A fragmentary past: Karasik and Mazzucchelli’s City of Glass by Nicolas Labarre

This article examines the way a temporary inflexion towards a cinematic representation in City of Glass: the Graphic Novel – an adaptation which actively seeks to explore the specificities of the comics form – brings to the surface the fragmented and incomplete state of tradition in comics.

Among many other things, David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik’s adaptation of Paul Auster’s City of Glass (City of Glass GN in the rest of this text) is a visual interpretation of the noir homage present in Auster’s book. City of Glass, the first novel of the New York Trilogy, initially relies on a loose pastiche of detective fiction and more specifically of the novels of Raymond Chandler, in which private eyes accept unclear missions for the sake of beautiful women. This archetypal scene is replayed both in the novel and in the graphic novel, when Quinn, the main protagonists, accepts to keep watch over a man named Stillman in part because of his attraction to Virginia’s Stillman, the man’s daughter-in-law.

In most of the book, Quinn functions as a “post-existential private-eye”, in the words of Dennis Drabelle quoted in (McCaffery, Gregory et Auster 2), and his surveillance of Stillman quickly leads him to semiotic and linguistic interrogations rather than to the down-to-earth investigation of a Philip Marlowe. The challenge in adapting City of Glass therefore rested mostly on the transposition of this verbal rather than visual narrative. To quote from Art Spiegelman: “For all its playful references to pulp fiction, City of Glass is a surprisingly nonvisual work at its core, a complex web of words and abstract ideas in playfully shifting narrative styles”. (Spiegelman). While others, notably David Coughlan and Spiegelman himself in his introduction, have examined the strategies used by the two authors to represent these non-visual elements, what interests me here is precisely the way the text’s “playful reference to pulp fiction” are adapted.

In the novel, Virginia Stillman’s initial description already points to her potential role as the archetypal victim/femme fatale. It is hard not to agree with Dan Holmes who, in his investigation of the links between post-modernism and crime fiction in Auster’s writing, has described this precise passage as “very Chandler-esque” (n.p.)

The woman was thirty, perhaps thirty-five; average height at best; hips a touch wide or else voluptuous depending on your point of view; dark hair, dark eyes, and a look in those eyes that was at once self-contained and vaguely seductive. She wore a black dress and very red lipstick.

(Auster 13)

Of course, this “depends on your point of view”, for just as the woman is usually caught between two roles in noir fiction (as exemplified to the screeching extreme by Faye Dunaway’s cry: “I’m her mother”/”I’m her sister” in the conclusion of Polanski’s Chinatown, 1974), Quinn is at this point of the novel caught between his playing the role of a private-eye and his becoming one. While Mazzucchelli’s mostly minimalist rendering [1] initially masks the sexual allure suggested by this depiction, Virginia’s Stillman’s attractiveness is later pushed to the fore in a panel in which we understand that Quinn is imagining her naked. This overt sexual fantasy has no direct equivalent in the novel.

Later on, still in the same discussion, the same structure is used and reversed. This time, Quinn is shown as an archetypal gumshoe, complete with raincoat and crumbled hat (echoing Spiegelman’s use of the same archetype in “Ace Hole, Midget Detective”, 1974, and anticipating the “Frank Kafka” strip in Brubaker and Philips’s Criminal, 2006-), while the focalization suggests that this representation is to be attributed to Virginia Stillman. This is the second occurrence of the detective in the narrative, which was previously introduced as a representation of Max Wonk, the hero of a series of crime novels which Quinn writes.

The two sequences of three panels each are symmetrical (Quinn – Virginia – Virginia/Virginia – Quinn – Quinn) and even their lieu on the page suggests that they are meant to balance each other, with the first occupying the top tier and the second the bottom tier of their respective page. By contrast, throughout this conversation, the novel provides no clue as to the thoughts of the protagonists, consisting solely of dialogue and succinct
The multiplicity of overlapping narrative instances in comics makes it difficult to positively assign these fantasies to either character. The repetition of the point of view between panels suggests that since we are placed in the physical location of Quinn and Virginia respectively, the fantasized panel is an expression of their mental state. This seems to be contradicted, however, by a later sequence in which Quinn "sees" himself transforming into a private-detective, and is represented again as the archetypal gumshoe (47). While this later reversal complicates our reading of the scene (the whole scene may alter all be a reflection of Quinn’s mental state, since he is the main focalizer, or Virginia Quinn may be imagining herself naked in an especially embarrassing moment), it does signal the connection between this specific scene and popular fiction – between noir and erotica – in a more overt fashion than the novel. Moreover, as pointed out by Alex Shakar in his review of the graphic novel: “Work is drawn in the chiseled lines of Dick Tracy, with all the backlit shading effects of film noir. He is visibly generic, but drawn with more care” (Shakar). His identity is therefore clearer, more easily defined than that of Quinn. His presence in the scene thus temporarily outweighs Quinn’s, and pushes genre to the fore.

