Renegotiating Binaries: Memory, Identity and Spatiality in David Mazzucchelli’s Asterios Polyp

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Abstract
David Mazzucchelli’s eponymous Asterios Polyp, a renowned ‘Paper Architect’, gives birth to ideas of award-winning spaces, that do not befit translation on to concrete. The Odyssean journey of Asterios Polyp is interspersed with an accompanying duality, as his movement from his urban residence in Manhattan to a small town called Apogee, is strictly to redefine his identity in consort with the changing geographical and cultural space; the narrative switches back and forth between his famed urban past and reclusive rural present, with memory acting as the thread of perpetual actual phenomenon, tying him to his eternal present (Nora). Mazzucchelli continuously reconstructs the identity of Polyp and his memories through distinct stylistic variations, with changes in societal and spatial conditions adversely affecting their representation on the page. Through an interdisciplinary focus on cultural studies and spatial production, this paper aims to posit that the shifting milieu of the social and cultural space inhabited by Polyp unremittingly impinges on his identity, leading to a re-negotiation between his memories within the context of his mutating cultural space. This study will strive to look into how the construction of identities are produced not only in specific institutional and historical sites within the discourse (Hall), but also contingent on the spatial location of the individual. Polyp’s spontaneous shift to the town of Apogee is not only a method to backtrack to his roots, but a mechanism to reconfigure his identity through routes that he traverses (Gilroy). A focus into the stark refusal to inhabit the urbanised city where his identity was set in established patterns marks the emergence of a new space, where all the power equations of the society, that of agency and hierarchy, and even that of personal and collective memory are reconstructed and reformulated. The paper aims to examine the web of interconnecting links that are formed between the aspects of identity, memory and cultural space in Mazzucchelli’s Asterios Polyp.

Keywords
identity, memory, spatiality, binary
Asterios Polyp (2009), David Mazzucchelli’s first full length graphic novel charts the life of the eponymous protagonist, a “Paper Architect,” whose award-winning designs do not befit translation onto concrete (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp). Asterios, with his preference for functionality over ornamentation, perceives life in terms of dualities. Afflicted by a lightning strike on his apartment building, Asterios instantaneously decides to leave behind his identity as a renowned Professor, and a comfortable urban Manhattan lifestyle to embark on an unprecedented journey to unchartered territories. Asterios’ quest to reconfigure his identity, and in the process, his memories alike, through a shift in his spatial paradigm, is encapsulated efficiently in the first and only statement he utters in the first chapter - “How far would this take me?”

David Mazzucchelli had earlier worked in mainstream comics, collaborating with other artists like Frank Miller, to produce works like Daredevil: Born Again (1985–86) and Batman: Year One (1986–87). In a later interview, talking about the scope of superhero comics in his oeuvre, Mazzucchelli admitted: “I had gotten to a point where I doubted I could go any further in that genre in a satisfying way”. He moved on to attempts at exploring different drawing and art styles in his anthology called Rubber Blankets. It is with Asterios Polyp that the author experiments with a full-length graphic novel format for the first time, without having to limit himself to the norms of mainstream comic books (McCarthy). Beginning from the uneven dust jacket of the book, to the absence of any page numbers, Mazzucchelli makes it clear in no uncertain terms that the graphic novel does not conform to any traditional notions and norms of print or spatiality.

His protagonist, Asterios, on the other hand, likes order and obedience to simplicity of forms, which is reflected in his binate view of architecture as well as his designs. The architect has a deep-seated binary outlook towards the world, which he rationalises as such: “Of course I realize that things aren’t so black and white—that in actuality possibilities exist along a continuum between the extremes…It’s just a convenient organizing principle. By choosing two aspects of a subject that appear to be in opposition, each can be examined in light of the other in order to better illuminate the entire subject” (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp).

This “eloquent equilibrium” of perceiving the world exclusively through dualities haunts the novel, as the narrative voice is that of Ignazio Polyp, the stillborn twin of Asterios. A binary strain also runs through Asterios and his ex-wife Hana, as he reminisces: “We couldn’t have been more different and yet...our lives folded into each other’s with barely a wrinkle” (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp).

