LOST GAZES, DETACHED MINDS: STRATEGIES OF DISENGAGEMENT IN THE WORK OF ADRIAN TOMINE

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INTRODUCTION

In the first lines of the introduction to the anthology *32 Stories* – a collection of the early work of Adrian Tomine – the author remembers how he prematurely became "painfully aware" of his detachment from "any type of social interaction" (Tomine 1995, 7). Such acknowledgment of disengagement is disclosed in a very revealing – even if self-ironic – manner, as depicted in the symptomatic cover of *The Comics Journal* no. 205 (Tomine 1998; fig. 1), a self-portrait of Tomine sitting on the globe, under a stream of money pouring down over him, surrounded by reporters, groupies and a bag of fan mail. The most intriguing element of this piece of self-mockery, though, is a series of flying pages reproducing some of the most frequent clichés propagated by his critics. On the first page (fig. 2), for instance, he calls attention to both a thematic recurrence ("I'm so depressed, I'm shy and lonely") and a supposed inability of closure ("I hate ending stories"). On the second page (fig. 3), he highlights the process of character identification[1] with the reader ("I'm so cute! I love coffee ...and 'indy' [sic] rock") and one more time underlines the topic of failed relations ("But... I'm sad. Can you relate?").
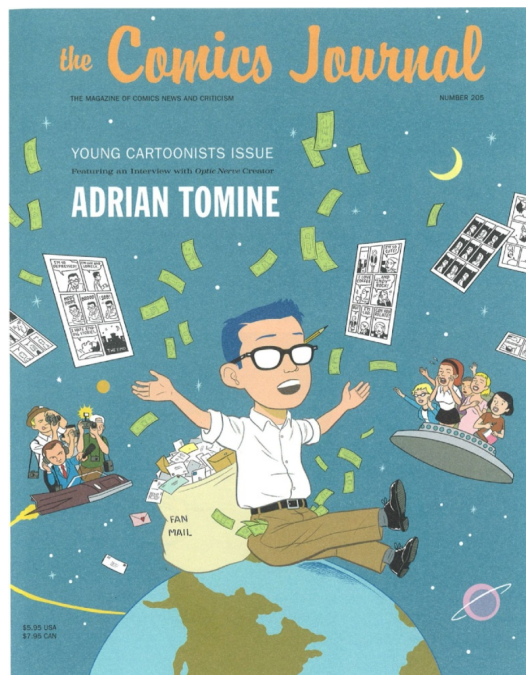

Figure 1: Tomine, Adrian, cover of *The Comics Journal*, no. 205, Fantagraphics Books, 1998. © Adrian Tomine & Fantagraphics Books.

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[1] The term should be taken here as referring to the reader's emotional response, as a strong vehicle of narrative empathy (Keen 2007). This specific case could be classified as what Keen calls "bounded strategic empathy", operating "with an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality and leading to feeling familiar with others" (Keen 2007, xiv).

Such caricature may work as satire, but this somehow hides some of the main properties that make Tomine – with all these self-depreciating comments – a typical example of a contemporary tradition of 'alternative comics', where autobiographical confessions of angst, melancholy and boredom are themselves the 'hallmark' of a genre in their own right.[2] It is precisely because of this paradigmatic characteristic that Tomine will be considered here as an exemplary case-study of this major phenomenon, which in various respects also includes authors like Chester Brown, Chris Ware, Seth, Tomine's predecessor Harvey Pekar, and of course, one of Tomine's biggest influences, Daniel Clowes.

Figure 2: Tomine, Adrian, cover of *The Comics Journal*, no. 205 (detail), Fantagraphics Books, 1998. © Adrian Tomine & Fantagraphics Books.

Figure 3: Tomine, Adrian, cover of *The Comics Journal*, no. 205 (detail), Fantagraphics Books, 1998. © Adrian Tomine & Fantagraphics Books.

This article focuses on the affective dimension of the work of Adrian Tomine, particularly on the feelings of angst and desolation so central to his fictional universe. Although such emphasis on emotions is very often seen with suspicion by critics – who tend to adopt rather an anti-sentimentalist position (Jullier 2002, 140) – such an approach should not be underestimated in

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[2] The label "alternative comics" refers to a set of innovative works that aim to explore the literary possibilities of the comic book medium. The term includes works from the underground comix in the 1960s and 1970s, and was consolidated by the publication of *Maus*, in the 1980s. The concept is extensively discussed by Charles Hatfield (2005).

comics scholarship, especially if one considers the phenomenon of alternative comics and its growing interest in more mundane personal stories. What is interesting in many of these stories is less dependent upon the dramatic turn of events (as mechanisms of production of suspense in serial fiction), but is more directed towards everyday situations and the dynamics of human relationships.

The aim here is to explore possible strategies of affective detachment so relevant to Tomine's work, which are also quite representative of a generation of comics artists. In order to do that, both form and content will be mobilised in the discussion, examining not only the construction of the characters and fictional universe (empathy), but also the clean line style, the way panels are laid out on the page and how the narrative is orchestrated.

