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# Architectural Grounding in Miller's *Elektra*: Temporality and Spatiality in the Graphic Novel

By Renée Tobe

## Introduction

1

When we say we are "caught up" in a story or that we "get lost" in a novel, it doesn't mean we have lost our orientation in traversing the terrain constructed by the writer. We really mean the opposite, that we are so fully and deeply oriented within that world that we have lost, for the moment, our connection with our own. This process is simple in that it takes place quickly, and without our realizing anything has transpired. Yet it is also complex, for if we try to examine the manner by which we accumulate a medley of coded information to follow the story and to position ourselves in a world of someone else's creation we may easily become mired. In literature, as in architecture or urban situations when narratives or places flow smoothly from one location to the next, they create a seamless exploration of a particular world. Narrative breaks, temporal shifts, or gaps in circulation on the other hand, make us look up and take account of where we are going and where we might have arrived. We may find ourselves in an unusual space or situation, a place not yet encountered, that somehow seems strangely familiar and we "recognize" it. Somehow, no matter how strange, we "know" how to find our way. *Elektra: Assassin*, a graphic novel scripted by Frank Miller and illustrated by Bill Sienkiewicz provides an excellent example for exploration of these principles that apply not only to textual media in general and to sequential art in particular, but also architecture and the city (Miller, 1986).

2

Elektra, the eponymous killer of the title, occupies a distinctly female place in a predominantly male superhero universe. She has no superpowers but possesses sharp intelligence and remarkable skill in martial arts, allowing her to pass unseen (although semi-naked in her trademark crimson costume), from one location to the next, miles or even continents away (Bongco, 1999: 110). I look at how the relationship between words, imagery, and spatial awareness "fills out" the story in our minds as we read. In this phenomenological study I avoid discussing female spectatorship but look instead at how *Elektra: Assassin* captures or evokes a qualified and specific set of epistemological functions that determine both human embodiment of "being-in-the-world" and "being-in-a-particular-world" (Sobchack, 1991: 44). This is not to elide the two issues nor marginalize either the importance of the female gaze or the notion of spectatorship but to emphasise Maurice Merleau-Ponty's insistence upon an elaborate description of human embodiment as the ground of meaning.

3

This phenomenological discussion implies spatial awareness and a "there" where we, the reader, imaginatively engage with human and mechanical hybrids, visits to satellites orbiting the planet, and mind/body transfer. Phenomenology offers a ground to understand Miller's nexus of convoluted but coherent readings and helps to explain how they relate to each other on narrative as well as cultural and political levels. In this sense, the heroine's name, Elektra, may evoke the power of the Greek myth, but not the whole content of Classical mythology. By the same means, her superhuman antics relate to daydreams of leaping ninja-like through the air. The complex stream of information suggests that one more diegetic layer might render the tale incomprehensible, whereas with one less, we would read it with greater ease, but be less engaged as readers. Through this accumulated material we incorporate basic knowledge of the world with the small but crucial fragments that ride, like stowaways, inside the primary meanings of visuals and text.

4

Phenomenology helps us to navigate between fact and fiction, or, in terms of Ricoeur's "as if," between hypothesis and mimesis. Thus I refer to the "reader" or to "us" as "we" engage "our" empirical experience and enter Miller and Sienkiewicz' world. We perceive fragments of a room or a townscape as a unified dimensional whole (McCloud, 1994: 40, 89). We know how to go through a door, open a window or stroll leisurely along a city street, so we can follow these actions when they are presented to us no matter how abstract, or undetailed, just as we "recognize" a bedroom, kitchen, or hotel room from the briefest sketch (Gadamer: 1989, 35). The more things we take for granted, the richer the background of experience that guides what we see. Yet it is different for each of us, just as our experiences of the world are different, and we each feel and experience the same situation according to our understanding.

5

Our relation to the everyday is stabilized and expressed in architecture. Miller and Sienkiewicz step knowingly or unknowingly into the territory of architecture as they create the context of the event (Pallasmaa, 2001: 35). The discursive combination of the multiple layers of Miller's narrative (in which many "voices" work together to tell the story) and the complexity of Sienkiewicz' artwork lend themselves to the dialectic between conditions and possibilities, necessities and freedoms, and universals and particulars.

