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Spirits in the Gutters: The British Invasion and the Haunting of the Twentieth Century

by

Tom E Sewel

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I analyze the significant artistic and literary shifts initiated in mainstream US superhero comics by the British Invasion authors Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Warren Ellis (among others), and argue that their restless curiosity in exploring how the comics page can come to make meaning is part of a tradition of literary production whose roots run back through the disruptive US/UK modernisms of the early twentieth century, the fragmented spiritual affects of Romanticism, and the dissonant overcomplications of Baroque art.

I argue that that the impact of this group of writers instigated a sea change of generational proportions in the direction of American comics writing from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. This change began with an increased focus on textuality and the tropes of literary storytelling (such as unreliable narrators, non-linear narratives, and biting political allegory) but was always accompanied by and generative of an innovative and experimental approach to the mechanics of visual storytelling in terms of the manipulation of layouts, panelling, guttering, and other concrete elements of the comics page. US superhero comics written and illustrated by US creators published subsequent to the British Invasion and up to the present day, continue to reflect the deep shifts in aesthetic and literary preoccupations inaugurated by the authors of the British Invasion, with Moore, Morrison, and Ellis chief among them.

At stake in this sea change is the figure of the unreconstructed, all-American superhero as a symbol of hope, justice, morality, and honour. I argue that the British Invasion authors brought a critical, intellectualized cynicism to their own superhero writing, which worked to create and sustain new audiences of more mature comics readers whose taste for overtly political or philosophical comics remains a powerful market force in the comics industry today. The Invasion writers changed the way that stories could be told in superhero comics, and while they may not have been successful in recouping the radical potential of the superhero as a figure of collective liberation, they heralded an enduring shift in the kinds of stories that mainstream comics were allowed to tell.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Tom Sewel.

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I must thank my family, whose support made it possible for me to reach this stage at all. My father, John, my mother, Romy, and my sister, Kate, have all at different times and in different ways given me support both moral and material without which I could not have completed this thesis.

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Chapter One: Parameters of the British Invasion

1.1 For Want of a Midnight Ride: The Writers of the British Invasion

1.2. Spatio-Topical Decompressions: The Grid and its Discontents

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1.1 For Want of a Midnight Ride: The Writers of the British Invasion

In the 1980s and 1990s, a loose group of British comics writers arrived, singly and staggered, in the US comics industry. They had each emerged via various paths from a British comics culture characterized by its overtly and often antagonistic political engagements. Most were science-fiction comics writers rather than dedicated superhero writers and most had come of age during the rule of Margaret Thatcher. They had grown up in a United Kingdom ravaged by the economic carnage wrought by an ideology founded on the idea that there was "no such thing as society"[1]. On landing in America, these writers were put to work creating superhero comics, despite a marked resistance to the genre evident throughout much of their work. The first to arrive, and arguably the most artistically influential of these British Invasion writers was Alan Moore. In February 1984, "DC Comics published issue 21 of their then flagging The Saga of the Swamp Thing title, written by Alan Moore, a comics writer from Northampton, England. The British Invasion of American comics had begun" (Murray 31). Rather than being a sudden and instantaneous event, The British Invasion, read in this way as the coming to prominence of a cluster of British writers in the American superhero comics industry, would continue to unfold over the next twenty or so years. The cohort of writers includes Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Warren Ellis, Neil Gaiman, Garth Ennis, and Mark Millar as its core

[1] Margaret Thatcher PM, interviewed by *Women's Own m*agazine, October 1987.

members, but a number of other British comics writers, including Peter Milligan and Jamie Delano, ought also to be considered at least peripheral participants in the British Invasion. Illustrators such as Brian Bolland and Dave Gibbons have also been suggested, by Isabelle Licari-Guillaume, as being part of the British Invasion, although as she notes, the term has come to be "associated more specifically with comic book writers" ("What is it…" 2) than with artists. For the purposes of this dissertation I concur with the broadly settled consensus of comics scholarship, which identifies the British Invasion as a primarily literary movement which nevertheless impacted the graphic traditions of comics production in important and meaningful ways.

What Murray describes as an invasion was therefore more like a slow and subtle infiltration. There was none of the popular excitement of Beatlemania (the original British Invasion of American pop culture in the 1960s) to greet these writers, and it would be a decade or more until the extent of this literary insurgency and its impact would begin to be recognized more broadly. While Moore led the way, the drain of British comics writing talent to the US soon started to seem inexorable. Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman and Grant Morrison were only the first of the UK writers to be brought across the Atlantic to rejuvenate a superhero genre that had begun to grow formulaic and stale in the hands of American comics creators. Prior to the British Invasion, the US comics industry, and its paying audience, had found little reason to value the work of specific writers (with a very few notable exceptions such as Frank Miller and Chris Claremont), seeing illustrators as the primary artistic creators and developers of the corporate intellectual property assets which were to be closely and carefully overseen by editors at every stage of their production. Simplistic villain-of-the-week plotlines and stilted, one-dimensional characterizations were as much a structural outcome of this American "bullpen" system as they were the fault of any individual writer. This shallowing of US superhero properties also owed something to the shift in distribution networks that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The move from sale-or-return to direct market distribution exploited a growing collectors' market where sales were driven by the stature of individual creators such as Frank Miller and Chris Claremont rather than readers' loyalty to particular characters or properties

(Gabilliet 89). For Murray, the British Invasion superhero writers were distinguished from their American forebears by a self-consciously literary approach to their work. They were radical, disruptive intellectuals for who the art of writing was at least as important an aspect of visual storytelling as illustration:

> "Where American underground artists primarily focused on autobiography as a way of avoiding the clichés of genre, and the revolutionary American writer/artists of the 1970s and 1980s— such as (Frank) Miller and Neal Adams— took film as their inspiration, the writers of the British Invasion saw themselves as writers in a long tradition of subversive imaginative production in a lineage that included Shakespeare, Blake, Wilde, Brecht, William Burroughs, J. G. Ballard, and Iain Sinclair." (Murray, 44)

The inclusion of the German Brecht in this list of English language writers is somewhat incongruous, and it is difficult to find any hint in the works of the British Invasion writers of the kind of avowed Marxist politics that characterized Brecht's life's work. In Grant Morrison's chaotic fulminations about class politics there are some suggestions of a historical materialist analysis albeit lacking the coherence or cogency of Brecht's works. If the British Invasion writers were the heirs to a subversive literary tradition in English literature, they also owe as much to the reactionary aestheticism of the Romantics, as hinted at by Murray, and the Transcendentalist poets. Notably absent from Murray's catalogue of influences are any of the US/UK Modernists of the early twentieth-century such as Eliot and Pound, whose preoccupation with inventing new literary forms and styles through transatlantic exchange might provide a more detailed model for understanding why the British Invasion writers were able to capture the American imagination so effectively during this period. It is important to note that while the Invasion writers did introduce more noticeably intellectual currents to the US superhero comics mainstream, they were not tied to the idea of traditional literature as a form of art that is inherently superior to comics. As Licari-Guillaume argues, the Invasion writers found themselves simultaneously "both embracing and deriding high culture" ("What is it…" 41) as they

forged a new form of comics literature which employed the tropes and techniques of traditional literature while remaining firmly grounded in the sensationalist pulpy aesthetics more familiar to comics audiences. In chapter two, I deal more closely with attempts to situate the British Invasion writers within the tradition of English literary production.

As the 1980s wore into the 1990s and pre-millennial tensions heightened, US comics publishers began to take serious notice of the passionate fan response to the comics being produced by their British writers. Moore's *Watchmen* (1986-1987), Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989-1996), and Grant Morrison's seminal runs on *Animal Man* (1988-1990) and *Doom Patrol* (1989-1993) had created a powerful stir of excitement that drew in many readers who had either never previously picked up a comic, or long since discarded them for more adult fare. What Murray describes as the second wave of British Invasion writers, Garth Ennis, Warren Ellis, and Mark Millar, arrived to find audiences already primed for a different, more self-consciously political and literary, kind of comics story. While Murray is right to identify an enthusiasm for more explicit political engagement among the British Invasion writers, it is equally important to register that not all of the British Invasion writers' comics works carry the same degree of overtly political consciousness. This dissertation takes the presence of a sharper political consciousness as one of the core features of the Invasion writers while acknowledging that it is nonetheless not wholly ubiquitous across their many and various comics works. It is worth explaining what I mean by the term "political" here. While any work of literature, or media in general, necessarily has a political aspect, political in the sense I use it here refers to an explicit engagement with, an intervention into, the contest between rivalling social and cultural values. Specifically, while many other comics writers of the era were content to largely ignore the changing political landscape around them, the core British Invasion writers made an active effort to connect their comics works to the social context from which they emerged and in which they appeared. Consideration of the comics works of writers such as Jamie Delano and Mark Millar, who might otherwise be considered to fulfil all the notional requirements for inclusion in any study of the British Invasion of American comics, is therefore given less weight in this analysis

relative to the more pointedly political works of Moore, Morrison, and Ellis. As such, my argument recognizes Moore, Morrison, and Ellis as the core group of writers responsible for defining the character of the British Invasion. Neil Gaiman and Garth Ennis form a second tier of authors whose comics works, while perhaps less significant in setting the overall tone and tenor of the shift in comics storytelling inaugurated by the Invasion, remain important and influential contributions to the Invasion as an artistic and literary movement.