This generic encoding means that the reader of City of Glass GN is more primed for a generic reading of the kiss that concludes the scene than a reader of Auster’s novel. Here is the scene in the novel:

For several seconds they stood there in silence, not knowing whether there was something to add or if the time had come to say good-bye. In that tiny interval, Virginia Stillman suddenly threw her arms around Quinn, sought out his lips with her own and kissed him passionately, driving her tongue deep inside his mouth. Quinn was so taken off guard that he almost failed to enjoy it.

(Auster 31-32)

The willful contrasts at work in this depiction, between light-hearted romance (“tiny interval”; the last sentence) and more sexualized elements (the matter of fact depiction of the penetrating kiss) again opens up the scene for a range of possible meanings.

In the graphic novel, the element of surprise is here, and there are traces of the stylistic dissonances at work in the novel, as the emanatas/speed lines over Quinn’s head (only four panels contain emanata in the first 25 pages of City of Glass GN) contrast with the elaborate rendering of Virginia’s hair. Surprise is present in Quinn’s expression – a raised eyebrow and wide-opened eye; in the sudden disappearance of the background – a break with the previous ten panels and again a rare occurrence in the graphic novel as a whole; and by the imbalance in the composition of the panel, suggesting a quick leftward movement. The sensual element present in Auster’s depiction is even made manifest to a certain extent by the shift from a cartoonish and angular approach to a more naturalistic depiction of the faces and bodies. This restored corporeality in the context of a scene of seduction can certainly be read as pointing to physical sex, achieving the same effect as the depiction of the probing tongue though through a very different means.

However, the specific panel in which the kiss occurs does more than simply transcribe Auster’s prose; in the context of the graphic novels and of comics in general it suggests the necessity of borrowing from cinema. As mentioned above, the whole sequence in the comic makes explicit something slightly less overt in the novel: the presence of a pulpish subplot to the whole discussion. The kiss itself therefore appears as the culmination of these erotic and noirish fantasies. However, it does so by invoking a very cinematic image. I would like to suggest that what is at stake here is not simply a temporary recourse to a form inherited from another medium but also an indictment of the lack of a usable past in comics.

The debt towards cinema in this panel is made manifest through several devices. One is the choice of a more naturalistic mode of representation, mentioned above, a form of “realism” which mitigates “the challenge of a narrative mode that uniquely never lets us forget, in which the kind of immersive magic that seeks to demystify simply cannot happen” (Gardner 66). This is by no mean a “realistic” drawing, but contrasted with the other panels on the page, it makes immersion considerably easier. The lack of balloons also contributes to this possible reading of the image as having a cinematic ancestry. The balloon is that “white presence which conveniently erased. The format of the panel is another noteworthy element, since its horizontal shape (1.25:1) is very close to that of the 4:3 aspect ratio, in use in cinema until the 1950’s and in television long after that. City of Glass employs a regular nine-panel grid, but panels within a tier are regularly merged. The shape of the panel is therefore not unusual in itself, but the choice to use at this specific point is significant: by contrast, the vertical panel dominant in the rest of the graphic novel (1:1.66) reads as specific to the form.

More strikingly, the off-balance nature of the picture pushes significant elements out of the panel, including a part of Quinn’s head and Virginia’s arm. Again, people and bodies are not always presented in full in the rest of the graphic novel, but in a majority of cases, framing is always very deliberate isolating faces, postures and details in carefully composed pictures. The imbalance and the ostensibly absent elements here suggest an accident, an arrested movement and the existence of an off-screen space, toward which Quinn is falling. However, as pointed out by Groensteen and Peeters among others, there is no such thing as an off-panel space in comics, the way there is in a film (Groensteen 50; Peeters 82).

None of these elements is decisive in its own right, but their combination strongly points towards cinematic
This cinematographic reading is also not suggested by the narrative and stylistic choices we identified earlier, it is also encouraged by the status of this type of closely framed kiss, seen in profile, as a paradigmatic image in Hollywood cinema. Since 1896 and the showing of the then scandalous The Kiss, the image has been an integral part of the public representation of cinema. This is convincingly illustrated, for instance, by the opening sequence of the French ‘Cinema de minuit’ – a weekly TV show dedicated to classic cinema – in which famous cinematic couples about to kiss are united by a series of dissolve, emphasizing the highly codified nature of the scene.

The same point could be made through the abundance of books devoted to Hollywood kisses, or simply through the fact that one of the lobby cards for Howard Hawks’s The Big Sleep emphasizes the kiss between Bogart and Bacall, while the film itself devotes much of its energy to frustrating this expectation.

The climax of the generic drive latent in this scene therefore appears to necessitate a move away from the specific code of comics. City of Glass GN constantly explores the ambiguity of images in comics, of a code in which highly symbolized representations (faceless figures, thick black lines) can be used to suggest both a “realistic” world and a highly symbolic imagery. This versatility however is found lacking at a point when the novel and the graphic novel seek to evoke an existing tradition – in this case detective or noir fiction.