This article is divided into three parts. The first part is devoted to examining how the subject of detachment emerges through a discourse of honesty and self-proclamation of shame, with special attention paid to the process of identification with the imagined reader. The second part is dedicated to discussing the reasons behind the adoption of an 'invisible' style, emphasising a linear-discrete reading over a tabular reading. Central here will be the works of the Franco-Belgian tradition of comics studies, namely the ideas of Thierry Groensteen (2007), Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle (1976) and Benoît Peeters (1991), regarding discussions on comics layout, and Phillippe Marion (1993) on the concept of graphic transparency. Finally, the third part investigates a special use of suspense as a narrative strategy that enables a sense of vagueness in the reader, with a theoretical framework taken from contemporary narratology, namely Raphäel Baroni's (2007) and Meir Sternberg's (1992) work on narrative tension. Tomine's peculiar dynamic of visual storytelling will be examined in works of different extensions – from single images (covers from magazines like *The New Yorker*), to short stories (published in *Optic Nerve*), to his first graphic novel (*Shortcomings*).

IN PRAISE OF APATHY IN THE NAME OF HONESTY: LOSER PRIDE AND READER IDENTIFICATION

The fictional universe constructed by Adrian Tomine deals primarily with human relations, but a very particular kind of humans inhabits his world. First of all, they are young people, examples of the so-called Generation X – a label given to the age group that came after the baby boomers –, young adults of the late 1980s and early 1990s, distinguished by a loss of perspective and the decay of the traditional idea of a nuclear family. The youth counter-culture of this generation is typified by the idea of the slacker, usually described as "educated youths weaned on popular culture and disenfranchised from mainstream America because of social, familial, and economic reasons"

(Hanson 2002, 61). It is for this reason that one of the central strategies of 'alternative' or 'indie' culture is to reinforce the identification with detached characters in the sense of enabling a belonging to a community of non-belonging individuals.[3] Tomine's progressive awareness of this lag between an initial feeling of social isolation and a later revelation of a paradoxical community of readers formed by young outcasts ends up in a trap, making his discourse of self-pity difficult to sustain over the years. Ultimately abandoned by Tomine, in recent interviews, he acknowledges this gap in his early work.

> Prior to publishing my stories, I felt like, I'm really weird, I'm really different, I'm an outsider, I can't relate to people and that's why I draw comics. [...] Then suddenly I start getting letters that say, 'I know exactly what you're talking about, I relate to you, you're speaking to me.' On one hand, it's nice, but at the same time, it's cold water in the face to realize you're not nearly as special and as unusual as you might have thought when you were an alienated teenager. (Tomine 2007)

This bond with the reader is achieved in two ways. The first one is by portraying the characters as having anxieties somehow familiar to this expected implied reader (i.e. the reader required by the text).[4] In the gallery of Tomine's typical characters one may find broken couples ("Smoke", 1995, "Sleepwalk", "Six Day Cold", 1998, *Shortcomings*, 2009), relationships in conflict ("Long Distance", 1998, "Happy Anniversary", 1995), lonely individuals ("Lunch Break", 1998), shattered families ("Dylan and Donovan", "Fourth of July", 1998), and damaged friendships ("Hazel Eyes", 1998). The second way to engage the reader is to include a web of cultural references that are easily recognisable for a specific kind of reader, building the impression of a shared cultural background. The names of certain films, bands, and books mentioned in the stories not only charge the characters with certain affective-cultural properties, but often also function in the manner of a secret wink to the reader, as it were a confirmation of mutual taste (fig. 4).

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[3] For a more extensive take on the alternative comics readership, see Hatfield 2007. The author highlights this intriguing contrast when he describes the contemporary comic book field as "a highly specialized if thinly populated consumer culture, one that holds tightly to a romanticized position of marginality and yet courts wider recognition" (Hatfield 2005, xii).
[4] For more on the concept of implied reader, see Iser 1978.

Figure 4: Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 20. © Adrian Tomine.

The social characteristics of this imagined public of comics are explored by Daniel Worden (2006) in an article about the celebrated anthology *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* #13 (which also includes an excerpt of *Shortcomings*). According to Worden, the embrace of everyday life strengthens the identification between author and reader, forming "a counter public explicitly interested in cultivating a unique aesthetic and lifestyle" (Worden 2006, 894). Such a relationship enables an almost paradoxical pride in shame, especially recurrent in the scope of alternative comics, also referred to as "shameful art".

> The workings of shame, as both a force of individuation (the comics reader is unlike normal readers) and relationality (all comics readers share in this unique cultural practice), produce a space for the development of a comics-based aesthetics and counterpublic. (Worden 2006, 892)

Besides such apology of shame, the characters are hardly likeable; many of them even have ethically questionable attitudes. "Summer Job" (Tomine 1998, 31) mixes coolness and detachment to create a bored aggressive teenager who lies to his boss, steals office supplies, and vandalises the storage space. In *Summer Blonde* (2003), a collection of four stories initially published in *Optic Nerve* (issues 5 to 8), all the protagonists are portrayed with some kind of human perversion: a blocked writer who cheats on his girlfriend, a frustrated stalker, a lonely depressed prank phone caller and an outsider teenager uncomfortable with his sexuality. The protagonist of *Shortcomings* (2009) – a Japanese-American – behaves in a sarcastic, self-absorbed and even

arrogant manner, in spite of his insecurity about his own ethnic identity. If, on the one hand, such hostility dangerously drives away the chances of empathy with the characters, on the other hand, such confession of unattractive qualities functions as a strategy to suggest not only human complexity, but also (and more importantly) a certain honesty: it establishes an impression of authenticity by unveiling the repulsive side of the characters as well. Though it is true that Tomine builds his characters with such unappealing psychological properties, however, visually he tends to be much more generous, using a very attractive set of young figures that guarantees a first level of immediate irresistible visual identification – they are even "cute", as remarked on the cover of *The Comics Journal*.