Karen Berger, the influential editor at DC Comics who had worked on Moore's *Swamp Thing* run (1984-1987) as well as Gaiman's *The Sandman*, was instrumental in setting up the new Vertigo imprint for DC in 1993, aimed explicitly at the more mature comics audience that Gaiman, Morrison, and Moore's works had helped to foster. Berger's role in bringing the British Invasion writers to American comics is sometimes overlooked in comics scholarship that tends to focus on writers and illustrators and their works, but it seems undeniable that she did more than any individual writer or artist to prepare the industry for the transformation of the figure of the superhero inaugurated by the British Invasion, and the consequent shift in the kinds of stories that comics were allowed to tell.

As head of Vertigo, Berger's interest in comics for mature readers would be responsible for the publication of many revered comics titles, and not just from British writers. Bill Willingham's multiple Eisner-winning *Fables* (2002-2015), Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso's Eisner and Harvey-winning *100 Bullets* (1999-2009), and the Eisner and Hugo-winning *Y: The Last Man* (2002-2008) by Brian K. Vaughn and Pia Guerra, all owed much of their popular success to Berger's skillful stewardship of the Vertigo imprint. But these American writers came later, and were able to take advantage of an already-proven market for mature comics, generated by the works of imported British writers. Since before Vertigo's inception, a number of British writers had been striving to make their own mark. Peter Milligan's writing had successfully revitalized *Shade, The Changing Man* (1990-1996), a character created by Steve Ditko in 1977 and later discarded, for DC Comics, and the title was grandfathered into Vertigo upon the imprint's 1993 launch. Likewise, *Hellblazer* (1988-

2020), which took as its protagonist a minor supporting character created by Alan Moore for *Swamp Thing*, had been in publication as a solo title since 1988 and, with fellow Brit Jamie Delano at the authorial helm, had established its own loyal audience of mature readers who were ripe for introduction to the rest of the Vertigo stable. Perhaps partly because of their earlier entry date, Milligan and Delano are sometimes unfairly elided from discussions of the British Invasion writers, but *Shade* and *Hellblazer* were both emblematic of the thematic and literary preoccupation with darker settings and morally grimier protagonists that marked out the work of the British Invasion Vertigo writers as qualitatively different from the work of their transatlantic contemporaries. In Milligan's *Shade*, the protagonist was a romantic alien poet (veering away form the origin story devised by Ditko) equipped with a "Madness Vest" that altered physical reality, trying to save planet Earth from the insanity threatening to overwhelm it. Delano's *Hellblazer* focused on fan-favourite character John Constantine, a foul-mouthed English working-class wizard and detective caught in the middle of the eternal cosmic battle between heaven and hell for the soul of humanity. Between these two early prototypes, much of the general tenor of the British Invasion was already set.

The second wave of British Invasion writers identified by Murray includes Garth Ennis, Warren Ellis, and Mark Millar (Murray 31). Millar's inclusion in this trio seems slightly out of step with the others, as his work published by Vertigo was minimal, relative to Ellis or Ennis. Despite having arguably reached greater mainstream recognition through screen adaptations of his comics works, in films and TV shows such as *Wanted* (2008), *Kingsman* (2014), *Kick Ass* (2010), *Logan* (2017), and *Jupiter's Legacy* (2021), Millar's most critically-acclaimed and popular comics creations came well after the period usually covered by the Invasion writers, and at some distance from either DC Comics or the Vertigo imprint. This is also true to a somewhat lesser extent of Warren Ellis, whose many creator-owned properties published with Avatar Press and its imprints, and under DC's Wildstorm imprint, have come to define his body of work as much as his early output for Vertigo did. The operative difference is that the latter's early Vertigo work, i.e., *Transmetropolitan* (1997-2002), was a sprawling, long-form epic set in its own discrete universe, and therefore closer in its formal

narrative properties to Gaiman's *The Sandman* than to the limited, short-run or single-trade comics that would come to characterize Ellis' later output. Garth Ennis' comics writing career has proved almost as prolific, although critical evaluation tends to rest on three principal properties; his almost decade-long stretch as writer on Marvel's *The Punisher* (2000-2009), which is considered by many among both fans and critics to have reinvented and rejuvenated a relatively one-dimensional character, *The Boys* (2006-2012), which launched on Wildstorm before being cancelled in 2007 and moving to the newly-formed Dynamite Entertainment comics imprint, and perhaps most beloved of fans of the Invasion writers, *Preacher* (1995-2000), illustrated by Steve Dillon and published by Karen Berger's Vertigo for the duration of its 66-issue run.

In "Signals from Airstrip One" (2014), Chris Murray divides the invaders into two waves, distinguished from each other both by their date of arrival, and by their distinct philosophical concerns and artistic approaches. While this dualistic schema offers an easy way to think about the two subgroups in contrast to each other, its implications are not necessarily borne out by closer scrutiny of their works. For Murray, the works of this second wave of British Invasion writers are marked by a predilection for "irreverence, extreme violence, and profanity" (Murray 42), while the first wave of Moore, Morrison, and Gaiman, had "offered postmodern deconstructions of the nature of comics storytelling and sequential art, and as such represent the emergence of a sophisticated and self-referential comics culture" (Murray 41). This distinction is not fully supported by close reading of the works in question. While it is certainly true that comics like *Watchmen*, *The Invisibles* (1994-2000), and *The Sandman* evinced a kind of self-consciously philosophical consciousness, and tended to be less interested in the standard superhero fare of superpowered ultraviolence, comics like *Planetary* (1999-2009) and *Preacher* were by no means low-brow, apolitical or any less intellectualized or literary by comparison. If Murray's claim that irreverence and profanity were signature features of the second wave of invasion writers is accepted, then many of Grant Morrison's works, not least *The Invisibles*, which is explicitly part of Murray's first wave and is among the most irreverent and profane of all of the British Invasion works, presents the two waves theory

with a categorical problem. I argue that a critical analysis of the British Invasion should aim to avoid any type of dualistic categorization based on any assumed shift in authorial preoccupations that are reflected in the chronological periodicity of the arrivals.

This is not to say that there are no coherent groupings within the British Invasion writers. I argue that, in particular, Moore, Morrison, and Ellis have proved to be the most enduringly influential writers of the Invasion in terms of superhero comics storytelling. This final qualification is important so as not to elide the stature that Neil Gaiman has since achieved as a novelist, and more lately as a creator closely involved with adaptations of his own and others' works for the screen. Were my argument to be focused on a broader interpretation of success across multiple media forms, and reaching the widest audiences, Gaiman would likely stand head and shoulders above the rest, with Mark Millar and Garth Ennis in close pursuit. Gaiman's significant artistic contributions to comics as a specific narrative artform in their own right, however, come almost to an end with the final pages of *The Sandman* (at least until his later and very brief return to mainstream superhero comics as writer for a seven issue mini-series of *The Eternals* in 2006). The works of Garth Ennis have similarly attained a much higher degree of successful adaptation in recent years. *The Boys* and *Preacher* have both been adapted into successful television shows, and the recent televisual adaptation of *The Punisher* for the streaming service Netflix, starring Jon Bernthal as Frank Castle, drew heavily from the tortured war veteran version of the character developed by Ennis during his nine years as the comic's chief writer. These televisual adaptations do not however demonstrate any lasting influence on comics storytelling as such, while echoes of the dreamlike magical realism of *The Sandman* and the nihilistic road-movie quality of *Preacher* can both be seen in *Pretty Deadly* (2013-2016), written by Kelly-Sue DeConnick. DeConnick and Rios' Eisner-nominated work is equally marked by the grounded, formally complex influences of Warren Ellis, and DeConnick's other major works, such as *Bitch Planet* (2014-2017), chart a narrative course and a writing style that exposes the limitations of the uniformly white and male writers of the British Invasion. Even compared to those comics of the Invasion writers that focus specifically on female protagonists, such as *Promethea*

(1999-2005), by Moore, or *Ministry of Space* (2001-2004), by Ellis, DeConnick's writing on *Pretty Deadly* and *Bitch Planet* brings a much sharper and more searching subjectivity to questions of gender, sexuality, and race. This is not to argue that DeConnick, in particular, owes any part of her success as a creator to the writers of the British Invasion. Rather it is to claim that DeConnick's comics works stand out as the products of singular artistic vision that push the boundaries and further expand the possibilities for comics storytelling in a way that ought to be familiar to any reader of Moore, Morrison, Gaiman, Ennis, or Ellis. The major works of DeConnick's career to date represent in some senses the kinds of possibilities that were opened up to comics writers by the advent of the British Invasion. In chapter three, I address in more specific detail the ways in which the British Invasion writers have engaged with questions of marginality and the figure of the Other through their work.