6

Phenomenology is a particularly appropriate means of interpretation for Sienkiewicz' abstract expressionism. His wish to portray how things feel rather than how things look lends itself to an interpretation that refocuses our attention onto our own empirical experience. We enter the world through the boundary between our imagination and the given world and phenomenology provides the language or means to describe it. A phenomenological approach helps us to understand the role of architecture in this discussion, which provides a ground for the debate.

7

In *Elektra: Assassin* this encompasses the collection of disparate voices and levels of narrative by which we, the reader, begin to see a connection to our own world. While on one hand the "world" depicted must manifest itself in a familiar way, on the other it is an "unreal" fantasy world of the imagination. This is true for all science fiction and other kinds of fantasy narratives, as well as the superhero genre. The conflicting conditions of this world (familiar but unreal) are tied together by mimesis. While traditional mimesis mediates between the human and the divine, contemporary mimesis involves the reciprocity of the given world and a world of illusion and fantasy (Ricoeur, 1985: 32). There is, of course, an enormous difference between the world of standard text and the explicit visuals of the graphic novel. The "world" on which the story depends, and that we bring to the reading, draws from Hannah Arendt's notion of a community of shared understanding and meaning (Arendt, 1958). Mimesis not only traces a path from illusion to "real," but also illuminates the broader world of politics, economics, and social order. These shape our understanding and self awareness as a cultural community (Arendt, 1954: 63). For example, a story is much more threatening against a background of recognizable reality, a reason so many stories take place in the familiar urban canyons of Manhattan (McCue, 1993: 68). Otherwise, as in Miller's *Sin City*, it takes a more concentrated reading for the reader to "get into" the story (Miller, 1993). Miller deliberately created *Sin City* with few landmarks (recognizable as an urban setting, but not a particular one) in order to invoke the loneliness of a bleak existence and the darker reality of modern day life (Bongco, 1999: 14 5).

8

Mimesis deploys a range of meanings released from the representative illusion by its being qualified in terms of praxis or human action. Praxis is the field from which the mimetic act gathers its materials and enables the creation of meaning. Miller interweaves several complex narrative strands that move back and forth in time while the reader links these strands together in an ever-encroaching present. Paul Ricoeur's interpretation, a complex three-tiered examination of mimesis, helps us to "read" the architecture and see how it informs our interpretations, as well as provides a means to unpick the strands of communication.

9

Dividing a text into three levels enables us to plot the continuities and differences, that which changes and that which stays the same, all of which emphasize the stability of the situation. The first level deals with situation, temporality of involvement, and "world." This is the situation in which we find Elektra, held somewhere in a prison, and we see that her "world" is one where women are kept in anonymity and pain in a tropical country. The second level of mimesis, re-interpretation, describes the nature of truth and illusion. This is the "as if" where we begin to imagine what has happened to this character to bring her to this impasse and what might happen next. In this median sense, the "as if" breaches the world of fiction and leads this long-limbed, dark-haired protagonist from the actual world into the world of our imagination. The third order concerns the communication between the closure of mimetic representation and the "outside" or given world in which we live. Our engagement is poetic when what we read connects with our own lives. Phenomenology offers a

means to examine the background on which Miller and Sienkiewicz's *Elektra: Assassin* builds and through which it communicates (Heidegger, 1983: 165, 297).

10

In literature, we expect to find the bad punished and good triumphant in the end. In contrast, when the hero is herself an assassin, the notions of good and evil become twisted into a moral dilemma where being good means questioning authority, thereby playing with issues of honor and justice (McCue, 1993: 70). For a character such as Elektra to work she must be beyond what we perceive as just or fair, good and evil and we may not judge her in a traditional manner (Reynolds, 1992: 71). Although not a conventional "bad guy" in the comic book sense, Elektra went over to the "dark side" when her father was assassinated. Throughout the story Elektra, who easily discriminates between nuances of fairness and villainy, attempts to use her super martial arts skills to fight her way to redemption. However, the bitterness and hatred resulting from the death of her father both ground her in the world on one hand, and restrict her on the other, since her unresolved anger and despair led to her profession as killer for hire. In order to emphasize the primal and violent world that she occupies, Miller relies on Sienkiewicz's artwork to carry much of the story without captions or dialogue (McCue, 1993: 69). Our experience and "trust" in both writer and artist is subject to hermeneutic circularity, through which our perceptions adjust as we take in more information which causes our perceptions to adjust *ad infinitum*.