In fact, such "honesty" is one of the most critically acclaimed properties of his stories. Tomine is considered a "mild observer, an invisible reporter, a scientist of the heart" (Windolf 2007), his style is "so meticulously honest that he doesn't even seem to care whether or not you like his hero" (Beauman 2007) and his work is "terrifying because it's absolutely real" (Wolk 1995). This impression of authenticity is also reflected by autobiographical claims, made not only when Tomine appears as a character in many of his earlier stories, but also in the stories that are deliberately declared to be inspired by personal episodes. The same happens with the paratext that accompanies his work, confirming this "strategy of shame": from the almost apologetic introductions to the decision of publishing (and giving preference to) the unfavourable letters sent by unsatisfied readers. Even the simple choice of material in which the stories will be printed is already charged with an avowed shamefaced value – the new edition of his mini-comics *Optic Nerve*, for instance, was published in facsimile form and packaged in a cheap cardboard box, instead of the fancy hardcover editions previously released by the same publisher (Tomine 2009).[5]

Although Tomine has an easily recognisable visual style, it would still somehow be possible to classify his work as realistic in the sense that his characters are drawn with a clear concern for proportion and with clean precise lines, very distant from both caricatured exaggerations and over-schematic projects. Moreover, the way Tomine depicts the urban environment also reveals not only an evident intention to make the space as coherent as possible, but also a special

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[5] Interestingly enough, just after publishing his first hard cover graphic novel *Shortcomings*, Tomine starts leaving aside this melancholic and realistic style in favor of a more amusing and cartoony one. First he publishes *Scenes from an Impending Marriage* (2011b), a "prenuptial memoir", collecting vignettes about the process involved in getting married. Made as a souvenir for the wedding guests, the book was not initially intended to be published, and that may explain the more loose lines and cheerful tone. Then Tomine goes back to the pamphlet format with *Optic Nerve* #12 (2011a). The issue brings a two-page autobiographical story in which Tomine is portrayed as the "last pamphleteer". In an interview for *Believer*, he laments the idea that comic books have been "lost in the ghetto" whereas the "respectable" graphic novel is "being held up as something to aspire to" (Tomine 2007).

attention to detailing ordinary and recognisable scenarios in modern metropolitan everyday life – from facades of buildings, shops and cafes to streets and public transportation.

IN SEARCH OF FICTIONAL IMMERSION: GRAPHIC TRANSPARENCY AND LINEAR READING

The discourse of honesty and authenticity described above is also reinforced by the way Tomine deals with the specificities of the language of comics. That is clear when he says that he tries to "make the visual style almost invisible" because he wants "all the responsibility to rest on the content of the story" (Tomine 2007). His attempt to develop a more direct experience of immersion often leads to the association between his work and a "cinematographic" quality,[6] a misleading – but understandable – parallel that happens for two reasons. The first and more general reason stems from the many similarities shared between film and comics: both count on strategies of visual storytelling that are not original to either of the two media, but are rather common to a previous system, what Hans-Christian Christiansen (2000, 111) calls "the deep structure of visual storytelling", based on the assumption that "the language of images is rooted in contingent universals". Under such circumstances, this kind of mutual influence between film and comics studies is not only predictable but also very fruitful.

Nevertheless, the association between comics and film does not in itself explain why this cinematographic property is so often attributed to Tomine. The second reason is based on a negative explanation. It is not his proximity to the properties of film that guarantees the label of 'cinematic' for his work, but rather his refusal to call attention to certain possibilities proper to comics storytelling. One of these specificities is described by Hatfield (2005, 48) as a tension "between the concept of 'breaking down' a story into constituent images and the concept of laying out those images together on an unbroken surface". Such tension was initially explored by Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle (1976) through the notions of linear and tabular aspects of comics (*linéaire* and *tabulaire).* While the linear function would tackle sequential aspects, obeying a regular direction of reading (from left to right, from top to bottom, as in a 'zig-zag'), tabular reading would refer to a simultaneously global view of the page. One of the major differences of comics compared to cinema then would be the possibility of playing with the page layout and manipulating elements such as the size of individual panels, interaction between them (what Groensteen [2007, 17–20] calls iconic solidarity) and so on – strategies that cannot be achieved in the one-sized fixed frame of the film screen.

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[6] Comparisons with film are often mentioned in reviews and in interviews, see for example Fershleiser 2007 or Petzold 2009.

