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Art and Illusion in Blutch's *Mitchum*

by Nicolas Labarre



Blutch (2005) *Mitchum* #3 (Paris: Cornelius) (no pagination)

Blutch is one of the most influential French cartoonists to have emerged from the 1990's renewal in *bande dessinée*. His work has been published both in the popular *Fluide Glacial* and by avant-garde publishers such as Cornelius or l'Association and he received the grand prize at the [Angoulême](#) festival in 2010. *Mitchum* is a series of five experimental comix in black and white, published between 1996 and 1999, featuring no unifying themes or characters, beyond an emphasis on improvisation, dance and body language. The character of Robert Mitchum himself only appears in one of the issues, as a perverted icon, depicted at the different stages of his life.

In the passage above, from *Mitchum* #3 (not numbered), the transient and nameless heroin is followed in the subway by the police after a nightmarish sequence, an opportunity for Blutch to

display the playful use of comics' conventions and graphical possibilities. The first noticeable feature of this page is its use of a regular six-panel grid, focusing the attention entirely on the composition and content of the panels themselves. The page is also silent, and depicts a left to right movement, so conventional as to pose no interpretative difficulty in itself. It is not uncommon for comic creators to neutralise some of the possibilities of the medium to provoke a shift of emphasis, but Blutch pushes this process to a stage where this simplification becomes prominent, becoming the subject of the page rather than a facilitating device.

The fixed frame, the lack of colour and sound effects (with the exception of a small “zzzz” in panel 5), as well as the stark shadows immediately call to mind German expressionist films, from *Dr. Caligari* to *M*¹. A reader familiar with the reference will therefore expect shadows and shadow plays to be decorative and expressive rather than mimetic². Blutch then proceeds to alternately confirm and undermine these expectations.

Depending on one's perception of the page as a whole and on one's familiarity with *German expressionism*, the black background of the first panel acquires different significations, the most simple being a metonymy for a dark place or a nocturnal environment. This default reading is sustained by the second panel, in which this black area expands as a recognizable, albeit conventional, shadow on a wall. However, the shadows on the trousers' legs suggest that this is actually a well-lit environment, with the source of light located above the character.

The third panel further complicates a potential naturalistic interpretation of the initial black background by providing an abstract and arbitrary division between black and white. At this stage, the division between black and white cannot be assigned to a mere distinction between light and shadow, but instead suggests a plurality of meaning, ranging from the naturalistic to the purely decorative. Long brushstrokes on the subway track even suggest a possible tonal reading of the black areas.

Having thus eroded the possibility for a mimetic reading, Blutch invalidates it entirely in the fourth and fifth panel. An ad hoc lightning allows for the projection of a menacing shadow on the white space of the background, thus implicitly positing it as a wall. In the next panel, however, the brushstrokes take a different signification, as they reconstruct a *Barkian* conventional symbol – cloud and speed lines. This is also the panel where the onomatopoeia “zzzz” can be found.

These symbolic devices are of course simply conventions, perceived as such all the more easily since they are absent from the rest of the page. The white space in this panel functions as nothing

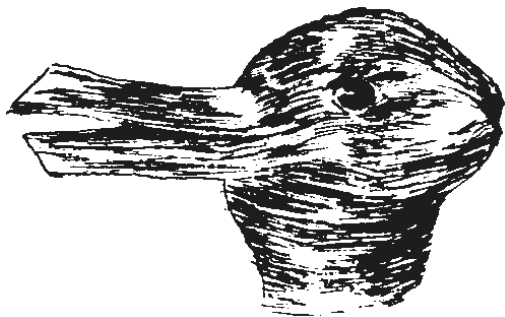
1 While film noir has often been linked stylistically to German expressionism, a connection reinforced here by the presence of Mitchum, most films described as belonging to the genre (itself a problematic category) actually make use of a flat lighting, with only occasional use of expressive shadows (projected crosses, window blinds as virtual bars on the wall, etc.). Even formally sophisticated noir movies such as Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956) could hardly be described as expressionistic.

2 In the previous sequence, a policeman dresses up as “*Mechagodzilla*” to burst open a closed door. This and the very title of the comix serve to prime a reading of the series in terms of cinema conventions.

more than an empty space on the page, integrated in the diegetic space solely through the delineating function of the panel border—“separative” and “structuring” functions, in [Groensteen’s](#) terms (43-9).

The character’s continuous movement in the last three panels, as she turns her head to look behind her, suggests a continuity of action within a coherent diegetic space, but Blutch’s shift from one conventional set of representation to another over the course of these three panels makes it impossible to reconstruct that hypothetical space. Blutch’s juxtaposition of these conventions negates them in turn, even in the case of the more ostensibly “realistic” space of the second and sixth panels.

In his introduction to *Art and Illusion*, [Gombrich](#) uses the well-known rabbit-duck figure to explore the nature of painterly illusion. He notes that while it is easy to see either the rabbit or the duck, and indeed possible to shift rapidly from one to the other, it is impossible to see them both at once. For Gombrich, the example illustrates the potency of illusion: the figure makes us aware of the illusion but does not allow us “to watch ourselves having an illusion” (4-5).



The duck-rabbit illusion (attributed to J. Astrow)

With less didactic intent, Blutch also uses a juxtaposition of two irreconcilable images virtually juxtaposed by the reader as she reconstitutes the narrative sequence, to bring the illusion to fore. The difference between Gombrich’s experiment and Blutch’s sequence is the inscription of the latter into a linear structure, which invites the reader not to a back-and-forth between two illusions, but to a forward movement, from one illusion to the next, then to the next again. Gombrich invites us to an analysis, while Blutch invites us to experience these sudden and jarring shifts in conventions.

Ann Miller (2007) [mentions Blutch’s strategy of integrating elements from other bandes dessinées](#) and explains how in doing so he is “disturbing the fictional illusion of the originals as well as that of his text” (144), but this intertextual practice permeates Blutch’s work regardless of the presence of an identifiable “original”.

The morphing of the shadow into a conventional symbol between the fourth and fifth panels calls our attention to the opacity of signifiers in comics, to the materiality of the ink on paper and to the reader’s willing participation in the construction of meaning through an educated separation between symbolic and diegetic signs. The juxtaposition here makes this separation problematic and

even meaningless. In the context of a simple narrative sequence, the page comes to be read as a meditation on the fluid meanings of ink on paper, itself echoing the supple brushstrokes and improvised narratives that characterize *Mitchum* as a whole.

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