Licari-Guillaume argues that the British Invasion might be classified by the specific kinds of content that these writers incorporated into their stories rather than purely stylistic or tonal characteristics. She claims that these forms of content include: "an interest in genre narratives beyond the superheroic, a taste for provocative content, and the willingness to incorporate popular culture at large" ("What is it…" 5). I would add to this list that another signature feature common to most of the British Invasion writers was their willingness to explicitly tackle thorny political issues head on within their comics work. Murray traces this political consciousness back to British Invasion writers' common history with the flagship British science-fiction anthology comic, *2000AD* (1977-2021, ongoing), crediting it with incubating "a generation of outspoken writers who used comics as a forum for political debate" (Murray 34). Overt political engagement marked a significant departure from the carefully depoliticized approach of most US superhero comics of the late twentieth century, where, for example, the relative class positions of Peter Parker and Bruce Wayne were usually left as a part of their respective comics' subtext which a reader could quite easily choose to ignore. This political consciousness was accompanied by an understated curiosity for academic cultural theories which produced some unusual intellectual trajectories within the works of the

British Invasion writers. The exploration of dialectical forms and figures as a means to discuss social and cultural problems in a dramatically compelling way through the medium of comics predates the British Invasion – we need only think of the contrast between the gravely lawful Batman and the frivolously anarchic Joker to find the most obvious of these dialectical pairings – but many of the British Invasion writers placed dialectic tensions and transformations squarely at the heart of their stories, most notably in Moore's *Promethea*, Morrison's *Flex Mentallo* (1996) and *Animal Man*, and Ellis's *Doktor Sleepless* (2007). Gaiman and Morrison both touched on Butlerian theories of gender in their comics works, often bringing these ideas to a mass audience for the first time. While Morrison's work draws broadly and shallowly from a huge range of theoretical fields of thought, Ellis's work reveals a much more penetrating preoccupation with the dialectics of Derridean deconstruction and specifically Hauntology. Comics and haunting may not immediately seem the most compatible concepts, but the multi-part processes of writing, drawing, and reading graphic literatures on the one hand, and the multiplicitous figure of the Derridean spectre as a ubiquitous deconstructive presence in narrative on the other, connect in ways that go beyond simple considerations of subject matter or gross content. While Moore and Morrison only rarely come to grips with the difficulties of deconstruction in their own works, their shared perspective on comics as creations of supernatural and magical art hints at an almost Benjaminian consciousness of their works as possessed of an auratic quality that defies their industrialized and mechanical mass-production. In chapter four, I analyze these numinous connections and their theoretical implications for the British Invasion comics in greater depth.

The figure of the superhero was always a fraught one for the British Invasion writers. From *Watchmen*'s presentation of its group of supposed superheroes as fundamentally flawed or failed men whose disconnection from ordinary humanity produces catastrophe, through Morrison's vision of marginalized superheroes in *The Invisibles* whose seemingly heroic deeds are revealed as being morally questionable where they needlessly take the lives of their enemies, to the later works of Warren Ellis and Garth Ennis on comics such as *No Hero* (2010) and *The Boys*. The British Invasion

writers consistently evince a grim delight in tearing apart the idea that the superhero is a figure that ought to be admired. I argue that this hostility to the superhero as a heroic figure stems from the more overtly political consciousness that the Invasion writers brought to the genre. The basis of this critical vision of the figure of the superhero as at best a force that works to preserve a stagnant and oppressive status quo, and at worst as an ideological catalyst for fascist politics, can be found in the critical writings of Fredric Wertham and Walter J. Ong, among others. I analyze the influence of Wertham and Ong's critiques of the superhero in the final section of this chapter.

The British Invasion, then, is already a difficult term for the purposes of contemporary scholarship. In some senses, it may seem an inherently conservative project to focus on the significance of the artistic contributions of half a dozen white men as the crucial formative influences and creative progenitors of a new renaissance era of American superhero comics, one now largely in the authorial hands of many more diverse writers. But the essential and enduring impact of the British Invasion writers brought across the Atlantic by Karen Berger – in creating, proving, popularizing, and sustaining a market for comics stories that dared to transgress the bounds of the normally acceptable – cannot reasonably be ignored in any contemporary history of American superhero comics. The British Invasion was a period of rupture and renewal for the US comics industry, and the superhero comics that followed it could never be the same again.

1.2. Spatio-Topical Decompressions: The Grid and its Discontents

"[T]he two fundamental intuitions that guide me: that comics are composed of interdependent images; and that these images, before knowing any other kind of relation, have the sharing of space as their first characteristic."

--Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics,* 28

Perhaps the most visually obvious aspect of the comics innovations heralded by the British Invasion writers was their lasting impact on page and panel layouts. From the regimented clockwork-like progression of *Watchmen*'s nine-panel grid, through the Escher-like warping of page surface and panel alignment by Morrison, to the exploded, decompressed pages of mostly negative-space that came to characterize many of Ellis's later works, these writers brought a rich chaotic energy to the craft of panelling superhero comics that remains central to their enduring creative legacy throughout contemporary mainstream comics of all genres. To properly describe and understand the kinds of shifts that these writers established within the visual field of comics storytelling, it is useful to consider the "Spatio-Topical System" laid out by Thierry Groensteen (Groensteen 24-102). In *The System of Comics* (2007), Groensteen theorizes the ways in which a comics page can be qualified and quantified according to the specific visual properties and contents of its panels. "[T]he choice of the panel as a reference unit is particularly necessary since one is interested primarily in the mode of occupation of the specific space of comics" (Groensteen 25). This focus on the specific space that the panel occupies on the page is at the heart of Groensteen's method of determining how the interplay of signification between multiple panels might be read. The insight that it is the panel's specific occupyation of the space on its page that represents the first order of its meaning-making business, even before its contents have been determined, is of key importance to understanding how the comics of the British Invasion writers marked a fundamental shift in the formal properties of superhero comics.

In order to specify more precisely the purpose of his theoretical work in *The System of Comics*, Groensteen argues that most comics criticism prior to his own focuses on trying to establish a hierarchy which aims to separate out the signification that is always happening at multiple levels at once, in ways that sometimes seem disassociated from each other when viewed through the eye of the critic:

> "[T]he tangling of the internal relations of the panel (notably, those of the three major components: the image, the story, and the frame; but there are evidently others, since the image on its own admits numerous parameters: reference, composition, lighting, colour, qualities of the line, and the writing does the same) then the relations that weave themselves between the panels, and the modes of articulation of these complex units . . . I will try, as much as possible, not to disassociate these multistage units, but to separately analyze their different levels of interaction, that being the spatial level in the first place, and, second, the syntagmatic level of discourse, or the story (which admits in its turn two degrees of relations: linear and translinear)." (27)

To make sense of this "tangling" of signifying relationships between the elements of a page and between pages without untangling them from their vital context, Groensteen develops a framework for understanding how meaning-making is happening on several interdependent planes at once: through the content and arrangement of visual and textual elements, through the syntax of their sequential arrangement, and through the less tangible sense of a narrative unfolding in both linear sequence and more holistically in an almost rhizomatic fashion where each panel relates itself to the whole story at once rather than only to the panels that precede and follow it on the page.

In taking the panel as the base unit of arthrology in comics (as a word might be the base unit of arthrology in verbal and textual language), Groensteen finds that in many cases the specific visual and textual contents of an individual panel are of less immediate importance in determining its signifying properties than the panel's syntactic relationships with other panels. He argues that there

are “at least three” parameters required in order to precisely describe any panel without reference to its contents. These are its “form” (or shape), its “area” (or the proportion of the page it occupies), and its “site” (or location and position within the page’s array of panels) (28-29). These three parameters form the basis of the spatio-topical system, which locates the first order of signifying power in these formal material properties of the panel rather than in their semantic content. Only once these parameters have been apprehended by the reader can the semantic content of each panel be interpreted as to its meaning in the context of the rest of the story. Each panel is a frame that stands not on its own but in constant, mutable relation to the other panels that surround it. A comics page is a frame containing frames, many of which are divided into sub-frames composed of multiple panels. In Groensteen’s terminology, the page is a “hyperframe”, while the “multiframe” refers to a series of “systems of panel proliferation that are increasingly inclusive . . . the book itself constitutes a paged multiframe. It cannot be comprehended in the totality of its printed surfaces; at any place where it is opened it can only be contemplated as a double-paged spread” (30). While the reader cobbles together a kind of holistic model of the narrative of a comic from the contents of the panels and their relative spatial dispositions to each other as they leaf through the pages, the largest single unit of the visual hyperframe is the double-page spread, and it is in such double-page spreads that we might look for the most challenging and innovative examples of spatio-topical manipulation.

This particulate understanding of comics composition, at the levels of panels on a page and pages in a book, sets it apart from other visual narrative mediums such as film. The format of separated panels has the potential to form a sequential and linear progression from left to right and top to bottom of the page, as in traditional written text, but it equally affords the possibility of a more rhizomatic, rather than strictly linear, relationship between panels, where multiple panels can be understood to belong to the same moment, where panels might be read all at once as belonging to the same multiframed image, or where different narrative threads may be interpolated with each other within a sequence. This generates a complexity of reading approaches which is not available to the viewer of a film in the same way, and so Groensteen is at pains to point out that “the comics

panel is not the equivalent of the shot in the cinematographic language. With regard to the length of time that it "represents" and condenses, its loose status is intermediate between that of the shot and that of the photogram" (25-26). Representations of time in the individual comics panel are a fraught question at best, as a single snapshot of an image may be overlaid with dialogue running to dozens of words, or none at all. Hatfield underlines the importance of recognizing that comics art is "distinguished from cinema by its own signifying codes and practices" (Hatfield 33), which include exactly these features of pagination and panelling. The duration of a panel might be thought to be the blink of an eye, or a half a minute of back and forth conversation, and it is up to the reader to determine which from contextual clues that are found largely in spatio-topical features such as the arrangement and size of panels. In most cases where the passage of time is a relevant issue though, a more apposite question is about the time that passes between panels of a comic rather than within them. The separation of comics panels by the page feature commonly referred to as the gutter allows for a flexibility of interpretation with regards to the passage of time within the story that is almost entirely alien to the visual storytelling medium of film. It is this property of the framing of each discrete panel, each individual narrative utterance, by the negative space of the gutter that generates the quality of comics' unique reading experience:

> "[F]ramed, isolated by empty space (a redoubling of the frame) and generally of small dimensions, the panel is easily contained by and takes part in the sequential continuum. This signifies that at the perceptive and cognitive levels the panel exists longer for the comics reader than the shot exists for a film spectator. When watching a film, "the cinema spectator does not experience . . . the sensation of being placed in front of a multitude of narrative utterances of the first order that accumulate piece by piece to give birth to the second order narrative utterance, the entirety of the filmic story." The comics reader, on the contrary, experiences precisely a sensation of this type."
> (Groensteen 26)
> (Internal quotation from André Gaydreault*, Du Littéraire au filmique* (1988), 49)