What happens is that Tomine avoids relying on the possibilities offered by tabularity in most cases and adopts a dominant linear regime of reading. (Even if he has no means to prevent his reader from seeing all the panels simultaneously, such a global view would not enhance the reading experience that much.) Praised for his drawing skills as a cartoonist, and the believable tone of his dialogues, he is rarely mentioned for his achievements in page layout.[7] Quite the opposite, his pages could be classified as what Groensteen (2007, 98) calls a "regular and discrete composition". His page layout is usually not only regular, all pages from his last work being composed by three rows, each of them with two or three equivalently-sized panels, but also discrete – dominated entirely by the story, lacking any explicit logic behind this organisation that justifies such regularity under a global visualization of the page. This discrete composition follows "the law of breakdown", as opposed to an "ostentatious" page, in which the "layout immediately imposes on the reader's perception" (Groensteen 2007, 99).

Another important element here is the use of text. Besides accentuating the impression of realism, (not only because people speak in real life, but also and more importantly because Tomine makes his characters speak in a very convincing way), the dialogues also privilege a more linear reading. A substantial number of panels are filled with talking heads, the understanding of which depends primarily on what is written inside the balloons (fig. 5). (Even if Tomine is very skilful with facial expressions, these depend mostly on what is being said to make sense.)

This refusal to play with page layout, rather than being considered as laziness, can also be viewed as the choice of hiding the marks of the medium in order to reinforce engagement (no matter how conscious the empirical author may be of it). Similar to the principle of perspective, which is responsible for creating an illusion of space (Fresnault-Deruelle, 1976, 21), Tomine's refusal to play with page layout works to illuminate how comics might somehow threaten the plot when the flatness of the support is manifested. Hence the price of denouncing the medium could work to promote fictional immersion.

The same principle is used in what some film theorists call 'invisible' style, or the idea of erasing marks of enunciation and thereby not calling attention to the medium itself. Typical for classical Hollywood narrative, such style recommends removing traces of the medium for the sake of a

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[7] And, although the author's opinion is not always the most reliable testimony, it is still symptomatic that Tomine himself confesses having little interest in such questions: "I probably don't pay as much attention to the overall design of my pages as I should. I guess I have some vague aesthetic standards in the back of my head when I'm composing my pages, but for the most part, I think I'm focusing more on the content of the story" (Spurgeon 2007).

stronger and easier engagement in the story.[8] One of the most interesting contributions to this movement of appropriation of film studies to comics' form can be found in the work of the French theoretician Philippe Marion. In *Traces en Cases*, he borrows the notion of *monstration* from André Gaudreault (1988) in order to build his scheme of invisibility in comics (which he calls *transparence graphique*; Marion 1993). While Fresnault-Deruelle and Groensteen address immersion through manipulation of the page layout, Marion is primarily concerned with the graphic trace, and examines the role of a graphic verisimilitude in the fictional immersion process itself. Marion (1993, 277) claims that the homogeneous style is able to produce a realism, if perceived in a certain continuity by the reader falling within the uniformity of a single style throughout a story or album.

Figure 5: Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 25. © Adrian Tomine.

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[8] Although one could claim the impossibility of applying this notion of "invisibility" to the medium of comics (once the idea of "invisible" is based on the double assumption of movement and a photographic mechanical connection with the object, obviously not viable in comics), such an argument can be circumnavigated by discarding the naïve mythological claim for transparency in the photographic apparatus. (These connections with realism oftentimes offer more material for confusion than clarification.)

Other fruitful insights concerning this transparency can also be found by using David Bordwell's work. In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, he states three factors to explain why the classical Hollywood style passes relatively unnoticed (1985, 164); namely, a priority of the function of communicating the plot, "a coherent, consistent time and space for the fabula action" (1985, 162), and the use of immediately recognisable conventions and their contexts of use. If we try to apply these fairly general factors to comics it would be possible to say that the classical style can be achieved by controlling the elements of the *mise en scene* (placing the characters' bodies and faces as the centre of attention through light, panel composition, point of view, gestures, facial expressions etc.) as well as the breakdown (disguising the discontinuity between the panels with a set of strong solidified conventions).

In Tomine's work, the large majority of the panels are occupied by characters (in almost all cases, the protagonist), which usually occupy privileged positions. The few panels in which characters are not present serve primarily to situate the reader in a new space (a car on the highway to indicate dislocation, a restaurant, a shop) and a new temporal location (a clock to communicate a specific time, the sun rising to denote a new day). The close-ups that he employs also have a highly communicative function, emphasising objects significant to the plot (a particular book, a card, a note or any artefact somehow relevant to the narrated situation). Moreover, his characteristic passages between panels are smooth enough so as not to disturb the engagement with the reader and usually favour the coherence of the story. Even if Tomine uses a significant variety of points of view, each panel respects some consistency in the situations – the continuity of the plot, clothing, action and reaction.

However, it is worth noting that the adoption of a conventionally classic style does not imply that Tomine is unaware of the possibilities specific to comics, such as page layout. The very fluidity of the story already depends on this acknowledgement, but they are usually in the service of a specific regime of narrative immersion already so codified that we tend to simply disregard it. Yet nonetheless, it is possible to find interesting variations in the page layout, but they are usually reserved for less intrusive sections, like the beginning and end of the story (or chapters), never disturbing the fluidity of the reading.