## **How Elektra "came into being" in the Marvel Universe**

11

Elektra emerged from *Daredevil*, a comic distinctive for its dark, believable urban landscape, and her death was one of the most brutal scenes presented in a mainstream comic book. The chapter that presents Elektra's first appearance in the Marvel Universe provides a flashback origin story. The background Miller sketches for Elektra (daughter of a Greek diplomat and one time student of political studies) occurs in an unspecified past, when Daredevil, then Matt Murdoch, studied law.

12

The scene of Matt and Elektra's meeting takes place on the steps of the Columbia University Library. The flashback that relays this information is in a cinematic style. In comic books flashbacks often appear "greyed" as if time dimmed the colour, a standard device to graphically demonstrate mimetic distance. In *Daredevil* however, Miller has drawn the action and figures as if filmed in long shot. The characters appear smaller in each panel than in panels where the narrative is situated in the present, suggesting we are looking at the narrative from a temporal distance. Daredevil's memory, shown in flashback, details their meeting, the death of Elektra's father, Matt Murdoch's first donning of the red that would become his costume, and ends with her embittered departure and his broken heart. This early love affair and the loss of the defining men in Elektra's life are delineating events that shape her character and represent Elektra's only weaknesses. As a female complement to

Daredevil, Elektra trained with the same master, wears a costume of an identical color, and fights for revenge (disguised as redemption) for the death of her male parent. Her first foray into the Marvel Universe lasted fourteen issues and when Bullseye killed Elektra, Miller received death threats (McCue, 1993: 142).

## ***Elektra: Assassin, the Graphic Novel***

13

*Elektra: Assassin* was published by Epic Comics, a Marvel subsidiary that provided an opportunity to experiment with non-traditional styles and produce comics with a more adult theme. In contrast to the traditional manner Miller employed for *Daredevil*, *Elektra: Assassin* offers complex transitions in narrative, time, and visual style. Both Miller and Sienkiewicz are interested in fresh forms of communication and perception. Sienkiewicz' belief that artists have a responsibility in society to expose people to new ways of seeing things, and Miller's interest in developing the shadowy, sinister side of the superhero are appropriate for this story about freedom and nature, identity and communication (Daniels, 1991: 188).

14

Miller intends that every line tells as much of the story as possible. For example, a short but apposite vignette that begins the second chapter summarizes the complex interconnection of mind and body, real nature and façade, that enfolds the narrative. In this scene, Elektra escapes from the asylum into the jungle and, in a highly symbolic scenario, encounters a film production crew complete with damsel in distress and rampant lion. She liberates the latter from its entrapment in a performing rôle. Exposing her own feline nature, Elektra communicates with the giant cat on a non-verbal level presaging her later relationship with a government agent whom she also "releases" from the role he plays into a position of power he can enjoy. Elektra herself is a giant predatory cat released from the mental institute where she was drugged and brainwashed. Her liberation of the sedated king of beasts provides a metaphor for the entire storyline.

## **Time and Memory (in the Graphic Novel)**

15

In the first chapter of *Elektra: Assassin* we discover the events that shaped Elektra's character and brought her into being. This comprises her background and training both as a person and as a mercenary, how she ended up in the asylum where we find her at the beginning of the tale, and the existence of a strange demonic entity called the Beast that is associated with milk and the smell of mayonnaise. The first chapter, without seeming to, conforms to the comic book convention of the origin story and conveys Elektra's entire background. Details previously told in other comics, such as her love for Daredevil and the death of her father, are presented here in single panels while new stories that flesh out her character are afforded a longer, more relaxed narrative. During the course of the graphic novel Elektra avoids a lobotomy, escapes her confinement in the mental asylum, tracks down presidential candidate Ken Wind,

and exchanges the real Wind for a dismantled and reassembled cyborg she picks up along the way, while battling killing machines, experimental clones, and S.H.I.E.L.D agents in the process. In this story her greatest power is not the arsenal of martial arts weapons she carries but a sophisticated mental ability to cloud people's perception of identity.

16

*Elektra: Assassin* begins with an example of its complex temporal hierarchy: a full-page panel depicting a tropical island with airbrushed sky, palm trees, sandy beach, and sailboat drifting on a peaceful sea. However a second glance discloses that the narrative might begin earlier, with the newspaper article that precedes each chapter, and here relates the tale of an unknown woman washed up on a shore, with references to a political assassination and chronological time. Or, perhaps it begins with the assassination that took place some time earlier since we surmise that the mysterious woman whose inner monologue begins the tale is the assassin referred to in the preface. Several pages into the first chapter a large panel shows many women lying on beds, with twisted angular limbs and long unwashed hair, implying prison camps, nineteenth century asylums and lack of identity. The captions representing her inner monologue signify this is the character's present. Is this the beginning of the narrative and is one of the women (who all look alike) the heroine of the title? Is it her "voice" that tells the tale? When does the story begin?

