

Tyler Huynh

WRTG 3020

Professor Sarah Barkin

The Madness of Uzumaki

Junji Ito's *Uzumaki* is a work that portrays the simplest horrors or fears that people have such as the unknown. *Uzumaki* is compelling in that it takes something so mundane and normal such as a spiral to instill fear into the characters and the readers as well. Ito wonderfully uses panel bleeds, line work, and his transitions between his panels to establish an eerie sense of fear and unease about this newfound addiction of spirals. The fear of spirals and Ito's work accurately captures this fear and illustrates humanity's innate fear of the unknown, a genre known as *Lovecraftian* horror, a distinct contrast to the typical horror genre. In this essay, I will analyze the thematical elements of Ito's work and reveal elements of it, while also using Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*.

Ito begins his work by showing the reader the main character of the manga, Kirie Goshima, with a full bleed of her standing in a field. Even before any notable dialogue has started, the image captures our attention through its use of detailed linework, as we see that the grass contains hundreds of spirals. From this image, we see that the spirals of the strange phenomena have already taking place, affecting the local flora of the town. Since this image is in

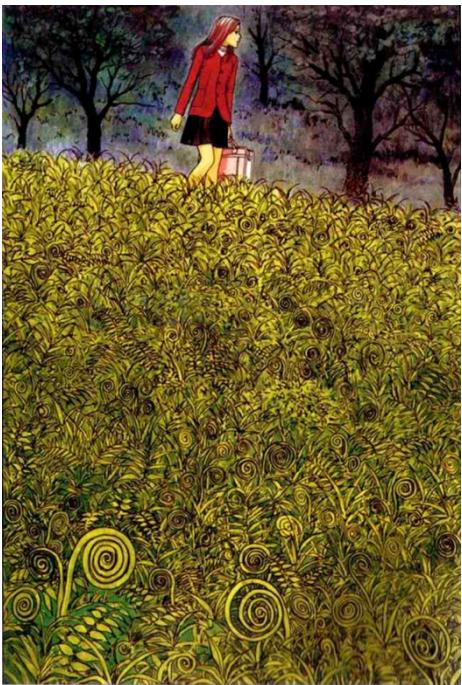


Figure 1 Chap. 1 Pg. 4: A full bleed of Kirie walking through spiraled grass with light and dark tones mixed in.

the beginning of the manga, the reader has no indication what the story has in store for us. This full bleed acts as an anchor point for us to refer to as more details of the town's obsession is revealed.

This image accurately portrays the effects of a full bleed, a panel style that allows the reader to pause and absorb every detail of it. This can be seen as an example of expressionism trying to promote a sense of uncertainty and fear from within the reader. As McCloud notes, expressionism “took great interest in the power of line, shape, and color to suggest the inner state of the artist and to provoke the five senses” (McCloud: 1994: 123).

The bleed's moment of pause allows readers time to take in Ito's artwork and use of color on this page, which makes the reader feel as if something ominous is about to happen. The spiraled grass and the dark and moody sky reveal an omen that has descended upon this town. The feeling of unease and the use of our senses is what McCloud called *synaesthetics* (McCloud: 1994: 125). By allowing for the reader to view the full bleed to its fullest extent it reveals much needed detail. The full bleed of the image acts as a stopping point temporarily pausing time for the reader to embrace the image and the detail of it, without any true dialogue or anything to guide the reader it allows for the image to fester in their mind to think back on later (McCloud: 1994: 102).