This "invisible" aesthetic style is somehow also reflected in his attitude towards his ethnic position – something that also has shifted in the course of his career.[9] In the beginning, there was a conscious effort to distance himself from addressing any question related to his Asian American identity. Sandra Oh claims that Tomine erased racial marks (for example, eyes are always hidden

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[9] Most academic articles written about Tomine actually address this subject of ethnicity (see for example Oh 2007; Park 2010).

behind glasses) and invested in the "transparency of whiteness", in an attempt to confer a "universal" tone to the stories, placing him in a context of "post-ethnic" or "post-identity" moment (Oh 2007, 139). Moreover, the very theme of social isolation would also be related with a racial "hyper-visibility" (Oh 2007, 139). Yet, the subject of Asian identity only starts appearing in 1999, in *Optic Nerve* #6 ("Hawaiian Getaway"), and it becomes a central issue in *Shortcomings*.[10] Tomine additionally became progressively more professionally involved with Japanese culture – he edited the autobiography *A Drifting Life* by manga author Yoshihiro Tatsumi (2009), did covers for a box of movies by Yasugiro Ozu (2010),[11] and a series of covers for the Japanese literature quarterly *In the City* (2010). Even if not explicitly mentioned as a theme, Tomine's connection to Japanese culture is also undeniable in his style, clear in his frequent use of aspect-to-aspect transitions in which time seems "to stand still" (McCloud 1994, 81). Due to these stylistic traits, Tomine is even being included as member of the *nouvelle manga* movement (Boilet 2006).

NARRATIVE TENSION: RETICENT ENDINGS AND SUSPENDED GAZE

Another strategy to forge both the impression of honesty and uncomfortable desolation can be found on the level of narration in the way Tomine administrates information and the pace in his stories. Central to understanding this will be the concept of narrative tension:

> [...] the phenomenon that arises when the interpreter of a narrative is encouraged to wait for a resolution, this waiting being characterized by an anticipation tinged with uncertainty which confers on the act of reception a passionate aspect. Narrative tension will thus be regarded as a poetic effect that structures narrative, and in it will be recognised the dynamic aspect or the 'force' of what is customarily called a plot. (Baroni 2007, 18,[12] translation from Kafalenos 2008, 377)

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[10] In 2001, Tomine published the one-page story "The Donger and Me", an annoyed response to the stereotypical portrayal of Gedde Watanabe's Asian American character – a Chinese exchange student – in John Hughes' comedy *Sixteen Candles*.

[11] Tomine lists Ozu as one of his influences, and it is interesting to see how he describes the filmmaker's style in terms of comics: "I feel like Ozu's visual style could be compared to the cartooning style that books like 'How To Draw Comics the Marvel Way' are adamant about avoiding. It's like the supposedly boring side view of Dr. Strange walking into a room, as opposed to the 'worm's eye view' of him dynamically bursting through the door. In other words, it's clear, straightforward, honest, devoid of flash, and it's absolutely perfect" (Tomine 2010).

[12] The French original: "le phénomène qui survient lorsque l'interprète d'un récit est encouragé à attendre un dénouement, cette attente étant caractérisée par une anticipation teintée d'incertitude qui confère des traits passionnels à l'acte de réception. La tension narrative sera ainsi considérée comme un effet poétique qui structure le récit et l'on reconnaîtra en elle l'aspect dynamique ou la 'force' de ce que l'on a coutume d'appeler une intrigue".

Strongly influenced by the narratology of Meir Sternberg, Baroni focuses his study on three master functions of narrative: surprise, curiosity and suspense. These functions work by way of a constant comparison between virtual development – what we expect to happen – and effective development – what actually happens. Roughly speaking, the story manages how the information is administrated in a way that purposely leaves gaps so that the reader can feel intrigued enough to complete them in a game of prediction and bets based on promises revealed in the course of the plot.

As indicated by these three basic narrative functions, suspense is considered to have a particularly interesting relation with comics. According to Baroni, suspense is "based on a 'reticence' of the text that polarises the interpretation towards a resolution awaited with impatience" (Baroni 2007, 269; my translation). On the one hand, such suspense can to a certain extent be undermined by the possibilities of a synoptic vision of the comic's page. On the other hand, the organisation of comics as a sequence of pages offers a potential suspense of another kind: one of the most popular techniques to produce an impression of suspense is by stopping the action in a crucial moment in the development of the story, moving the expectations of the reader in a certain direction and instigating his curiosity to follow the story and buy further editions. Largely used in melodramatic literature, through installments (*romans feuilletons*), in comics the technique is part of a genre convention in serialised adventures where the suspense is usually left in the last panel as a kind of preparation, explicitly or not, triggering some kind of "to be continued" effect as a promise of solving open questions.

Upon first glance, it seems difficult to recognise how such a description of suspense can be appropriate to explain what happens in the work of Tomine. First, because rather than a logical course of events ruled by the conceptual pair of conflict/resolution, his stories are best defined as a chronological portrait of routines – labelled as 'slice-of-life' stories. Second, because his world is inhabited by alienated characters who have no perspectives of a future to be "awaited with impatience". In such cases, this angst and impatience would be frustrated not only by the absence of resolution, but moreover by the absence of a question to be solved. What remains in this situation is not an invitation to a prognosis, but a particular kind of angst, a desire for desires.