17

The narrative is particularly unspecific in time, since it is unclear whether this is a tale of Elektra's mercenary life before her first appearance or whether it occurs after her death at the hands of Bullseye. This notion of a post-mortem account is less unrealistic than it might first appear since Miller later resurrected Elektra in another graphic novel, entitled *Elektra Lives Again* (Miller, 1990). True to the duplicitous nature of *Elektra: Assassin*, the way the narrative relates to the time at which it was created provides a way of dating the graphic novel that slightly conflicts with the storyline. In *Elektra: Assassin* references occasionally allude to how much time has passed or even if it has passed at all, and they avoid placement in calendar time, which is typical of the timeless quality of the superhero comic. As an example of one of the manifold temporal disparities, although *Elektra: Assassin* seems to take place before Elektra's death in 1981, the events politically situate the story at a later time, the mid-1980s. *Elektra: Assassin* appeared right in the heart of Reagan-era politics in the United States, and the juxtaposition of the graphic novel with the Iran-contra affair highlights the relevance of this tale of a president eager to push "the button" and *Terminator*-esque special operatives.

18

In order to cast light on Elektra's means of occupying both time and space we look first at time and its relation to narrative. Emplotment in the Aristotelian tradition of temporality enables us to differentiate between the time of things narrated and the duration of the act of reading. It also illustrates the discordance between the temporal modalities of fictional and historical narrative. The number of panels, lettering, and complexity of imagery are some of the many means by which graphic novelists

control the rate at which we read the panels, thereby dictating the duration of the scene (Bongco, 1999: 79, McCloud, 1994: 100). Each panel of *Elektra: Assassin* exists at once in itself, complete with its own complex narrative and temporality, and comes alive as we read it left to right. Despite the diverse situations Miller presents, the authority of panels to establish duration remains (Bongco, 1999: 93). Panels of repeated images serve as divisions of time, and text further slows down the act of perception. In several parts of the graphic novel Miller employs many small repeated panels paired with blocks of dialogue boxes that offer information in a way that impedes the progress of the reader in order to "fill in" the time it took narrated events to take place. In addition, the intricacy of many of the images retards the reader's progress even in panels with no text.

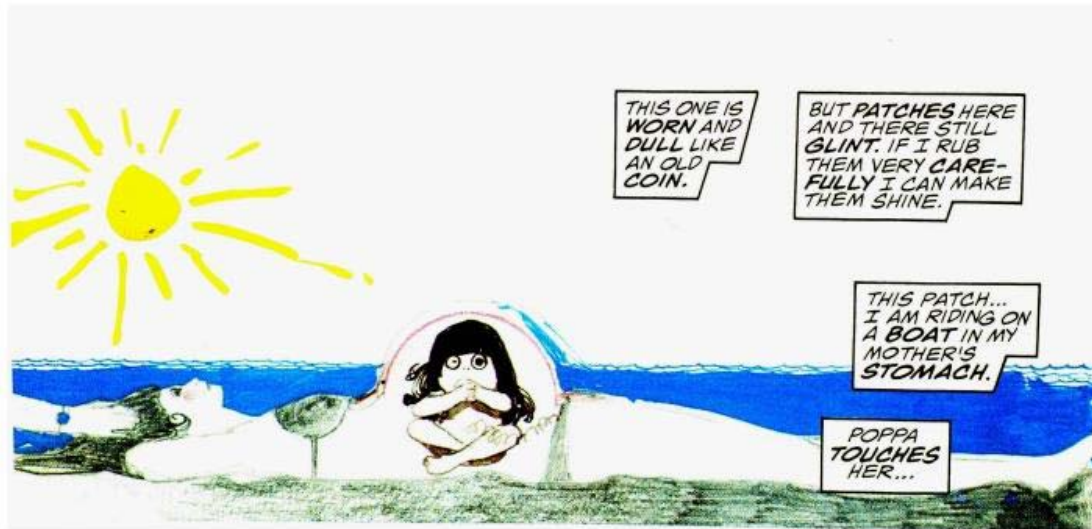
19

This highly complex graphic novel (with its references to the masks of Greek tragedy, and the "face" we present to the public) clearly illustrates both time and memory in mimetic terms. When the story opens, Elektra is imprisoned in a mental asylum where both her mind and body are under attack. Elektra retains her sense of self through a series of memories, rubbing them as one might a magic lamp. This trope allows the first chapter to leap back and forth in time, combining the tale of Elektra in the asylum with necessary background material.