This detachment from a continuous and unbroken viewing experience of temporally immutable order is the key, for Groensteen, to understanding how and why the material arrangement of panels on the page is of such paramount importance to the meaning-making work of comics. The gaze of the comics reader is free to roam backwards and forwards, up and down, until they come to a workable understanding of the narrative sequence(s) proposed by the page. The syntagmatic function that emerges from the disposition of the panels in relation to each other drives the reader's gaze here and there, pressing it forward, and calling it back. By compositing a sequence from the raw materials of the individual panels in their own mind, the reader is actively constructing a narrative flow, as opposed to the more passive audience of a film, who has this work already done for them. The comics author who wishes to reproduce a filmic experience on the page is therefore confronted with this problem of how to overcome the fundamental discontinuity between these two media, of images that blur together in a temporally bounded and irreversible sequence, and images that are fixed and singular upon the page. As Hatfield says, "These are images that stay, unlike the successive moments in a film or video as it is being viewed" (Hatfield 33). This persistence of the comics panel (and comics page) as something that can easily be returned to by flicking backwards through the book, as opposed to the "blink and you miss it" quality of an image perceived as part of the screening of a film, give comics a relationship with time and its passage that is almost entirely alien to cinema. To understand how the works of the writers of the British Invasion, particularly Alan Moore and Warren Ellis, which were often characterized by a deliberately cinematic style, changed the ways that comic stories were presented on the page, Groensteen's and Hatfield's insights into the disjunction between the experiences of comics-reading and film-watching hold crucial importance.

Where *Watchmen* (1986-1987) begins with a sequence of discrete and regularly gridded panels that mimic the effect of a slow cinematic zoom-out, it is using the affordance that comics offers the reader, that of constructing their own understanding of the relation between panels in a

sequence, to present itself as the opening establishing shot of a film[2]. The fundamental process of comics reading is not altered by this manoeuvre – the reader must still follow the syntagmatic prompts to interpret what is being signified in the normal way of a comic – but the unadorned and standardized grid, which will be maintained throughout most of the three hundred or so pages of the book, makes the syntactic relation of these panels to each other spare and uncomplicated. The grid, in its most general sense, is one of the most universal features of the comics page to the extent that Groensteen can claim that the grid itself "effectively incarnates comics as a "mental form," (28). The conceptual constraint of the grid shapes the reading of comics as a cognitive encounter. There is little in the arrangement or material disposition of these nine-panel grids that could offer any other way of reading them than left to right, row by row, from the top to the bottom of the page. It is from this spareness, this absence of energetic "play" in the spatio-topical system of the page, that *Watchmen*'s cinematic quality first begins to emerge. This is in line with Groensteen's argument that: "[S]eparated by the thin blank space, panels can be considered as interdependent fragments of a global form, something that is made all the more clear and consistent when the exterior edges of the panels are traditionally aligned" (30). The stable progression of the nine-panel grid through most of the book operates as a kind of metronomic pace-setter for reading, giving a steady temporality to the reading encounter which sets the stage for the comic's later complex manipulations of chronology. Where the nine-panel grid is later disrupted by variations in grid format, the impact on the reading experience is pronounced and memorable. Indeed, Groensteen himself uses *Watchmen* as the paragon example of this comics trope: "In a book in which all the other pages are regular, a page that is suddenly distinguished by a special configuration carries an extremely strong impact (the example of the double-page spread situated at the centre of the fifth chapter of *Watchmen* comes to mind)" (97). The fixed flow of identically-dimensioned panel to identically-dimensioned panel lends much of the book a storyboard-like quality from which it is easy for anyone who is familiar with cinema to extrapolate a cinematic construction. Here again, the requirement that

[2] Appendix, Fig. 1.1

comics make of their reader, to bring their own imaginative creativity to bear upon the panels being presented, comes to the fore. This type of faux-cinematic experience underlines what Hatfield refers to as "the interactive nature of comics reading and the possibility of generating meaning through the manipulation of tensions inherent in the reading experience" (Hatfield 39). Comics require an active participation by the reader, dependent on their own familiarity with the kinds of signifying codes established by the history of the comics medium, to draw out sometimes very complex significations from formal, spatio-topical features of the panelled page.

In *Desolation Jones* (2005-2006), written by Warren Ellis and illustrated by J.H. Williams III, the authors take a very different approach to effecting a cinematic style in comics form. Ellis is credited with having introduced the "decompressed" or "widescreen" style to mainstream US comics (usually cited to his run writing on *The Authority* (1999-2000), illustrated by Bryan Hitch) and *Desolation Jones* is an exemplary comic in this respect. Panels are usually the whole width of a single page (*Desolation*, part 2, page 3), often with smaller inset panels featuring close-ups of specific features such as eyes or hands placed within the larger panel frame (*Desolation*, part 1, pages 18-19)[3]. Other pages present a grid of geometrically irregular panels where no two panels have the same shape (*Desolation*, part 2, page 17), or a double-page spread where the top half is a single extra wide panel overlapped by purely stylistic insets and the lower half is black negative space that gives way to a row of panels by the bottom of the page (*Desolation*, part 6, pages 6-7)[4]. The "letterbox" panel style mimics the shape of a widescreen cinematic film's format, and allows equally for striking landscape shots with rich background detail or broad areas of negative space (within the panel) that serve to thrust the subject of the panel into sharp relief. In *Fell: Feral City* (2005), the widescreen panel that runs right out to the normally-blank page edge (the bleed) is used sparingly at moments of sudden tension (*Fell*, chapter 1, page 2)[5], and the panelling structure shifts during

[3] Appendix, Fig. 1.2.
[4] Appendix, Fig. 1.3.
[5] Appendix, Fig. 1.4.

moments of actual peril, seeming to momentarily accelerate the progression of the story's action as only three page-width panels take the space normally reserved for the grid of nine (*Fell*, chapter 5, page 8). On some pages of *Desolation Jones*, often on the double-page spreads that Groensteen identifies as the largest possible comics hyperframe, the structure of a panelled grid remains only as an implied form or is disposed of entirely, with just a few smaller panels set into a field of negative space that dominates the page. This style, where most of the page is taken up by what we would normally think of as the gutter and margin (the space between and around panels, whether coloured or not) generates an impression of importance, and even urgency, for the panels that are present that raises their significance as single panels above panels on other pages that are set into something more like the standard grid format. Groensteen points out that the margin of the page is a "part of the exterior support of the multiframe . . . far from indifferent on the aesthetic plane, or even on the semantic plane. Even empty, the margin cannot be totally neutral" (31). In effect, such splash pages are almost entirely frame, with the semantic content of the visual and textual elements of the panel constrained inside a far smaller than customary boundary that occupies only 10-15% of the total surface area of a double-page spread. In her discussion of Eisner's *Contract with God* (1978), Barbara Postema argues that: "frameless panels in the text have the effect of opening up the page as spaces bleed into each other. With the absence of formal frames and gutters the draw from panel to panel is reduced. The weakened gutter function slows down narrative pacing and makes the look of the page more organic" (74). I argue instead that rather than slowing down the narrative pacing, this kind of frameless, sparse panelling technique generates a distinctly cinematic effect through the elimination of the grid structure. The overwhelming proportion of negative space of the page(s) and the consequent reduction of the readable area generates an accelerating effect on the reading encounter rather than a slowing down. Parallels of this technique can be found in some examples of postmodernist literature such as *House of Leaves* (2000), which employs a similar progressive shrinking of the text-field area of the page to produce a like effect of an accelerating acceleration of the reading experience. By vastly increasing the size and shape of the comics page's

gutters and margins, the atypical framing gives the images that remain a much more forceful character, somewhat akin in its affective import to that of a cinematic long-take. In effect, the reader begins to turn the pages faster and faster as the density of information being imparted on each grows thinner and thinner. While Ellis was the foremost proponent of this "widescreen" or "decompressed" comics style, it has become more generally a signifier of the British Invasion's influence on mainstream US comics.

As Groensteen says: "[T]he frame of an artwork participates fully in its enunciative apparatus and in the conditions of its visual reception. In autonomizing the work, in the isolation of exterior reality, it accomplishes its closure and constitutes it as an object of contemplation" (32). By manipulating the framing of each panel and of each page in sometimes radically unusual and innovative ways, the British Invasion writers inculcated a newly cinematic sensibility into mainstream US comics. This is not to say that such formal manipulations of page layout and panelling did not exist in US comics prior to the arrival of the British Invasion writers. Experiments and innovations with page layout are part of the fundamental toolkit of the comics artist, and appear across comics from many different cultures and eras. Among the British Invasion writers though, the works of Moore, Morrison, and Ellis in particular heralded an industry-wide formal shift within the superhero genre and beyond in terms of how comics might use the page to play with, disrupt, or subvert readers' understandings of spatio-topical conventions. Where Moore's *Watchmen* adopts a self-consciously cinematic aesthetic, and Morrison's *Seven Soldiers of Victory* (2005-2006) twists the layout of the page like an Escher drawing, Ellis's comics often opt for an unusual (and latterly very influential) scheme that depends heavily on negative space to create significance for the panels that are presented. Of these three writers, it is Ellis whose formal innovations in page layout have proved to have the most enduring impact on mainstream US comics, with elements of the decompressed style now visible in everything from superhero comics, to children's comics, to promotional cartoons.