The torn protagonist is in a constant renegotiation of his identity of self with that of his perceived identity of his twin, had he been alive. “If he had been the one to survive, would his life have followed exactly the path mine has? Am I living his life now?” wonders Asterios to Hana (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp). While identity can seem to “invoke an origin in a historical past”, Stuart Hall in his essay “Who Needs Identity?” argues, “identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being... how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation” (4). Asterios too, through his own representation of himself and his binary other, Ignazio, constantly keeps designating to himself an identity, which is perhaps " a
name given to escape sought from that uncertainty” (Bauman, 19), the uncertainty here of always feeling as if his existence can be attributed to “just mute luck” as he feels that each of them “had an equal chance in the womb” (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp).

The ghost of his past constantly keeps impinging on his present, as the architect is always aware of a constant presence - “But when I was alone, I felt - Well, I used to look over my shoulder all the time, expecting to see someone. It was a weird sensation...like searching for your reflection in the mirror” (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp). In a moment of faith, Asterios confesses to Hana the reason for him installing video cameras in all rooms of his apartment: “Somehow, though, it’s comforting to know they’re there, in the next room...my own video doppelgänger” (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp). On Asterios’ fiftieth birthday, a lightning strike leads to a fire in his apartment. He sees this as an opportunity to rid himself of this unending search and leave behind all his ties. But his “phantom sibling” keeps recurrently manifesting in his dreams, no matter how far he traverses to evade it (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp). Memory, hence, as Pierre Nora suggests, keeps acting as a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying Asterios to his eternal present (8).

Apogee, a quiet suburban town, is the answer to Asterios’ question of how far he can traverse with his limited resources. During a recollection of the past, Asterios admits in his conversation with Hana: “I’m a city person; you’re a country person”. Having spent almost all of his life in either Ithaka or Manhattan, the suburban territory of Apogee, although an unfamiliar dominion for the tragedy-stricken protagonist, is conducive to finding mechanisms to redefine his identity outside the scope of his established patterns. With no money at his disposal, he finds himself a job at an auto repair shop owned by Stiffly Major, a local auto-mechanic. This emergence of a new space, where all the power equations of the society, that of agency and hierarchy, and even that of personal and collective memory are reconstructed and reformulated, renders Asterios out of his depth, and pushes him to begin anew. After spending a considerable time in the suburbs with the rustic Majors, the same Asterios, who was over-exacting of his architecture students as a Professor, upon looking at a plan for treehouse sketched by Stiffly, contently exclaims that it “looks great” (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp).

Through his use of colour, Mazzucchelli demarcates space as well as time, with blues and reds signifying Asterios’ urban life in the past, and muted yellows along with purple to render his out-lying present in Apogee. Alternative chapters shuffle between his past and his present, interspersed with sequences of dreams where Asterios comes to face with his twin.

A strong undercurrent of ancient Greek myth and philosophy undercuts the novel, as if in an ode to Asterios’ heritage. The spaces in which the “Paper Architect” finds himself transported, are more often than not, a homage to ancient Greece (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp). One such dreamscape would be a structure resembling the Parthenon of Athens, where Asterios finds Ignazio lying on his deathbed. Another one features Asterios being woken up to find himself at sea, by his doppelgänger, who has attached solely his head to the architect’s body, in a reversal of the conception of ancient humans, who, according to Athenian philosopher Aristophanes, “were spherical, with four arms, four legs, and two faces on either side of a single head” (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp) (fig. 1). These spaces, where Asterios finds himself transported to in his dreams, more than being simply illusory
sequences, are “concretely represented” and thus part of our protagonist’s “lived existence” (Soja, 46). While not strictly existing on a material level, these spaces or sequences play a crucial role in the dynamics of the ever-mutating identity of Asterios. As Edward Soja, in his book *Thirdspace: Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real- and-Imagined Places* states “Even in the realm of pure abstraction, ideology, and representation, there is a pervasive and pertinent, if often hidden, spatial dimension” (46).