20

The first two pages represent Elektra's attempts to escape her present into an impossible pre-natal memory. A pregnant woman lies on the beach and inside her extended belly is a child Elektra. The panel works on several different levels. Drawing from the principle that we read left to right as our eyes move across the page, the drawing style becomes increasingly childlike, appropriate for a memory drawn from Elektra's childhood. Elektra's childish voice "colors" or stylizes the telling and like all such tales, it is increasingly more about the narrator than the story she tells. Styled as if drawn by the child she was when she first heard this memory, the story becomes less about the people depicted than about herself. The use of an expressionist style of drawing amplifies the narrative by stripping it down to its essentials and imparts "meaning" in a way a more realistic style can not (McCloud, 1994: 30). [Figure 1]





**Figure 1.** *Elektra: Assassin* (Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz), p. 2. A pregnant woman lies on the beach and inside her extended belly is a child Elektra. © 1986 Frank Miller and © 1986 Marvel Comics

21

Elektra's attempts to slow that memory down, drag it out, and extend it so she may repose within it, are interrupted by the inevitable advancement of time, even within a contrived memory. Miller uses the visual trope of the helicopter's blades "rhyming" with the fronds of the palm tree to show the slow but inevitable arrival of the assassins who destroy Elektra's mother, injure her father, and bring on her birth. [Figure 2] This memory also introduces the on-going motif of the uselessness of men in Elektra's life to provide protection. To explain why Elektra chooses *this* memory in which to take refuge we look into more contemporary associations than the mourning and tragedy of the *Elektra* plays by Sophocles and Euripides. Her name implies the female equivalent of the Oedipus complex (based on the Greek myth of Agamemnon's daughter), proposed by Freud to describe a woman searching for a replacement father figure. We see and understand that Elektra's entry into the world is marked by the violence that leads to her present: assassination, vengeance, and mindfulness.



**Figure 2.** *Elektra: Assassin* (Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz), p. 2. Repeated panels and the visual trope of the helicopter's blades rhyme with the fronds of the palm tree. © 1986 Frank Miller and © 1986 Marvel Comics

While the present intrudes into these memories to stress the reason for their re-telling (more than just to fill in the background story), it also provides a sharp break from one point to the next: birth, death, love, loss, a new beginning, loss again, a great fall. Elektra refers to her memories as shiny globes, and she tries to slow down the narratives they spin so that she does not use them up. The best spinning globes are unused, fresh, and lustrous. An inset close-up of Elektra's face intrudes onto these memories. The focus on her eye for vision emphasizes how she "pictures" these memories as an escape from her severely painful present. [Figure 3] This close-up of Elektra makes her presence felt, and imposes a timeless quality (as if emerging from or into another time), as the present intrudes onto the closed world of her memories.



**Figure 3.** *Elektra: Assassin* (Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz), p. 3. The close-up of Elektra imposes a timeless quality (as if emerging from or into another time), as her painful present intrudes onto the closed world of her memories. © 1986 Frank Miller and © 1986 Marvel Comics

23

Each time period is characterized by a particular palette so that we see them "colored" by memory. In the first chapter Elektra's "present" contrasts with the bold color and abstract composition of her "past" narratives. Elektra re-structures her present surroundings by remembering, modifying, and representing these events as the young girl she was when they occurred (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 25). In a striking memory from the period following the death of her father when Elektra devoted herself to her martial arts training, Elektra's epiphany (corresponding diametrically to the blackness of Daredevil's lack of sight), takes place in the whiteness of a snow-covered precipice. Her ninja training continues steadily for three pages as the icy background grows

darker. Later, a similar flashback details events from Elektra's training with the evil Hand. The roughness of the drawing style communicates the emotion of the story accurately and directly and animates her wide-eyed determination.