A notable feature of Ellis's comics (and also to some extent, Moore and Morrison's comics) is the utilization of the margins and gutters of the page as signifying surfaces, going beyond the merely decorative or ornamental additions that are commonly made to page borders in comics art. Many Ellis comics that use the decompressed style do so within "full bleed" pages, which is to say the artwork extends to the extreme edges of each page with no border or margins. In *Desolation Jones*, full-bleed pages and double-page spreads are often used for scenes of action, violence, or heightened affect (*Desolation* part 1, pages 18-19). The decompressed style routinely eschews the use of gutters entirely, in the absence of anything that looks like a grid of panels, and panels are set or inset on the page in irregular, even chaotic, arrangements that usually reflect the turmoil of their contents. In other Ellis comics, such as *Fell: Feral City*, similar techniques are deployed within the framework of a standard nine-panel grid, where a single irregularly sized panel that pushes into the margins disrupts the regular arrangement of the page to lend a pronouncedly sinister affective twist to the progression of the story. (*Fell*, chapter 1, page 2)[6]. Where *Fell*, illustrated by Ben Templesmith, hews to the steady structure of its grid format almost as closely as Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen*, these relatively smaller and less immediately comprehensible deviations from the pattern nevertheless carry a powerful signifying charge. The reader understands from spatio-topical cues that even the most minor, singular disruption of the grid is meaningful, even if they are not precisely sure what its meaning is in each case. Adeptly handled by Templesmith, this uncertainty adds to the general air of mystery and dread that pervades *Fell*. As Groensteen puts it: "[T]he frame of a panel will not be definitively concluded without consideration for the surrounding panel. Bound to the contents that it encloses, the frame is no less attached to the frames that surround it" (43). A slice of story presented in eight perfectly regular and identically-dimensioned panels followed by a ninth that seems to swell and grow beyond the limits of the grid has its whole reading altered by that final deviation – the spatio-topical mutation of a single panel affects the meaning of all of the panels on that page which are a part of the same scene or sequence, even where the gutters cleanly divide the

[6] Appendix, Fig. 1.4.

images from each other. As an example of a similar technique being deployed in poetry, we might consider the *volta* of a Shakesperean sonnet, and the way that its departure from the scheme established by the preceding lines forces a new reckoning with the import and meaning of those lines. "[T]he ultimate signification of a comics panel does not reside in itself but in the totality of relations in the network that it maintains with the interdependent panels; in short that it borrows from general arthrology" (Groensteen 53). This network of framed and unframed panels, specifically here in *Fell* and *Desolation Jones*, but in all comics and graphic narrative forms in general, is subtly manipulated to create ambiguous significatory cues that amplify moments of particular affective importance in the story being told.

In terms of this formal innovation around panelling and page layout, Ellis's comics are arguably the most energetic and radical among the British Invasion writers, but as noted above, this kind of formal inventiveness is far from unique to Ellis's work. In *Watchmen*, picked out by Groensteen as particularly rigid in its panelling and page layouts, there are numerous spatio-topical deviations which inform the pacing and affective intensity of the story. During the sex scene between Dan Dreiberg and Laurie Jupiter on board the Owlship in chapter seven[7], the panels are split into half-width, giving two rows of six relatively tall, narrow panels across the upper part of the page that shows the moment of sudden intimacy unfolding in a partial "split panel" style (where a single contiguous image is divided across multiple panels). The last of these twelve narrow panels shows Laurie's elbow inadvertently hitting the Owlship's flamethrower controls, and the page's final panel, on the bottom row, occupies the full width of the page, showing the Owlship sending a jet of boiling flame across the night sky (*Watchmen* 239). Groensteen argues that, "when the more or less regular layout observes a canonical division into separate strips, the reading of a comic obeys a natural rhythm, a breathing aroused by its discrete apparatus of enunciation, which, discontinuous, is laid out in strips and tabular . . . When the layout is chaotic, this breathing becomes affected,

[7] Appendix, Fig. 1.5.

anarchic" (61). This sex scene in *Watchmen* aptly demonstrates this idea of the panel progression as the "breathing" of the story. As the panelling breaks from rows of three panels into rows of six panels, the breathing of the comic is accelerated in harmony with the arousal of the two characters, and the widescreen format of the page's final panel might be read as a kind of long sigh of fulfillment expressed through the spatio-topical structure. This same kind of relation between panel structure and affective tempo can be seen in *Pax Americana* (2014) by Morrison and Quitely, although here taken to its furthest extreme. There is much to be said about *Pax Americana* as both a reimagining of *Watchmen*'s story and as a critique of its formal and political complexity, which I will deal with in more detail later in this chapter. Towards the end of *Pax Americana*, though, we find the young Harley (who will later in his life become President Harley, this story's analogue to *Watchmen's* Ozymandias), wracked with guilt over his childhood responsibility for the death of his superhero father, being introduced to the mysterious "Algorithm 8" (the story's cosmic MacGuffin) by the atemporal Captain Atom (*Pax*'s, and Charlton Comics', version of Dr. Manhattan). Harley's broken and unsettled consciousness in this moment is signified by the disordered and deliberately messy panelling in the top two rows of the page. His world is coming apart and the spatio-topical arrangement of the panels reflects this collapse of a stable order. Then, as the full import of Algorithm 8 begins to sink in for him, the shattering of his mind is reflected by the doubling of panels on each row. Four panels become eight, eight becomes sixteen, sixteen becomes thirty two, becomes sixty-four, becomes one hundred and twenty-eight panels, until the row across the centre of the page, where the panels become so tiny as to make it impossible to read their individual contents, consists of two hundred and fifty-six separate panels[8]. The number of panels in each row then drops again, halving on each line until the penultimate, when four panels give way to a single page-width panel showing Harley consolidated, whole, and stable. Developing the same physiological metaphor that he applies to the "breathing" pace of a comic, Groensteen says that the panelling of a comic "obeys a rhythm that is imposed on it by the succession of frames – a basic

[8] Appendix, Fig. 1.6.

heartbeat that, as is seen in music, can be developed, nuanced, and recovered by more elaborate rhythmic effects" (45). At this moment in *Pax Americana*, the "heartbeat" of the comic therefore accelerates to something approaching a violent seizure. It is a moment of critical overload, a crisis, and an experimental attempt to discover what the limits of the comics form are, in terms of the meaning that is generated for the reader through the panel structure. There is no equivalent to the formal extremity of this moment in *Watchmen*, it represents a break with the source text, something that builds on the stylistic principles that guide Moore's formidable creative intelligence, but which emerges as something wholly new. It also reflects another of Groensteen's insights into the function of the panel, where it is offered, "to the affective investment of the reader, so that it is transformed into some sort of fetish" (26). This notion of the panel as a fetish, as a kind of totem whose existence signals the arrival of some new increment of meaning-making content, as a new piece of the affective continuum of the comics, is taken to its utmost extreme, almost to *reductio ad absurdum*, on this page of *Pax Americana.*

Much scholarly attention has been paid, not least by Groensteen, to *Watchmen*'s fifth chapter, "Fearful Symmetry" and the covertly symmetrical layouts that extend outward through the chapter from its central double-page spread. Likewise, *Pax Americana* also deploys symmetrical page layouts and iconic symbols to generate a striking visual impact. Where *Watchmen* uses symmetrical circular symbols such as the smiley face, the radiation symbol, and the clock face, as motifs throughout its story, *Pax* constrains itself to the image of the figure-eight, recapitulated again and again from the coiling CND flag in the first panel of the first page, to the domino mask held up by the distraught child Harley in the last panel on the last page, in both cases enclosed in the spatio-topical embrace of a steady eight-panel grid. *Watchmen*'s manipulations of chronology have been the subject of numerous journal articles and conference papers in comics studies, marvelling at the

adept temporal acrobatics that centre around the character of Dr. Manhattan[9]. I argue that *Pax Americana* is Morrison's direct riposte to the academic veneration with which *Watchmen* has been treated. The manipulations of time in *Pax* are significantly more complex than those in Watchmen – here is a story which is told in reverse temporal order, beginning at its chronological ending, and working back through the history of the characters to uncover how that ending was arrived at. The formal complexities of the layouts are also an explicit response to *Watchmen*. Where, as noted, Moore sticks closely to the structure of the nine-panel grid, Morrison and Quitely adopt an unusual eight-panel grid structure, somewhat more reminiscent of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), but which, as described above for example, plays with the panelling and page layouts in such a way that the eight-panel grid structure is often implied rather than fully formalized. Another moment of formal radicalism in *Pax Americana* comes on pages 12-13[10], where a thirty-two panel, double-page splash shows three different timelines intersecting in a single space (the Pax Americana Headquarters) which is presented in contiguous, split-panel view. This division of the eight-panel grid shows, simultaneously, the final argument between Nora O'Rourke and the Peacemaker; Nora's later murder at the hands of Sergeant Steel; and The Question's subsequent investigation of the space. There is a structural resonance here with Rorschach's investigation into the Comedian's murder in *Watchmen*. Both are break-ins, both present the murder and investigation in parallel montage, but the confusing, almost rhizomatic structure of this page layout in Pax goes beyond any of the formally innovative layouts in *Watchmen* in terms of sheer ambition and complexity. There is, arguably, no "right way" to read this page. You can read the individual panels in almost any order, but you have to read them all before you can tie together the different threads that are being spun here and weave yourself a coherent tapestry that reveals the sense of the scene. Groensteen, describing the way in which spatio-topical cues guide the reader's eye around the page, argues that

[9] Among recent journal articles there are analytical meditations on this subject by Fishbaugh, Dietrich, Lefèvre Cortsen, Horstkotte, Kukkonen, Mahmutovic, Mikkonen, Prince, Song, Thoruet, Wolf-Meyer, and Yogerst, to name but a few.
[10] Appendix, Fig. 1.7.

layout and panelling, “carefully deliver to the reader a route devoid of ambiguity, suggesting a direction to the reading (except in knowingly confronting the reader, by an effect of narrative deconstruction, with several contradictory options)” (92). The parenthetical qualification here describes almost exactly the process by which these pages of *Pax Americana* require the reader to engage in some deconstructive detective work of their own, in order to come away with a working understanding of the three intertwined stories that the pages are trying to tell.