From here on the pages return to their original black and white color, thereby foregrounding the linework itself. As time goes on within the manga, more strange things happen to the town. For instance, Kirie Goshima is on her way to class when she stumbles upon Shuichi Saito's father staring at a spiral in the wall. The story continues and she confronts Mr. Saito about his erratic behavior, and she learns that he has been obsessing with spirals for a long time. Figure 2 shows that Mr. Saito has now decided to become the spiral himself, contorting his body into a loop that constantly repeats itself. Ito's linework on these pages shows such detail, from seeing his ribs being contorted or the shock and fear in his



Figure 2 Chap. 1 Pg. 41: Full bleed of Mr. Saito becoming the spiral himself, while his family watches in horror.

families' eyes. It's a prime example of what McCloud identifies as, "The picture plane, where shapes, lines, colors can be themselves and not pretend otherwise" (McCloud: 1994: 51). Ito's artwork resides mostly in the middle within the picture plane, balancing the thin line between reality and cartoon. The art although we know it is fake, forces us to think if this could possibly happen in the real world. These characters although drawn become an extension of our thoughts and feelings into the horror of Ito's world (McCloud: 1994: 45). Ito's artwork here has no dialogue, this page becomes almost a pause point, a still in time allowing for the reader to embrace the cold and desolate feeling Ito is trying to portray.

Ito's precise and intentional use of full bleeds allow the reader to fully embrace the sheer amount of detail that has been implemented into the page. For example, in Figure 2 we see the individual folds on Mr. Saito's skin to the sweat and fear being reflected on Shuichi and his mother. The level of detail present and the combined use of his linework illustrate to the reader the intensity of the moment, the fear of finding someone you loved for so long being addicted to something so simple, yet crippling. Feelings like this resonate throughout the reader leaving them in a state of shock so supreme it changes how we read the manga later. Shock and awe from the seeing Mr. Saito as a spiral eventually turn into madness and fear of the unknown as reflected in Shuichi Saito's mother extreme fear of spirals.



Figure 3 Chap. 2 Pg. 50 Mrs. Saito losing her mind when confronted with the same spirals that killed her husband.

Ito continues in his manga depicting the fear of spirals especially in Mrs. Saito. His mother now fears spirals to the point of screaming out in fear of just something as simple as her hair being in a spiral. Ito portrays the unease that she feels through his panel work and his line work. This sense of unease according to McCloud is, "In fact, what we're seeing in the living lines of these pictures is the primordial stuff from which a formalized language can evolve" (McCloud: 1994: 127). Ito's linework depicts the sense of madness, one's sense of losing oneself when something so severe happens to us. After witnessing her husband curl up into a spiral, Mrs.

Saito is traumatized by this image, and it affects her very psyche. From Figure 3, we can see that the simple ideas of spirals have already taken hold within her mind and has affected her to such a

state, that it causes her to cry out at the bewilderment of her fellow townsfolk. Her cries reflect the madness she is experiencing and the fear that has taken shape within her mind.

Ito continues his charade of using visual cues and elements to elaborate this sense of madness within the manga by depicting the fear a simple spiral can have on a person. After the death of his mother and witnessing first-hand the fear that spirals have had on his parents, this fear Shuichi sees starts to haunt him when he meets a girl named Azami. From the first interaction Shuichi was already suspicious of Azami, the new girl in school. Shuichi is confronted by her, with her forehead being a black hole, one of the most remarkable spirals of them all. Ito portrays the fear we see within Shuichi with the slight crookedness of the panel and sharp detail within them to show how eerie seeing one of your classmates turning into a black hole truly can be.

From Figure 4, we can see the detail in his linework, especially the detail in the blackhole. The sharpness of the lines within the spiral sucks the reader in just as the student that got sucked into the black hole himself. Spirals themselves are inherently very powerful, thus this strong addiction to them, furthers the fear from them.

McCloud speaks to the effects of linework, “Backgrounds can be another valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas... particularly the world of emotions” (McCloud: 1994: 132). The



Figure 4 Chap.3 Pg. 103: Azami turning into a blackhole, with linework depicting the never-ending spiral.

background of the half bleed is mostly black with spirals around Azami, drawing the readers eyes towards the spiral.