I would like to suggest that this points to the lack of a usable icon in comics tradition, which could be used as capstone to this specific subtext. In Auster’s text, the noirish elements function without an explicit reference to the cinematic treatment of the genre; though of course intertextual inferences color our reading on several occasions. This suggests that in this case, as well as in other occasions in City of Glass GN, the history of comics does not offer usable icons. The graphic novel includes several overt pastiches – which is unsurprising for the adaptation of Auster’s referential text – but crucially, they are not pastiches of other comics. Instead, Karasik and Mazzucchelli reference other visual forms: woodcuts, children pictures, Jerome Bosch’s paintings for the adaptation of Auster’s referential text – but crucially, they are not pastiches of other comics. Instead, Karasik and Mazzucchelli reference other visual forms: woodcuts, children pictures, Jerome Bosch’s paintings and cinema. By contrast, again, Auster’s City of Glass references literature and most specifically the novel without the need to allude to other forms.

Yet, comics do offer examples of forms which could have been used in this context, notably those comic books produced in the late forties, be them crime or romance comics. I hope to have demonstrated that this is not what Karasik and Mazzucchelli have done here, instead choosing to reference a form with cultural clout and more importantly, a more visible cultural form, one which is likely to function as meta-textual reference for the greatest number of readers.

What this recourse to cinema highlights is the incompleteness, real or perceived, of the comics corpus. When it comes to representing 17th century religious dogma, which the graphic novel does by imitating woodcuts (42), the brevity of comics history is of course of factor, since there are no contemporary texts available. When it comes to the kiss, however, the lacuna points to the fact that a significant portion of comics works – entire genres even – was until recently entirely submerged. Whatever useable traditions comics have focus on a small subset of influential comic strips (Dick Tracy, Krazy Kat, Little Nemo, Peanuts…), a few genres which benefit from a voluntary or involuntary historicization (super heroes, funny animals, horror shorts) and a smattering of culturally bound aesthetic references (Kirby and possibly Steranko in the United States, la ligne claire or l’école de Marcinelle in French speaking countries, certainly others elsewhere). This accessible and regularly used tradition encompasses a mere fraction of the history of the medium, and a strikingly small subset of genres. The general availability and persisting presence of a number of noir or neo-noir films thus contrast with the unavailability or invisibility of entire periods of comics history – although the recent “golden age of reprint” has altered that situation to some extent.

Discussing the origin of these lacunae would go beyond the scope of this article, though one may point to lateness of serious of critical engagement with the form (Beaty), the unavailability of much of the material for a long time and the perceived hierarchy of cultural forms as contributing factors. In any case, the minute variations in such a controlled environment as City of Glass GN function as an enlightening comment on the limits of comics not as form but as a corpus when it comes to recreating such an ambitious intertextual effort as Paul Auster’s novel.

Bibliography


Nadel, Dan and Paul Karasik. ‘Interview with Paul Karasik.’ The Ganzfeld Fall 2000: 105-149.


Nicolas Labarre is an assistant professor (maître de conférences) at University Bordeaux 3, France. He has worked on mass culture theories, but his current research focuses on issues of adaptation, genre, narrative constraints, and cultural legitimacy in comics. He is a regular contributor to The Comics Grid. He also draws and writes comics, mostly published on his blog.

[1] – Interestingly, Mazzucchelli’s style is perceived as “naturalistic” by Coughlan (838), while others have likened it to a woodcut novel (Tremblay-Gaudette 72). Mazzucchelli himself emphasized ambivalence as the main characteristic of his style in the book: “I wanted a drawing style naturalistic enough to evoke the “real world” in which the story takes place, calligraphic enough to bend easily into the other styles I planned to use, and simple enough to be clear in the book’s small format.” (Kartalopoulos and Mazzucchelli)

[2] – The ‘cinematic reading’ of the scene is further encouraged in the Picador reprint of the graphic novel, which uses on the cover an atypical panel, displaying the intricate entrapping shadows often used as a visual metonymy of film noir. The original cover did not establish such connection.

[This article was updated on 14/01/2013 to correct a spelling error]

Share this:

Email  Print  Facebook  Reddit  LinkedIn  Pinterest  Pocket

Twitter  Tumblr

Loading...

Posted by Comics Forum on 2012/12/14 in Guest Writers

3 Comments

← Affiliated Conferences Archives: Further Updates

Navigating the Post-9/11 Mental Space Architecture and Expressionism in In the Shadow of No Towers by Aletta Verwoerd →

3 responses to “A fragmentary past: Karasik and Mazzucchelli’s City of Glass by Nicolas Labarre”

Pingback: Comics Forum Articles Nominated for 2012 Hooded Utilitarian Awards « Comics Forum
In Arts One this past week we discussed Paul Auster’s novel City of Glass as well as the graphic novel adaptation by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli. We were very fortunate to have a guest lecture by Paul Karasik on the graphic novel, on Monday, March 27, and he gave a public lecture later that day as well. One of the students in my Arts One seminar group asked him about the scribbled face that appears numerous times in the graphic novel. Karasik didn’t want to “give too much away,” and just said it had something to do with who the narrator of the story is. So of course we had to discuss...