In *The Otherness of Comics Reading* (2009), Charles Hatfield argues that:

> “From a reader’s viewpoint, comics would seem to be radically fragmented and unstable. I submit that this is their great strength: comic art is composed of several kinds of tension, in which various ways of reading—various interpretive options and potentialities—must be played against each other . . . readers must call upon different reading strategies, or interpretive schema, than they would use in their reading of conventional written text.” (36)

Pax Americana as a whole might be imagined as an energetic and unapologetic proof of this statement, but the thirty-two panel double-page spread at the heart of the book places this question of the various interpretive tensions and potentialities offered by the comics page front and centre of the reader’s attention. This is a story fundamentally concerned with temporality and how comics as a form afford possibilities for playing with the passage of time that cannot be duplicated in any other medium. That focus on time is flagged on the cover of the comic, with a quote from the Delmore Schwartz poem, “Calmly We Walk Through This April’s Day” (1959): “Time is the school in which we learn, time is the fire in which we burn”. This central concern with temporality and its representation echoes one of the most formally innovative and striking sequences in *Watchmen*. During Doctor Manhattan’s lonely sojourn on Mars, he reflects on the sequence of events that have led him there – not simply remembering, because Manhattan experiences all of time simultaneously – so we are given to understand that he is actually present in all of the situations that cross his attention in these

pages (120-138), at the same moment. Through these pages the reader is afforded a glimpse of the kind of atemporal omniscience that Manhattan possesses. His thoughts wander backwards and forwards through time, inhabiting every moment at once and offering up the fragmented parts of his alien experience so that we as readers must piece them together for ourselves into a still-fractured but human-coherent whole. The process echoes the process that any comics reader must engage in when they are confronted by the fragmented, panelled pages of any comic – the experience of reading comics lends itself to understanding the nature of Manhattan's consciousness. We are given a fleeting glimpse into the mind of a thoroughly inhuman god. Grant Morrison, seemingly unwilling to let this triumphant piece of formal storytelling innovation go unchallenged, foregrounds in *Pax Americana* that this temporal flexibility is one of the core features of comics writing in general. Captain Atom, the original Charlton comics antecedent of Doctor Manhattan, is shown, in a moment of self-promoting metafiction, reading a *Multiversity* comic (the limited series of one-shots of which *Pax Americana* was the fourth installment). Where in *Watchmen* we as readers join Manhattan in browsing forward and back in time through his own experiences, Captain Atom explicitly references and explains comics as having the same property of linear temporality which the reader exists outside of and may manipulate according to their own will. As Hatfield argues: "there is always an underlying tension between different possible ways of reading, between serial and synchronistic timing. Understanding comics conventions only heightens that tension. The reader must invoke what she knows of comics, including image/series and sequence/surface, to entertain and ultimately to reconcile different understandings of time" (58). Where *Watchmen*'s contortions of normal temporal order ask the reader to reconstruct the action of the story for themselves in a way that makes sense, *Pax Americana* explicitly situates the reader as the agent in control of the comic's temporal fluctuations. All of this complex theorization of temporality on the comics page is represented through the spatio-topical arrangements within the comics themselves, as they follow the adventures of a band of costumed crime-fighters. As well as being a stand-alone superhero story in its own right, *Pax Americana* also represents perhaps the most detailed and complete critique of

Watchmen yet published. Yet this fundamental relation between the two comics is never explicitly recognized within the pages of *Pax*'s text. Instead it emerges from what Groensteen calls the "general arthrology" of *Pax Americana*'s structure. That is to say that *Pax* forms its crucial meaning-making relationship to *Watchmen* through its choices of characters, its panelling and layouts, and the temporally complex structure of its narratology. It is primarily these overarching syntactic structures, and not the specific semantic content of individual pages or panels, that connect *Pax* to *Watchmen*. As such, it uses the specific arthrological properties of the comics form to generate its critique of the older, canonical comic text.

Before moving on, I want to take a further moment here to consider the concept of "closure" as theorized by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1993). McCloud uses the term closure to refer to the same imaginative work, identified by Groensteen, Hatfield, and others, undertaken by the reader to make sense of the transition between two comics panels that occur in sequence[11]. Closure here is used to describe the 'closing' of the indeterminate action between panels in the reader's imagination. For McCloud, closure is the closing of a knowledge gap in the narrative evidence, making its progression seamless and complete from the subjective perspective of the reader. This specific usage of the term closure though, is at odds with the way that the term closure is understood in cultural and critical theory in the study of literature (and more broadly throughout the humanities). Closure in this broader sense refers to the closing of other possibilities for a text and the shift in its meaning from fluid and indeterminate to fixed and final. Closure is generally regarded as a symptom of misplaced critical certainty, rather than a useful model for understanding how we approach reading. Closure explicitly excludes other determinations, binding its successors inside a single framework. Closure limits analysis. For a scholar accustomed to this routine critical use of the word, there is great cognitive dissonance generated by using the same terminology to describe the rapid processes of abstraction that occur when we must imagine and

[11] Appendix, Fig. 1.8.

construct for ourselves what happens in the time and space between two consecutive panels of a comic. On a fundamental level, the effect that the spatial element of the gutter triggers for the reader is something like the opposite of how closure is usually understood as an instrument of critical terminology.

The nomenclature of closure suggests exactly the opposite kind of cognitive operation from that which actually takes place for the reader in the space between panels. McCloud seems to suggest that the reader's imagination "closes" the gap between panels by filling it in with an imagined contiguity. While this is a seductively common-sense explanation for the comics writer, to envision the reader completing the story as the writer intended, I argue that the indeterminacy of this transitional space between panels might be better understood as a kind of opening, or aperture, into which the reader is invited to apply their own creative understanding of the spatio-topical codes and conventions of comics to generate a number of possible relations between the panels in question. Closure implies, indeed almost necessitates, the idea that there is a "correct" way to read the transition between two panels, and this is an idea which runs counter to much of the theoretical work of comics scholars before and after McCloud. Hatfield, for example, argues that "there is no one "right" way to read the comics page, nor any stable, Platonic conception of that page" (Hatfield 65), while Groensteen states that the signification that emerges from the page is "not invented under the dictation of the breakdown, but according to a dialectic process" (Groensteen 92) in which the reader engages with the possible implied meanings of the comic on their own terms. McCloud's conceptualization of closure, and the finality implied by that terminology, sits uneasily with the notion that the comics page offers a multiplicity of possible readings. The descriptive and explanatory power of the term "closure" as a tool of comics scholarship is therefore undermined by the very certainty it attempts to impose on the inherent instability that characterizes the space of the gutter. As Barabara Postema says: "Gutters do not "stand for" or represent anything beyond elision. They only create the conditions for the process of signification (e.g. narrative) to occur and invite a focus on what is given: each panel, as a signifier, gives a certain amount of information,

which is re-evaluated with each new panel, if necessary by revisiting earlier panels" (Postema 89). This is a crucial clarification which has deeper consequences for McCloud's theory of closure than Postema seems ready to explore. The gutter between two panels creates "the conditions for the process of signification (e.g. narrative) to occur", which is to say that comics narrative cannot exist without the gutter (whether that gutter is tangible or merely implied). The understanding of closure for which McCloud argues is a misnomer that misunderstands meaning as something created and defined unilaterally by the author, and defined by the contents and relative position of panels, rather than as something that emerges from the encounter between reader and text, and specifically in comics from the interstitial spaces between and around panels, rows of panels, and pages. It is this interstitial quality of signification in comics that allows for the kinds of formal innovations introduced by the British Invasion writers like Moore, Morrison and Ellis in the first place. It is because meaning emerges from the gutters and the structure of pages, that comics authors are able to construct complex webs of signification that span whole comics or chapters through the relationship that panels bear to each other and to the whole. In comics, the ghostly presence and absence represented by the gutter opens up the possibilities for reading and meaning, rather than closing them.

1.3. Broken Heroes, Strange Bodies & the New Scum: A Cyberpunk Invasion

One of the most notable generic features of the British Invasion writers, and of Moore and Ellis in particular, is a persistent fascination with the relationship between bodies and technology. This science-fictional cyberpunk sensibility pervades Ellis's oeuvre from his first published comics work, *Lazarus Churchyard* (1991), through the whole run of *Transmetropolitan* (1997-2002), as well as *Global Frequency* (2002-2004), *Mek* (2003), *Ocean* (2004-2005), his *Iron Man: Extremis* run (2005-2006), *Doktor Sleepless* (2007), and on into the web-distributed *Freakangels* (2008-2011). All of these comics regularly feature bodies empowered, cursed, or otherwise radically and deliberately altered by their merging with prosthetics of a technological, biological, pharmaceutical, or even spiritual origin. The alteration of a person's body to empower them with superhuman abilities is of course part of the stock-in-trade of superhero narratives, though this might be caused by genetic mutation or an accidental dose of cosmic radiation rather than through human intervention. The issue of instantaneous interpersonal communication – a technologically mediated social sphere that penetrates every waking moment of characters' lives – is a common trope in many of Ellis's stories. In *Global Frequency*, such a communications network forms the core conceit of the plot. *Doktor Sleepless* features the "Shrieky Girls", who are not only verbally but affectively linked en masse such that: "They live in an invisible web of constant secret conversation, transmitting raw feelings like they were texting notes" (*Sleepless*, part 2, page 13). These plot points fill a gap in the visionary futurism of the canonical cyberpunk works of the 1980s and 1990s which almost entirely ignored the future possibilities of how technology could come to mediate the social sphere. Even where the science-fictional dressing of cyberpunk is missing from his works, its generic preoccupations with trammelled and morally suspect protagonists, a noir-ish world of cruel indifference to the weak, and the corrupting evil of social elites and mega-corporate entities, are often visible, as in *Planetary* (1999-2009), *Desolation Jones* (2005), *Fell: Feral City* (2005), and *No Hero* (2008-2009), to make a short list of some notable examples.

