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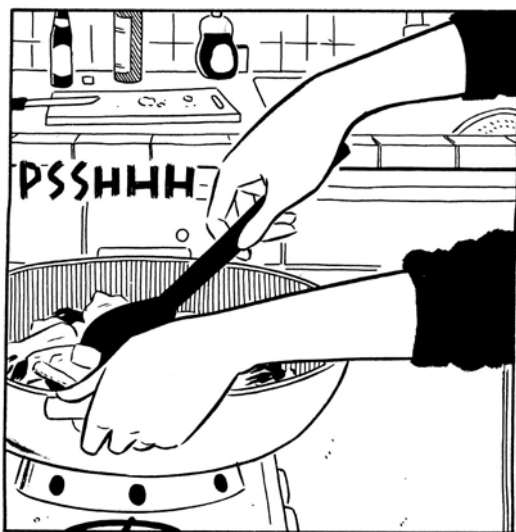
# Shortcomings: bridging the page-break

by Nicolas Labarre

**S**hortcomings, Adrian Tomine's 2007 graphic novel, which was originally published in *Optic Nerve* (9-11), is simple and classical in its construction and page composition. The book depicts the relationships between Ben Tanaka, his girlfriend Miko Hayashi and his lesbian confidant Alice Kim, in three chapters and 108 pages.

Throughout the graphic novel, Tomine divides his pages into three layers, each comprising two or three isomorphic panels. This classicism is also at work within the panels themselves, where black and white figures, usually framed from the chest up are rendered realistically, in precise brushwork. Some of the potentialities of the medium are thus voluntarily downplayed, the better to emphasize Tomine's main subject: his characters, delineated by dialogue and body language.

However, while creating regularities and driving the medium toward a “transparency” that makes it easier to engage with its narrative and characters, Tomine controls the rhythm of his sequences through unobtrusive, efficient, and at times unusual devices. Consider for example the following panel, which serves to establish a new scene on page 17.



Tomine, A. (2007) *Shortcomings* (London: Faber and Faber, 17, 7)

The onomatopoeia and the black spoon direct the reader toward the hands, drawn in Tomine's typical disconnected brushwork, then to the rolled-up black sleeves (a careful reader will remember having seen this sweater in a previous scene, worn by Miko). Added details in the background suffice

to place the scene in a private kitchen as opposed to a restaurant, thus distancing it from the locale of the previous scene, which depicts a conversation in the street.

In addition to the change of location, the change in scale, the foregrounding of objects and details, as opposed to a character's face, signals a disjunction. In each panel of the four pages leading to this picture, the face of at least two of the characters, Ben and Alice, are clearly visible. In other other words, although this panel could be something else than an “establishing shot”<sup>1</sup>, it unmistakably signals the beginning of a new scene in this context.

However, this discontinuity does not coincide with the page break.



Tomine, A. (2007) *Shortcomings* (London: Faber and Faber, 17)

1 The phrase is unfortunate, since it conflates film and comics, however, comic criticism vocabulary does not seem to have a valid equivalent for it.

Early in the book, Tomine makes a creative use of the page break, as the first page of *Shortcomings* is revealed to be a film within the graphic novel. The break enables Tomine to circumvent the fact that the flatness of the comic book page is analogous to that of the movie screen, and even to exploit this ambiguity. Because the panel of an audience watching the film belongs to a separate page, our reading of the first page is literal. We engage with the action and the characters without suspecting that they belong to an altogether different narrative from the one we are about to read.

What is then the benefit of having the establishing panel on page 17 as the last panel of the page, rather than as the first of page 18?

First, this physical closeness serves a narrative purpose. It connects this new scene to the previous panel, and the composition emphasizes that connection, with its emphasis on corresponding horizontal lines. Ben's line of sight directs us toward the PSSHHH, the black area in panel five is aligned with the upper edge of the wok, and thanks to what Thierry Groensteen would call **iconic solidarity** ("solidarité iconique"), the line "We all have our priorities" comes to be understood as foreshadowing the content of the new scene and potentially applying to Miko as well (1999: 21-133).

From the early- 20th century Sunday pages to *Tintin* to structuralists analysis of comics, the notion of the comic page as a unit has been central to our conception of the medium. The academic habit of reproducing single pages (or two adjacent pages) is a reflection of this consensus regarding the significance of the page as an aesthetic and narrative unit.

As seen in the opening sequence, Tomine makes use of these structural possibilities, but he also reveals them to be conventional in nature: the scene shift remains perfectly legible, even when placed in such an unconventional site. Thereafter, whenever discontinuities are introduced in the book, they become more meaningful because they are not perceived as the application of a rule, but as deliberate choices.

In addition to its efficient unconventionality, this choice also helps construe *Shortcomings* as a legitimate cultural object, as it deemphasizes suspense and episodic construction within the chapters even though suspense is used and even emphasized between chapters. Rightfully or not, seriality itself is seen as the stigma of popular fiction and using the page break to create suspense is one of the ways in which graphic novels resemble serialized comics. The convention of the last-panel suspense (*Tintin*, *Spirou*, *The Authority*, etc.), suggests a partial isomorphy between the comic page and the episode in a series. The spatial and temporal discontinuity between consecutive pages (or spreads) is indeed analogous to the discontinuity existing between consecutive installments of serialized fiction, albeit in a condensed form. As indicated by **Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle**, readers have long internalized the last-panel suspense convention (1976: 14-15), which suggests that most comics could be characterized as paraliterature, an array of work in which suspense structures the narrative (Couégnas 1992:149).

By stressing continuity and unity at the expense of suspense, Tomine distances himself from this stigma. Cliffhangers are used before the objective gap between installments and not in the course of

the chapters themselves. In the collected edition, a title page and a blank page are inserted between chapters, materializing the narrative break with a literal pause.

Suspense is not absent either at the end of page 18: the panel itself is too sparse to prevent the creation of tension between the two pages, but crucially, it does not ask any question. This minimizing of suspense, this severance of the link with seriality, aligns *Shortcomings* with legitimate literature, especially in collected form. The book's subject matter, its playful use of different modes of representation, its length, its paratext (a blurb quoting Nick Hornby, a novelist, who writes that "Reading a comic book suddenly becomes as rewarding as reading good contemporary fiction"), its physical form, all suggest the ambition realize the promises of the "graphic novel". The structural elements also contribute efficiently toward that goal.

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