteroid from two different perspectives emphasizes Ignazio's discussion of perception on p.38. In Jackson's view, the shooting star represents the beauty of nature and the hope of wish fulfillment. This same moment, depicted on p.336-37, plays out much differently as the asteroid bears down on Asterios and Hana.

p.342 - A picture of the cosmos with a shooting star in the middle mirrors, but is not identical to the cosmos picture at the beginning of the novel. The two images create a kind of ringed symmetry to the novel. It begins with the gods setting Asterios on a journey and ends with them forcibly ending that journey.

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