The thematic conventions of cyberpunk literature first emerged from a cluster of mostly US writers in the early 1980s, foremost among them William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and Pat Cadigan, who peeled away from the largely utopian bent of most deep future science-fiction of previous eras to form a new genre set in a more recognizable "fifteen-minutes-into-the-future" milieu, that exhibited a more jaded and dystopic view of humanity's destiny. The early cyberpunk novels (and films, including Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968)) borrowed heavily from the genre conventions of film noir. Hapless, often victimized, and usually in some fundamental way 'broken', protagonists stood at the centre of these stories, menaced by powerful and dangerous *femme fatales*. Where film noir (and the hard-boiled detective fiction of the early twentieth century that was its literary antecedent) usually located evil as a central if latent feature of the human condition in general though, cyberpunk tended to find it concentrated most intensely among social elites (such as *Neuromancer*'s (1984) Tessier-Ashpool family) and globe-spanning mega-corporations whose priorities were so far removed from merely human considerations as to make them into faceless, ruthless monsters.

The extent to which cyberpunk and its themes permeate Ellis's work throughout the duration of his career is so great that it is not unreasonable to consider him as a cyberpunk writer first and a superhero writer somewhat secondarily. It is also worth noting in this context that *2000AD*, the venerated British science-fiction anthology comic in which most of the British Invasion writers cut their authorial teeth, was an early testing ground for many cyberpunk comics stories. Its most famous, long-lived, and ongoing strip "Judge Dredd" (1977-2021), in which a grim and merciless lawman patrols a dystopian near-future Mega-City One dispensing violent summary justice to "perps" (perpetrators), is an example of British cyberpunk writing that narrowly predates the emergence of cyberpunk as a literary genre. Despite its focus on a protagonist who serves and enforces the law (rather than one who suffers under or subverts it somehow, as is common with most cyberpunk fiction), the world of Dredd is a cyberpunk one in many of its most tangible features. Each of the Dredd comics stories are set 122 years after their publication date (they run

from 2099-2144, following the publication history of the comics to date), which is further into the future than most cyberpunk but some way short of the deep future genre of science-fiction space opera such as *Star Trek* (1966-1969) which was set in the 2260s, three centuries ahead of their release date. A relatively near-future setting is a signature feature of cyberpunk fiction, setting the story in a world that is somewhat more advanced technologically than the one the contemporaneous reader knows, but which is still immediately recognizable and familiar in terms of its social and political contours. In most cases this means restricting the action of the story to planet earth, and its immediate orbit, or at the furthest extent the limits of the solar system. The adventures of post-scarcity cultures in deep interstellar space belong to more traditional forms of science-fiction. In this sense, cyberpunk stories are stories about the domestic horrors of home, of what is already known, rather than the hazards of exploration and discovery.

Another generic convention of cyberpunk stories is the presence of a simulated virtual world of some sort, into which the characters must often enter in order to resolve some problem or challenge. In this, cyberpunk echoes a narrative trope that can be traced back through medieval drama to ancient myth. This kind of story "shares the shape at least of Shakespearean comedies, where the retreat from a city to a green space solves a personal crisis. Other times the entry into the virtual reality is to rescue someone who has got stuck there; this is an even older narrative, echoing Orpheus in the underworld" (Butler 14). This story of entering into the simulated world to solve problems in the real one can be found in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, where the protagonist must retrieve the digitally-stored consciousness of the Dixie Flatline from a corporate data node within the "matrix", as well as in later cyberpunk such as *Snow Crash* (1992), where the hacker-hero repeatedly alternates between the digital "metaverse" and quotidian reality to frustrate the diabolical plans of a nefarious religious leader. *The Matrix* (1999) is perhaps the most well-known cinematic example of this kind of cyberpunk story, where the hero's journey carries him towards the revelation that the simulated world has in fact entirely replaced and supplanted the world of unmediated, fleshly experience and that in order to reclaim his agency he must escape it.

The “punk” element of cyberpunk comes from its typical narrative focus on characters who are low-lifes and hustlers, “the working or lower middle-class characters, the have-nots” (Butler 15) rather than the members of social, financial, or intellectual elites (who are usually figured as the villains). Cyberpunk heroes are often drug-users or dealers, sometimes prostitutes, con-men, or musicians. They are skateboarders and hackers who exploit the affordances of public space, both physical and digital, to their own advantage without regard for the disturbance this might cause to the continued smooth operation of civil society. In opposition to these low-life heroes are the powers-that-be, usually gigantic transnational corporations, like Tessier-Ashpool SA in *Neuromancer*, the company run by the televangelist and media mogul L. Bob Rife in *Snow Crash*, or the sinister Tyrell Corporation in *Blade Runner*. Cyberpunk heroes exist perilously on the margins of the societies created and ruled over by these monolithic entities, as both their victims and adversaries.

Beyond these overt and tangible generic features, cyberpunk as a genre is philosophically concerned with the figure of the cyborg, the post-human body altered and augmented by technology to create a synthesis of living person and machine. Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985) provides a radical marxist-feminist analysis of this techno-organic hybrid form that offers some insight into why the genre of cyberpunk in general and the idea of cyborgs in particular exerted such a powerful grip on the imagination of Ellis and the British Invasion writers who had come up through the ranks at *2000AD*.

As a historical-materialist critic in the tradition of socialist feminism, Haraway was engaged with but wary of the radical feminist ideas of the 1970s and 1980s that staged “woman” as a category from which useful notions of gender and identity could spring. Her poststructuralist angle on the writing of thinkers like Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich led her to identify essentialism, whether of gender, race, or any other category, as a fallacy which needed to be challenged. Pursuant to this idea, Haraway’s essay takes the hybrid, composite figure of the cyborg as its central metaphor for the figure of the contemporary woman. This rhetorical strategy reveals a kind of knowing irony,

in that the presence of the cyborg in media up until the time of her writing in the mid-1980s has been an almost unremittingly masculine one. Whether in James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), or the US television series *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1973-1978), popular science-fiction stories of the time about the fusion of man and machine had nearly always been distinctly focused on the man as the organic component of synthesis. Haraway re-evaluates the figure of the cyborg and undermines its place in the service of the militarised and oppressive mythologies in which it is most often found. From the heedless egoistic pursuit of scientific progress cultivated by the racist, male-dominated capitalism that gave rise to the cyborg, and its consequent exploitation of nature to serve the desires of its culture, Haraway rescues and rehabilitates the figure of the cyborg as a part of a universal human experience. In arguing for "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (151), Haraway urges us to understand that "we are cyborgs" whether we know it or not, because it is the cyborg which "is our ontology, it gives us our politics" (151). Even in our ignorance, we are already cyborg subjects whose experience is mediated by the technologies that are inextricable from our own daily life, whatever the specificities of our individual subject positions. In this way, the cyborg escapes from the naturalist and Freudian tendencies of so much literary fiction. The cyborg emerges from a "post-gender world" (151) because its existence is not predicated on human sexual reproduction. It does not seek completeness in hetero-normative romance, or desire community in the form of the traditional nuclear family. Haraway's cyborg is a radically disruptive and oppositional figure whose origin emerges from the military-industrial compulsion to dominate every aspect of the biological environment, and yet, it is precisely because they are the "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism" (152), that their loyalty to the priorities of those systems is already questionable.

In developing her argument, Haraway defines four different possible aspects to the figure of the cyborg (150). The first is as a "cybernetic organism" – an organism augmented by the addition of cybernetic prostheses. The second is as a "hybrid of machine and organism" – a separate category

more akin to the replicants of *Blade Runner* or the eponymous murderous villain of *The Terminator*. Thirdly, Haraway points to the cyborg as "a creature of lived social reality" – a being with its own agency and subject position unique to its experience, and which already exists in the way that people live and relate to each other in the present moment. Fourthly and finally, Haraway identifies the cyborg as "a creature of fiction" – a being constructed through the relation of self-consciously fictive narrative, originating from and belonging to the world of artifice and invention. This vital connection of the cyborg to the structures of language is at the heart of Haraway's understanding of its radical potential. "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (181). The figure of the cyborg enables and empowers complex, almost impenetrable speech that challenges established orthodoxies about what is sayable. In this ironic, self-consciously blasphemous conception of the cyborg, its inalienable hybridity represents a threat to the theological certainties of essentialist thinking which underpin the structures of capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism and "other unlamented -isms" (157).

The cyborg is therefore a creation that undermines traditional dualities by virtue of its mere existence. While it originates from a recent military, techno-industrial past, its hybrid nature makes it intolerant of and intolerable to the fixed, essentialist boundary divisions demanded by the oppressive structures of power that created it. The cyborg represents a fundamental challenge to the values of its its conservative creators through its gross defiance of the logic of impermeable categories. For Warren Ellis and the other writers of the British Invasion, who until 1997 were living and working in Britain under the Conservative rule of Margaret Thatcher and her successor as Prime Minister, John Major, the radical liminality of the cyborg was an achingly modern and vital metaphoric antidote to the stagnant and fussy traditionalism that was suffocating artistic and social freedoms in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s.