Nevertheless, the lack of perspective of the characters and the absence of a traditional generic idea of a mission to be accomplished should not imply the lack of narrative tension driving the story. The events narrated may not necessarily have a strong logical-causal order, but the chronological trajectory in which they are arranged does, even if the intended result is to arouse a certain sense of vagueness. In the end, the conflict in the discourse can be located in the very idea

of absence of conflicts in the story as such. In other words, according to Sternberg, "the narrated world may be without end in either sense of telos, limit or purpose; but the narrative discourse is always end-directed" (Sternberg 1992, 512). And this can serve, for example, the purpose of narrating the "'endlessness' of the world, its circular time, or its absurdity" (Sternberg 1992, 512). In this scenario, the absence of resolution can be seen not as incapacity in ending stories, but more precisely as the very intended resolution for that story.

One of the most remarkable pieces of evidence of this kind of narrative tension in Tomine's work can be found in his laconic endings that emphasise this indeterminacy and feeling of suspension, as suggested in the panels from the cover of the *The Comics Journal* (Fig. 2). The absence of resolution is clear, for example, in a number of stories finished with an empty black panel (fig. 6). It is also very common to see stories ending with a detached longing, where characters, lost in thought, stare at nothing, giving rise to an introspective and reticent atmosphere (fig. 7).
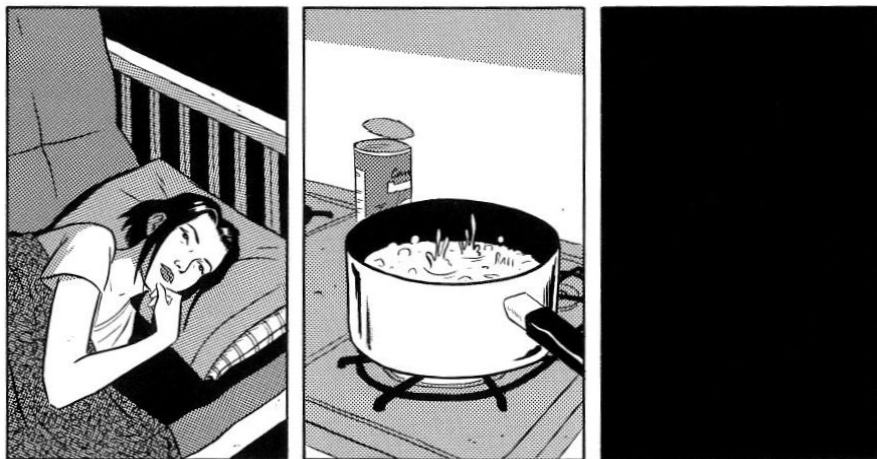

Figure 6: Tomine, Adrian, *Sleepwalk and Other Stories*, Drawn and Quarterly, 1998, p. 89. © Adrian Tomine.

It is possible to identify a special kind of suspense in these endings – in the sense that the action is suspended – yet, what remains is not the desire to know what would have happened, but an emotional hiatus, a kind of anxiety and feeling of incompleteness that compliments the one felt by the characters. Such an emotional dimension in the narrative tension is what Baroni (2007, 20) calls thymic function (*function thymique*), a term used by the author to refer to the capacity of being moved by an emotion (such as pleasure or suffering). In the case of Tomine, the plot's resistance to closure is actually a strategy to arouse the mood of detachment and instability.

Figure 7: Tomine, Adrian, *32 Stories. The Complete Optic Nerve Mini-Comics*, Drawn and Quarterly, 1995, p. 83. © Adrian Tomine.

Page layout is not the answer to Tomine's narrative tension, but a look at his work as an illustrator perhaps can provide some clues about how he conducts this emotional affection and tension. Tomine has done covers for magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times Magazine*, rock albums, film and music posters (Weezer, Yo La Tengo, Yasugiro Ozu), postcards, etc. What is interesting in these works is that, even if they are made under specific commercial and spatial constraints, it is possible to identify a way of capturing a fugacious mood of ordinary situations in them and the suggestion of a suspended time.

Although the absence of sequence poses a challenge to the idea of narrative, in these single images without words or other panels to further narrative development Tomine displays an economy of drama in small encounters, in a game of narrative tension ruled by facial expressions, especially the gaze, and the direction of it. The gaze of characters guides our expectations and makes different elements interact, transforming the images into potential scenes, referring to what Fresnault-Deruelle (1993, 188) calls the "story's limbos" (*les limbes du récit*), as a reference to Edward Hopper's paintings.

Figure 8: Tomine, Adrian, cover of *The New Yorker*, November 8, 2004. © Adrian Tomine & *The New Yorker*.

Figure 9: Tomine, Adrian, cover of *The New York Times Magazine*, January 13, 2008. © Adrian Tomine & *New York Times Magazine*.