Fig 1. Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp*

In an interview with Bill Kartalopoulos, Mazzucchelli says that through the process of cartooning, he has arrived at “a system of mark-making that creates its own credible reality”. Throughout the graphic novel, the author assigns different nuances to each character, beginning from the colour scheme to the font of their speech. Mazzucchelli’s approach to spaces, imagined or real, is also similar; he imbues them with individualistic traits, both in design and colour. His life bearing a strong resemblance to Greek mythology, Asterios, towards the end of the novel, embarks on an Orpheus-like journey to Hades, to unsuccessfully rescue his Eurydice (Hana), and the whole sequence is rendered in varying shades of purple, the darkest colour used in the book. While this rendition of Hades is
clearly not only of a material space, but of a mental space too, it is, what could be termed as ‘Thirdspace’, a “transcending composite of all spaces” (Soja, 62).

Drawing from Henri Lefebvre’s Trialectics of Space, Soja defines thirdspace as being beyond the “‘real’ material world” as well as not being limited by “‘imagined’ representations of reality”, instead, he deems thirdspace as “a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives that have heretofore been considered by the epistemological referees to be incompatible, uncombinable” (Soja, 05). Asterios’ experience thus, through the course of the novel, covers the expanse of spatial paradigms which cannot be encompassed simply in binaries (such as urban and suburban, or dreamscape and nightmares), but rather, can be explored through “a multiplicity of real-and-imagined places,” namely, the concept of Thirdspace (Soja, 06).

The page in itself, despite being devoid of traditional markers, unfurls on multiple levels, as Mazzucchelli leaves no stone unturned to utilise the space to its full potential. When Hana starts opening up to Asterios during their first conversation, the two dimensional page with traditional comic book panelling suddenly gives way to a three dimensional experience, with the page peeling off from the pair in the background, to give way to a page from Hana’s life, charting her childhood through pictures and ending with a slowly shifting spotlight on her present (fig. 2). The exploration of the page renders it beyond the “concrete materiality of spatial forms, on things that can be empirically mapped”, a “Firstspace”, as well not limited merely by the scope of “Secondspace”, which is “thoughtful re-presentations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms” (Soja, 10).

Fig 2. Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp
It is not only through creating illusions of an additional dimension that Mazzucchelli creates these Thirdspaces; he uses a multiplicity of techniques to give rise to spaces that contribute to the production of social identities of the characters. Ascribing individual base colours and geometrical constitutions for each major character; bold blue straight lines for Asterios, and blurry red sketched lines for Hana, the author engenders spaces which are contingent on the disposition of the characters which inhabit it. As they get to know each other, not only their forms and identities collapse onto one another, but also the space surrounding them, producing an overall purple tinted illustration with a uniform single-lined outline (fig. 3). The moment Hana and Asterios have a disagreement, their characters as well as the panels encasing them change colour and form. Their self-awareness and temperament dictate the physical space they occupy. The reverse also seems to hold true, as Ursula Major, (wife of the mechanic who hires and rents a room to Asterios), asks the architect his birth date before she hands over the room to him. Upon encountering furniture placed askew, she announces to Asterios: “This is the most auspicious arrangement I could come up with, so I advise you not to move anything”, implying that the positioning of objects in the space one inhabits has an effect on the individual (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp).

![Fig 3. Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp](image_url)
The dynamics of the absence of physical space is also not left unexplored by the author. In the precise centre of the unpaginated work, an imperceptibly minute Asterios stands facing a double-page spread image of a wide crater, exclaiming “Now, that’s a hole”, as if the enormous depression that lays in front of him is reflective of the void that lies within him; ascribing to the spatial paradigm a self-reflecting quality (fig. 4).

Space and memory act in concert as inextricably linked elements throughout the course of the graphic biography, questioning the constitution of the quintessence of things. After having built a treehouse with Stiffly Major, Asterios narrates the story of a Shinto Shrine in Japan, which, while dating back to the fourth century, is razed and rebuilt every twenty years. “At any given time, no single piece of the structure is older than two decades...but the Japanese will tell you the shrine is about two thousand years old” remarks Asterios; to which Ursula pensively replies “That makes perfect sense to me” (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp). Despite the mutating physicality of the Shinto Shrine, its identity remains unaltered, stemming from a “memory entwined in the intimacy of a collective heritage”, consecrating it perhaps not only as a lieu de mémoire (site of memory), but also simultaneously as a lieu de mémoire (site of memory), (Nora, 7-8).