Ito makes use of beautiful transitions allowing for the reader to employ their own sense of closure between each panel. This contributes to the uncertainty of something concrete happening is what adds to the story of *Uzumaki*. Ito uses primarily action-action transitions for



Figure 5 Chap. 10 Pg. 122: The mothers are ready using the spiral to feast on the other patients for their blood.

his manga, where there is little closure for the reader to use (McCloud: 1904: 70). However, sometimes when he uses subject-subject transitions it is spectacular, as it provides this sense of uncertainty again as to what is going to happen next. In Figure 5 we can see that the townspeople are still being subjected to the torment of the spirals. On this page the local women are using the spiral to suck blood out of patients within the hospital to fend for their unborn children. The last two panels of the page show a perfect use of subject-subject transitions, as once that patient had fallen to the ground, the blood hungry mothers were ready for their pray. The reader's mind automatically fills in the blanks

of how gruesome their butchering of the patient can be. It fills with blood flying around and needles stabbing the skin, while they have this look of satisfaction on their face.

Ito continues to use panel transitions to add to the sense of unease and uncertainty by also using scene-scene transitions to skip time. McCloud's definition of this transition transports us over large amounts of time, which allows us to fill in the context within the skip in time (McCloud: 1994: 71). A skip in time allows for the reader to utilize a large amount of closure rather than just short bursts of it. Ito beautifully uses this after a suspenseful moment to keep readers on their feet, waiting for what is going to happen next. This suspense adds to humanity's innate fear of the unknown. In Figure 6, we can see Kirie and two boys running down the stairs from the fire from the spiral. Until one of the boys is swallowed by the flame to the horror on Kirie's face. In the next panel some time has passed and both Kirie and one boy are left relatively unscathed, at the base of the lighthouse. This gap in time allows for our brain to automatically fill in the screams of the boy as he is being burned alive, with his cries echoing within the halls of the lighthouse, until we see Kirie waking up from the ground.

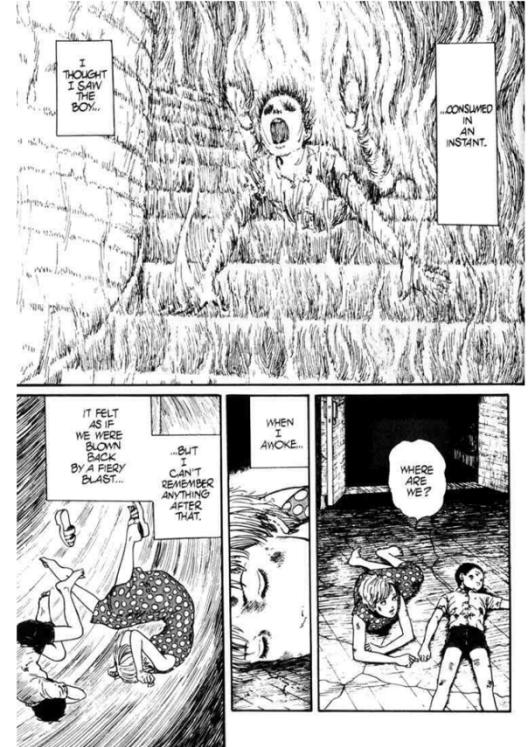


Figure 6 Chap. 9 Pg. 96: Half bleed of one of the children being incinerated from the strength of the spiral. With Kirie and the other child barely making it out alive.

Uzumaki is a wonderful spectacle of horror, using line work, full bleeds, and panel transitions to display a sense of unease. These techniques both make a rich story full of detail, while also keeping us frozen with fear, waiting for any type of relief from this fear. *Uzumaki* allows for readers to experience a unique sense of fear, one stemming from the dark and common patterns such as a spiral. Ito's use of Lovecraftian horror of the unknown, allows for readers to feel the same type of dread the characters felt, surviving the allure of the spiral.

Works Cited

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* (Eds.) Martin, Mark. Lappan, Bob. HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.

Word Count

Main Text: 1800 words.

Main Text with Other Text: 1975 words.