24

In contrast, a subsequent memory is drawn in a style similar to that used for the present to tell a story of a different color from Elektra's more recent, less distant past. As the memories approach the present their style increasingly resembles that used to describe her "now." After a brief cut to the asylum, we see this memory of how she discovers the relations between American Ambassador Reich (whose name is a reference to fascist intentions to unite the world into one kingdom) and the Beast. The chapter ends with a three and a half page narrative from her present that details Elektra's escape from the asylum. As Elektra scrapes together her broken and tortured self, the panels appear first as shattered fragments, then collect into a more conventional panel sequence. [Figure 4] In this chapter we glean the necessary pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to get the bigger picture. Elektra, a mercenary assassin, was hired by Reich to kill Huevos, did so, found out Reich was evil, attempted to assassinate him, was nearly claimed by the Beast, ended up in a mental institute where she is about to be lobotomized, and escapes. We have to assemble these shards together to form a single story, just as Elektra gathers her mind. Once we become familiar with both background (pieced together from the luminous globes of memory that help Elektra retain her identity), and foreground (the nameless terror of the asylum that takes away those memories), and Elektra knows herself once more, the story may begin.



**Figure 4.** *Elektra: Assassin* (Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz), p. 29. The panels appear first as shattered fragments. © 1986 Frank Miller and © 1986 Marvel Comics

## Temporal Disparities in *Elektra: Assassin*

25

Temporality of involvement refers not to how much time has passed or how long a particular action takes, but to participation with unfolding events. This is the time it takes something to happen, for something to "come into being" or the time "in" which we live and act. This is relevant even in the "unrealistic" world of the comic book superhero. Here, duration refers to the period of time we infer from reading a single panel. The time in which the events described "seem" to take place differs from the time it takes to read the sequence (Bergson, 1990). It may be a single instant or a longer period of time.

26

*Elektra: Assassin* is filled with breaks that require our participation. The divergent visual styles and compelling graphics of sequential art challenge conventional reading. Although these insights are familiar to readers of graphic novels, *Elektra: Assassin* offers a distinctive style of overlapping, tangled and intersecting narrative lines, including multiple personalities and narrative within narrative. These volatile temporal conditions, such as flashforwards, flashbacks, or flashbacks within flashbacks, are grounded in the present and given presence in space. This "thick" time not only fills in the gutter (the gap between panels), but also the spaces we lay claim to as we read, such as the back of the laboratory, the madhouse, the jungle or the small, dark and mysterious alleyways that are trademarks of the genre.

27

A reproduction of a newspaper clipping sits on the inside of the front cover of each issue, where ads are generally found. From the information it provides describing the woman found on the beach "yesterday morning" (but giving no date), we may attempt to determine the period of time that has passed. She seems to have been there longer than a single day. What makes it unclear is the juxtaposition of the beach of the newspaper article and the beach with which the story begins. This frontispiece mentions an assassination and a beach. Next we see a beach and an assassination, but this is not the event of the newspaper article, but a created memory illustrating the circular inevitability of Elektra's life. Figuring this out slows down the reading as we take in the underlying information floating below the graphic surface. Further evoking notions of *durée*, there is a discrepancy between the time the memory beach scene actually took and the way Elektra adjusts her perception and extends the same events in her imagination.

28

There are three times here: the time that the event actually took to happen (if it happened at all), the time she spends in the asylum, and the third time, the *durée*, or how long she makes the memory seem, repeating it, and dragging it out into an ever receding present. The doubt cast by the growing realization of the unreality of the assassination beach scene begins to retroactively include the frontispiece story. This

shadow begins to extend to the present, focusing the narrative on the unresolved issue of relating a story about a character already forcibly removed from the world she inhabited, the Marvel Universe. Even the title of this first chapter, "Hell and Back," suggests Elektra has been to the other side and returned. The Elektra of the rest of the tale is a woman in control and a voice we can trust amidst a cacophony of thought expressions with which we slowly become familiar. In order for Elektra herself or the other characters to solicit any sustained interest, she and they must be part of a "world" in which we feel we have a stake.

## Body/World Duality

29

The exotic locations in *Elektra: Assassin* anchors or roots the action so that we can "picture" the actions that follow in a particular place. After that few clues are required, and sequential art is famous for its minimalism: a window for the superhero or villain to climb in or out of, a door to create a barrier or opening for a confrontation. Sienkiewicz captures an incredible spatial quality not as much in terms of perspective and architectural accuracy as it is in an immediacy of presence and action. In superhero comics, walls and ceiling give the characters something from which to rebound and rooftops provide a dramatic backdrop and open arena for a fight. Rooms or places tend to be presented simply, like Merleau-Ponty's box in which three sides are always on view and appear as if possessing depth and dimensions (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 263). Spatial perception is a structural phenomenon, so that we, anchored in the perceptual field by our own experience and understanding, require only a minimal amount of information to perceive an entire room, house, world, or universe.