The main difference between the gaze in some of these fixed images and throughout Tomine's stories is that, while the former frequently depict human interaction (since, for commercial reasons, they cannot be charged with a negative tone), the latter usually reinforce an absence, depicting a detachment between the outside world and an interior life. Take, for example, the cover of *The New Yorker* (November, 2004; fig. 8), in which a young man finds out he is reading the same book as a beautiful young woman in a passing train. The situation presents a connection (even if temporary) between two young people through a shared reading taste. In the same way, the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* (fig. 9) also shows an attached gaze. Yet by contrast, many of the gazes found in the *Optic Nerve* stories reveal a lack of involvement, not only when the characters are alone (fig. 10), but also when the characters are in a populated environment (fig. 11), or even when there is physical contact (fig. 12).
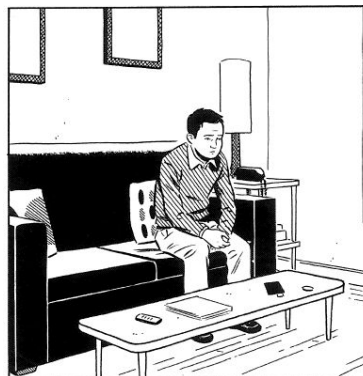

Fig. 10: Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 39. © Adrian Tomine.
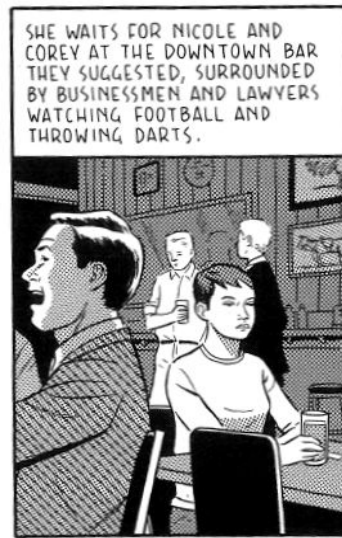
Fig. 11: Tomine, Adrian, *Sleepwalk and Other Stories*, Drawn and Quarterly, 1998, p.97. © Adrian Tomine.

Fig. 12: Tomine, Adrian, *Summer Blonde. Stories*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2003, p. 132. © Adrian Tomine.

But this impression of reflective and moody temporality can sometimes be misleading. Tomine is conscious of what people expect from him (melancholic lonely characters) and plays with it in a rare moment when he uses the constraints proper to comics' storytelling to achieve a specific effect (and, because it is rare, it is therefore all the more powerful). In the beginning of chapter 3, from *Shortcomings*, we see Ben Tanaka's girlfriend Miko in a series of six panels, apparently six moments where she seems to do nothing more than what a character of Tomine usually does: sit or lay down alone with a detached look (fig. 13). However, as we turn the page, we realise that those were actually photos of her (fig. 14). By using the absence of flow and the panel organisation of comics, Tomine blurs the difference between a series of pictures diagrammed as frames in a postcard and a series of moments from the story itself (a story told in comics, through panels).

Even if he gives us some hints, like some posing conventions or the looking "at the camera", and even after we discover the existence of these photos, we still remain in doubt as to whether the panels represent the session where she poses for the photographer, or the photos themselves.

The slow movement of time caused by the reflective gazes becomes even more evident on the basis of the repetition of panels, which functions as a way of showing an introspective moment where little changes with the passage of time. Although such a strategy is not explored in depth in the work of Tomine (there are only a few examples in his more recent work), it adds considerable force to both the detached gaze and the effect of reticence in his laconic endings. This happens, for example, on the last page of *Shortcomings*, when we see Ben Tanaka looking out of the window of an airplane in six similar panels (fig. 15). While the character stays inert during the entire sequence, we see the scenery changing outside the window, indicating the duration of a take-off: other airplanes on the ground in the first panel, the line of the horizon changes its angle in the second and third panels and so too with the clouds in the fourth and fifth panels, and finally only the sky in the last panel of the graphic novel remains.