Pierre Nora distinguishes memory from history by claiming “memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects”, while “history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative” (9). The fire in Asterios’ Manhattan apartment causes a halt to continuities and progressions in his life, and makes him choose the three things he holds most valuable to himself. By choosing those three physical
“objects” to save, Asterios “installs remembrance within the sacred”, his choices reflecting the most revered memories of his life (Nora, 9). During the course of his journey to Apogee, only hours after the fire, a dishevelled Asterios is seen sitting next to an ex-convict in search of cigarettes. On seeing the protagonist thumbing through a lighter, the ex-convict thoughtlessly asks: “Kin I have it?”, to which Asterios, in what seems to be after a brief moment’s consideration, replies, “Keep it.” (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp). One of the objects he saved, the lighter belonged to Asterios’ deceased father; the only physical remembrance he retained of the patriarch. The second object, the first watch that he bought with his saved-up allowance of two years, he unceremoniously gifts to Jackson, Stiffly and Ursula’s son. Asterios’ move to Apogee can be construed as an attempt to redefine his identity by leaving behind his past, and by handing out two of his prized possessions, the architect’s intentions to efface the memories of what he once held sacred become apparent. Steadily, Asterios seems to be renegotiating with his memories, laying off even the most consecrated ones; yet, the only object that he holds on to is a Swiss army knife, which he serendipitously came across on a day out with Hana at the beach. His refusal to let go of that one object, the sole souvenir of his and Hana’s relationship, betrays Asterios’ lack of complete indifference towards his past. In fact, the graphic novel delineates a keen role of memory in the book, with the commencement of every chapter marked by an image, each of which pertain to significant memories of Asterios’ life.

Perception, of space, of memory, and of identity in Asterios Polyp is in a constant state of flux. As Ignazio’s narration divulges: “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.” The graphic novelist, while illustrating Asterios’ past, engenders various iterations of him, constructed primarily in binary terms, with his “phantom sibling”, or with Hana. Through the course of traversing his present, Asterios’ perception of the world and of his own identity, which were earlier inhibited by the filters of duality, are enhanced by his acceptance of the pluralities of possibilities. When Ursula, during the picnic by the large hole, tells Asterios: “Well, y’know, in life, things are seldom either/or. It’s that kind of thinking that creates fanatics”, the previously staunch believer of dualities reflectively admits: “Now that you mention it, I’ve probably engaged in some of that simplistic thinking myself.” (Mazzucchelli, Asterios Polyp). This acceptance entails that the shifting milieu of the social and cultural space inhabited by Polyp unremittingly impinges on his identity, leading to a re-negotiation between his memories within the context of his mutating cultural space. As Hall suggests “identities are never unified...never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (4).

Unlike most of Mazzucchelli’s earlier creations, Asterios has no super power bequeathed to him, nor does he wear capes. Certain aspects of his voyage can be categorised as mythic, on levels comparable to that of Odysseus, as both traverse foreign terrain, which necessitates a shift of identity in both (Massak, 67). The loss of his eyesight in one eye in a pub brawl, and his “cut in half” family name (Polyphemus), refer to parallels with Cyclops. The resonance with Orpheus echoes throughout the novel; with Hana as his Eurydice, and his architectural tools as his lyre, Asterios descends to the underworld, and
likewise as Orpheus, loses his beloved at the last moment. But to simply regard the journey of the protagonist in mythic terms would amount to repeating the same mistake he makes in the novel; of limiting perception. At the end of the novel, Asterios finds himself driving an old solar powered Cadillac, wading through the snow, to reach Hana’s abode. He returns to his beloved not as a Greek hero, but an altered man, who has learnt to look beyond binaries in life, and ceased to consider people as an extension of himself. Through the process of voyaging various spatial paradigms, reliving his memories, and redefining his binary perspective of life, Asterios traverses his own self, to re-acquaint himself with his identity. Set into motion by a lightning strike, and ending with an ominous meteorite approaching, Asterios Polyp’s journey is neither super heroic nor mythic, but perhaps simply human to its core.
Works Cited