30

For example, when the story opens, Elektra appears in a dark, dank place with a strange oversized mechanism and although we may not at first understand the purpose of the machine or the laboratory we do understand its menace, and Elektra's need to escape. The "present" narrative seen from above, suggesting the objective standpoint of reality rather than that of subjective memory, and shows the immense room in its entirety. The grey palette conveys the lack of identity and the horrors of the asylum. The scale of the laboratory panels reduce the relative size of the human figures, suggesting a diminishing of individuality.

31

A Heideggerian approach to the notions of "being" and "world" reveals being-in-the-world as dependent on things taken for granted every day, and corresponds with Merleau-Ponty's investigations into the reciprocity between ourselves and the world we inhabit. The architectural contribution in graphic novels provides both "background" meaning spatial configuration, and "background" meaning the claims of the everyday. "Space" in a graphic novel is constructed dependent on our understanding of the commonplace, a word whose derivation directly indicates the importance of community, location, and shared understanding. Space also reveals

itself in temporality . What we recognize in the "present" of the first chapter is a situation, the "institution," that exposes us to dreadful machines in a room the size of a missile silo. This brilliantly painted sequence both disorients and orients us in Miller's distorted world with unfamiliar shapes and the familiar feelings of foreboding they evoke.

## **Voice, Identity, and the Sexual Occupation of Space**

32

When Elektra pulls her consciousness together, unifying body and mind, her physical stance reflects her growing strength. Where previously she was prone, with legs akimbo, she now returns to her familiar superhero posture, slipping in or out of a window, aloof, always at the ready. Sexual significance manifests itself in the whole manner of the graphic novel: Elektra's bearing, gestures, and expression display the experience of the body as both a subject relating her inner thoughts and an object for her torturers to practice on. Offset against her leggyness and pelvic thrust, Elektra's hair provides a magnetic attraction to which the eye is drawn, as it is to those ribbons from her costume always flying about. In a non-superhero world, they would trip her up or get caught up in her long pointed weapons. Like her hair, they provide both a feminine aspect and a compositional device, similar to the way the tail of the predatory cat provides a balance as it attacks.

33

Although in this story Elektra remains silent, we read her inner monologue as she battles for her mind . Issues of identity and voice are crucial elements of the tale. The backbone plotline of *Elektra: Assassin* reflects the 1980s' cynical indistinguishability of good and bad (Bongco, 1999: 143). For example the evil presidential candidate appears as a smiling, photocopied face, half John F Kennedy, half Oliver North, (with prescience of Bill Clinton), that never changes no matter what direction he turns. The superficiality of this photocopied face with its single expression suggests the transfer of identity that happens at the end.

34

Elektra, who has perfected her presence as a woman, occupies space in a specific way. If, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, the body expresses and dramatizes existential themes and these themes are fully historicized, Elektra's female body becomes a domain in which the intimate and political converge (Butler, 1999: 187). Our embodiment in the world helps us to orient ourselves and we bring this nexus of understanding with us as we follow the action of the graphic novel. How we "know" where we are provides the grounding and stability of the situation, so that it is both illusory and "real" at the same time and does not perplex us.

35

The concept of mimesis helps us to examine whether it is realistic to posit a world where a female has the authoritative narrative voice. Luce Irigaray suggests that

women deliberately assume or mimic the feminine style and posture assigned to them in order to disclose the mechanisms by which a masculine discourse exploits them (Irigaray, 1985). Irigaray's definition offers a summing up of *Elektra: Assassin* and the way Elektra "speaks" through or gets inside others' heads, and more particularly what happens when Elektra assumes the form of a young girl in order to infiltrate the enemy without being recognized. The girl in question has never experienced love, Elektra's greatest weakness. By assuming this "girly" identity that also exposes her Achilles heel (her unresolved feelings of love for Matt Murdoch/Daredevil), Elektra uncovers the political plot that is manipulating her and attempting to destroy the world.

36

In phenomenological terms, the means by which one comes into existence in the world is through the experience of one's own body (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 166). Merleau-Ponty argues that sexual significance is synonymous with existential significance in general. The construction of sexuality is implicit in the constitution of built spaces, just as spatiality structures the discourse of gender (Wrigley, 1992: 328). Elektra's breaking free of the mental asylum is also a "breaking free" from conventions of literature, visual arts, and film wherein space contains women or obliterates them.