Figure 13: Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 77. © Adrian Tomine.
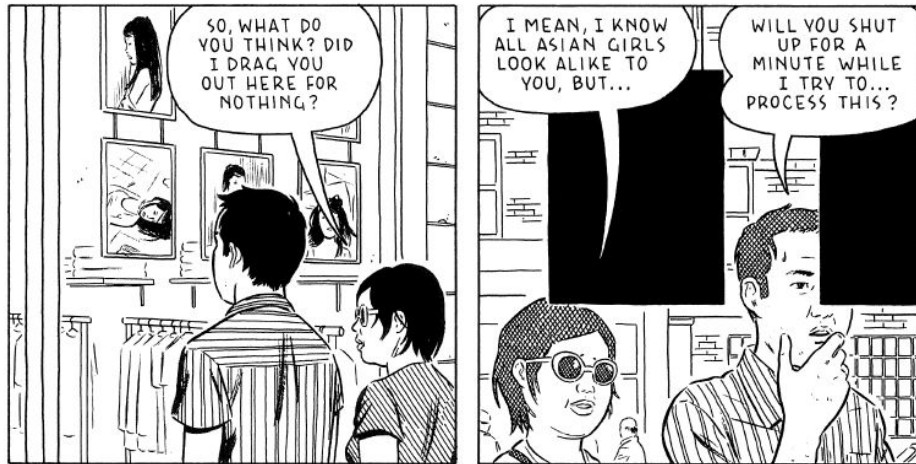
Figure 14: Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 78. © Adrian Tomine.
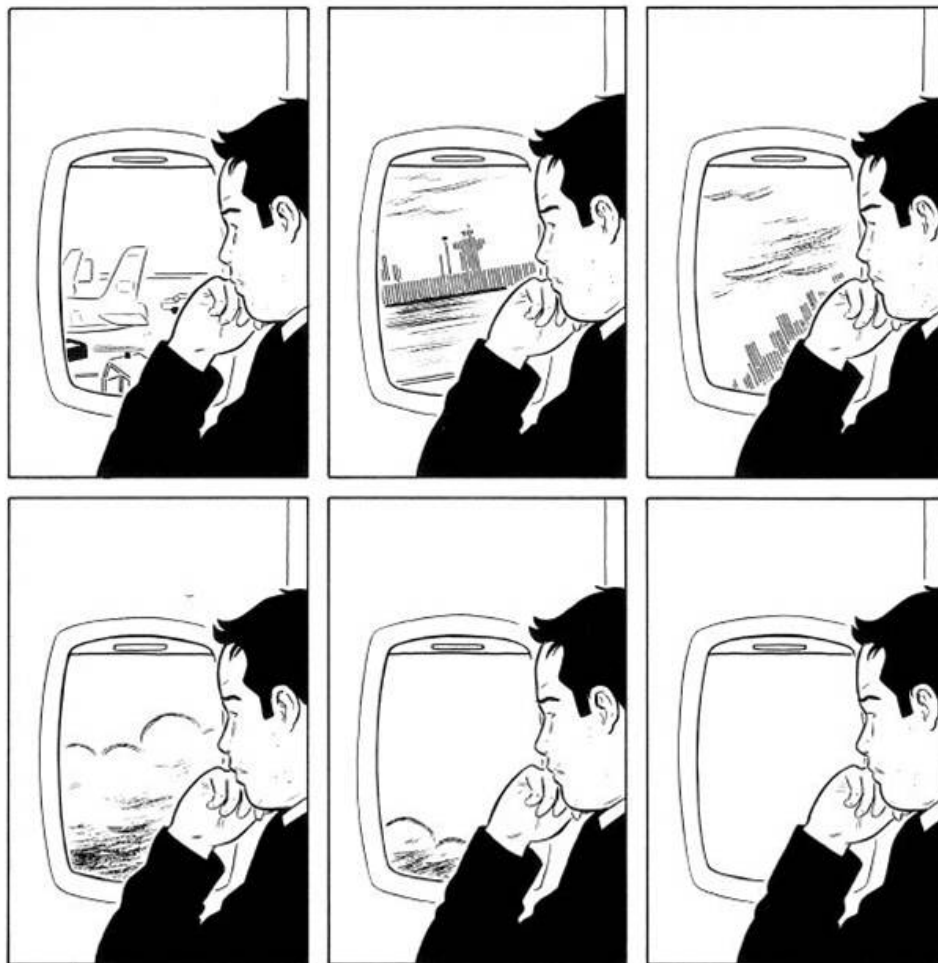

Figure 15: Tomine, Adrian, *Shortcomings*, Drawn and Quarterly, 2009, p. 108. © Adrian Tomine.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the mood of detachment and desolation in the work of Adrian Tomine emerges from a combination of two complementary forces. First, there is an impression of honesty achieved by the adoption of a confessional and shameful tone (not only textually, but also paratextually, i.e., through extra surrounding material like the cover, introductions, etc.), the construction of a coherent everyday world (dialogues, construction of space etc.), and the emulation of a sense of indeterminacy and vagueness similar to 'real life' (with a special attention to suspended tension and the way in which the lost gazes are represented). Secondly, there is a special engagement with the readers, guaranteed by the pleasure of self-recognition (sharing the same cultural background) and by the easy and direct fictional immersion through a discreet 'invisible' style. Together, these elements contribute to an interesting game where engagement in the reading experience arouses disengagement as a shared feeling. In other words, rather than representing a conflict with the relative popularity of Tomine (at least in the branch of 'alternative comics'), Tomine's unlikable characters and ordinary stories are actually reinforced by the absorbing storytelling techniques and clean lines he employs. In the end, both the self-depreciative introduction of *32 Stories* and the auto-parody panels on the cover of the *The Comics Journal* mentioned in the beginning of this article reveal not only an awareness of detachment, but also a keen consciousness of the strategies used to express it.

In this article, I have addressed a few strategies through which this impression of honesty and detachment can be deliberately programmed. My focus was limited to formal and discursive devices found not only in Adrian Tomine's work, but widespread in a number of alternative American comics, especially from the 1990's and 2000's. Such discussion could of course also benefit from a critical assessment of this "shamefaced honesty", undoubtedly a popular trope that made sense as a historical reaction to mainstream extraordinary storyworlds, but that, in the long term, tends toward saturation. As alternative comics steadily reach a stage of commercial success and cultural legitimacy, the urgency to define itself in opposition to the "mainstream" is steadily replaced by a very promising and liberating configuration. But that is another story.

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