37

Judith Butler describes Merleau-Ponty's discussion of body/world duality as non-feminist and non-gender specific. She calls for a "feminist appropriation" but acknowledges that phenomenological reflection allows access to a description of the female body as territory both for exercising impartial juridical power and the partiality of desire (Young, 1989: 100). Despite Butler's claim that Merleau-Ponty devalues women by being non-gender specific and assessing only the heterosexual male subject, I return to Merleau-Ponty's original intention, to describe the body as an expressive and dramatic medium (Butler, 1999: 17). Iris Marion Young offers a phenomenological description of lived-body experience that is gender specific and historicized: instead of "throwing like a girl," as Young puts it, Elektra's ninja weapons invite close combat and rely on acuity of throwing ability (Young, 1990: 145). Young's feminist frame of reference, detailing how women comport themselves differently than men, provides a dialectic with Elektra's martial mastery. Elektra has a specifically feminine way of occupying space, as if her sex is her superpower, making full use of her body's spatial and lateral possibilities.

38

Young traces modalities of feminine body comportment, the manner of moving and relation in space. However, superheroes are by their very nature an unnatural situation. Still, they must not be too "alien" to enter into our horizon of understanding so we may identify with them. Although Elektra contradicts Young's description, she must conform to some recognizable aspects of womanhood. Since she has no secret identity her costume functions less as a disguise than as a sign for her inward progress, or character development, and her self-possession as a female occupying a predominantly male realm. (Bongco, 1999: 107) As Bongco argues, the

subtle rejection of women's power is presented as a necessary plot element whenever women become a perceived threat to male independence and masculinity. Women who, like Elektra, begin as ruthless killers, must atone for their crimes, empathize with others, fall in love, and turn to serving justice (Bongco, 1999: 110, 113).

## Conclusion

39

A phenomenological reading sheds light on the means not only by which the reader easily follows transitions in narrative time, but also accesses an unconscious architectural piecing together of human emotion. The phenomenon of closure is observing the parts but perceiving the whole (McCloud, 1994: 64-87). While making the reading difficult, the temporal and spatial disparities only emphasize this closure. *Elektra: Assassin* provides an excellent illustration of how the combination of image and text provides for a deeply layered feminist reading of the metaphysics of sexual difference. Inasmuch as the arrogation and use of spatiality are political acts, *Elektra: Assassin*, the graphic novel, presents a political way of inhabiting space .

40

The structure of temporal and durational grounding in the graphic novel enables Miller to bring chronological disparities into play, just as the body/world duality that grounds us in the world sanctions the multiplicities of voice and time that characterize *Elektra: Assassin*. The inconsistencies of voice and time Miller brings into play not only emphasize the integrity of ground, but also describe the nature of Elektra's world . The integrity of the world is the basis for its distortions and transgressions. This integrity is twofold. The first deals with the characters, their wit, cunning and bag of tricks, and the second with the closure of "world." The initial aspect is not only specific to sequential art, but also found in James Bond films and similar media. Characters such as Daredevil, Elektra, and Bond are in thrall to nihilistic energies against which the only option is to win, not to find truth or eternal values. The protagonist must have extraordinary powers and/or apparatus. This may take the form of a power ring or of clever companions collected along the way, as well as brute strength and cunning. These abilities are rarely, unless humorously, used for everyday activities (such as making a sandwich) or for charitable enterprises (such as healing the sick, or reducing poverty), although saving the world is something the comic book superhero does with astonishing regularity.

41

The second aspect of the integrity of the world is the coherence of mimetic closure, whereby events at the conclusion relate directly to conditions and circumstances with which the tale begins. As with the film frame, in sequential art one cannot put anything into each panel, although that freedom exists only hypothetically. As *Elektra: Assassin* is chaotic in terms of time, identity and place, the memories, allusions, and so on must be interesting on a psychological level, first in Elektra and next in the reader. As in other genres, such as horror, this places a special burden on settings and material artifacts. The places and things the reader sees need to move as



if endowed with (generally malevolent) intentions of their own. Stability is not completely recovered, or at least not at a level of profundity that matches the horror. Beyond the demonic setting there is little that denies either character or reader of the customary stability of the background, instead pushing it into a deep distance that solicits anxiety.

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