Lazarus Churchyard (1991), illustrated by D'Israeli, was Ellis's first comics work to receive regular publication (in the short-lived *Blast!* comics anthology magazine which was published over seven months in the latter half of 1991, a year after Thatcher left office). As such it is a significant marker of Ellis's early thematic preoccupation with cyberpunk ideas. The comic's eponymous protagonist is a wretched human made immortal by a science-fictional technique called "plasborging" which has replaced upwards of 80% of his body mass with an "intelligent, evolving plastic" (*Churchyard*, part 1, page 6). Lazarus's body is therefore effectively indestructible and immune to any kind of biological threat. He has been alive for almost four hundred years as the story begins, and as quickly becomes clear, the only thing that he desires is the sweet release of death. During the long span of his unnatural lifetime he has witnessed the apocalyptic fall of industrial civilisation, which has reduced the human population of planet earth to a little under 10 million through disease and natural disasters. Over the course of his adventures, he is recruited in a sleazy dive bar by a sinister mega-corporation called ISIS-ELEK which owns the country once called England, now renamed Savoy. ISIS-ELEK promise to finally end his life if he will do one last job for them first. This originary storyline connects the character of Lazarus to both Henry Dorsett Case, the protagonist of William Gibson's seminal cyberpunk work *Neuromancer* (1984), who is likewise recruited in an unsavoury drinking-hole by the representative of a villainous corporation for one last job, and the caged Cumaean Sybil of Petronicus's *Satyricon,* referenced in the epigraph for T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), who when asked by a group of passing boys what she wants, replies only, "I want to die".[12]

The figure of the tortured, trapped immortal seeking escape from the mundane horror of everlasting human life is one that turns up again and again throughout the work of the British Invasion authors, sometimes as a being of bemused but alienated benevolence, and sometimes as a

[12] "Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σίβνλλα τί Θέλεις; respondebat illa: άπο Θανεΐν Θέλω." Eliot's own translation renders this as "I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her: "Sibyl, what do you want?" she answered: "I want to die.""

creature of grim, relentless malice, or anywhere on the spectrum between those two poles. This figure is visible in *Watchmen's* profoundly inhuman superman, Dr. Manhattan, in the *All-Star Superman* (2006-2008) of Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely, in the viciously psychopathic Homelander from Garth Ennis's *The Boys*, in the poetic and whimsical Dream (and to some extent the other members of the Endless) from Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, and in Rac Shade from Peter Milligan's *Shade the Changing Man.* A preternaturally durable protagonist (or more rarely, principal antagonist) who utterly rejects human social mores and norms to the extreme of his own self-destruction is a recurrent figure throughout the works of the British Invasion writers. The works of Warren Ellis reveal a particular fascination with this figure of the doomed or wretched but nigh-unkillable hero which appears not only in *Lazarus Churchyard* but in *No Hero*'s (2008-2009) Joshua Carver, *Planetary*'s Elijah Snow, *Fell*'s Richard Fell, to some extent in *Transmetropolitan*'s Spider Jerusalem, and even in the more straightforwardly superheroic character of *The Authority*'s Jenny Sparks, styled "the Spirit of the Twentieth Century".

Lazarus Churchyard is marked throughout its short run by a defiant punk mentality that glamorizes violent catharsis as a means to personal satisfaction. It crosses genre lines into deep future science-fiction and cosmic horror and features storylines that touch on paedophilia, forced eugenic breeding, and involuntary body transformation. Even while it embarks on this phantasmagoric tour of a 25th century post-apocalyptic earth, its roots remain firmly grounded in the familiar conventions of the cyberpunk genre, including extensive technological body modification, the existence of a virtual world of data that acts as a counterpart to the physical world of "meat-space", and the idea of digital consciousness – the workings of the human mind replicated by powerful computers. Lazarus is simultaneously a cyborg and an early iteration of Ellis's anti-superhero figure, drawing from both narrative traditions to emerge as a radical political figure despite his own incoherence.

The content, setting and stock characters of cyberpunk make it a genre well-fitted to providing the base substance of comics stories, which for the most part are themselves an outgrowth of the "pulp" fiction traditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that also gave birth to detective fiction and its film noir successors. They are dramatic tales of twisted morality and personal hazard, featuring protagonists who must habitually negotiate the fine line between good and bad. Moore, Ellis, Ennis, and other British Invasion authors drew heavily upon these pulp tropes to create a new subgenre of comics that left behind the dayglo certainties of Jack Kirby's purely heroic fantasies for murkier waters that would appeal to the more mature sensibilities of readers who had grown up with Kirby, but now found themselves adults in a world of more complex moral ambiguities. Setting aside these thematic considerations for a moment, cyborgs have another, more structural relation to comics through what Haraway describes as their hybrid nature. Comics themselves are a kind of hybrid, a fusion of the pictorial and the textual arts that generates a synthetic and inextricable whole which in turn makes the borders of both forms porous. Hatfield describes how: "Comics, like other hybrid texts, collapse the word/image dichotomy" (37), and it is the hybridity inherent in this joining of forms that makes the comics medium resonate with the figure of the Harawayan cyborg. The figure of the cyborg, as presented in the character of Lazarus Churchyard, for example, a human irreversibly augmented by the advanced technology which permeates his body, bears a structural relation to "the hybrid, visual/verbal makeup of comics" (Hatfield 34). Just as Churchyard cannot be separated from the alien plastics that compose the large part of his body's matter, neither can comics be divided into pictorial and textual elements and still retain their meaning-making power. The same essential hybridity can be seen in many other characters created and written by the British Invasion authors, whether they are strictly techno-organic cyborgs in the mold of Haraway or not. Rac Shade, protagonist of *Shade the Changing Man* is a stranded alien, surgically coupled to a "Madness Vest". The dog, cat, and rabbit who are the co-protagonists of Morrison's *We3* (2004), are animal cyborgs of military origin whose implants and augments raise their intelligence and awareness of their own situation to the point that they are

able to rebel against their creators and escape from the lab that imprisons them, fulfilling Haraway's vision of the cyborg as the "illegitimate offspring of militarism" (152). As Licari-Guillaume argues, the animals of *We3* represent an almost uniquely specific and multivalent manifestation of the figure of the Harawayan cyborg: "[T]echnology allows the animals to navigate a double form of hybridity: they are living creatures who are also robots, and they are animals who possess many human traits. Yet the most important element in terms of humanization is undeniably the fact that the animals are endowed with language" ("Cutting…" 16). The central humanizing function attributed to language in transforming these technologically-modified animals into something like people, or at least into agents capable of articulating their own moral perspectives, is always at the heart of the figure of the cyborg. The portrayal of the language shared by these cyborg animals through a mangled, destandardized syntax that "that brings to mind both text messaging . . . and Internet leetspeak" ("Cutting…" 28), reflects an emancipatory repurposing of the structures of language through technological mediation that subverts standardized, grammatically correct language's function as a signifier of intelligence.

Haraway argues that the goal or objective of the cyborg is "a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (181), which is to say, a blasphemous expression in language of multiple perspectives, or subject positions, at once. This multiplicitous subjectivity is, in a fundamental formal sense, an inextricable part of the experience of reading a comic composed of both pictorial visuals and verbal text. The perceived blasphemousness of comics is easily seen in the attitudes of more established fields of literary study towards comics scholarship, where the idea that placing the hybrid graphic/textual works of comics creators on the same plane of critique as, for example, the works of the high modernists or the Romantic poets, is still sometimes met with a kind of appalled bemusement by more conservative professors. Critical discourse about comics, along with that of other popular cultural forms sometimes regarded as inadequately serious for literary study, works to break down the sense of entitlement that reserves the appreciation of literature and literary criticism to the privilege of academia. The comics of the British Invasion writers, and books

such as *Watchmen*, *Pax Americana*, *The Sandman,* and *Planetary*, in particular, are rich and self-consciously literary texts that deploy dense intertextuality, acrobatic formal innovation, and destabilizing, deconstructive meta-fictions in ways that lend themselves readily to study in the terms of literary criticism. They use the disjunction between image and text to create complex weaves of signification that repay careful unpicking and analysis. They present difficult, even troubling, subject matter and characters fraught with moral ambiguity in a way that is alien to the traditional view of comics as overwrought children's stories. As creations of artistic collaboration between writers and artists, they are blasphemous, illegitimate presences in the context of a canonical literary tradition that continues to privilege the single-author novel above all other forms as the pinnacle of the literary arts. Through revelling in the affordances and the conventions specific to the comics form, of which spatio-topical manipulations are an important part, but which also include the use of emanata, onomatopoeic text, captioning, colouring, and lettering, among other elements, comics generate a fluid and diachronic heteroglossian grammar of signification that shifts and evolves over time.

Of the major works of the British Invasion authors, it is Ellis's *Transmetropolitan* that stands out as the one which most closely adheres to the setting and conventions of the cyberpunk genre. It is also, by no coincidence, the major British Invasion work that most closely echoes the Judge Dredd stories of *2000AD* in terms of both its tone and its political consciousness. *Transmetropolitan* presents a world just far enough into the future to be difficult to recognize, but which is unmistakably grounded in the material histories of the world we know, and which closely echoes the political tensions of our own time. While these resonances are undeniable in places, it is not a totalizing allegory, in the way that much science-fiction is often assumed to be, but remains a scathing, vulgar, at times absurdist, commentary on domestic US and UK political issues of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Transmetropolitan opens with a storyline, ("Back on the Street") about a cult of "transients", humans who have voluntarily chosen to alter their own DNA by admixing it with genetic material recovered from the bodies of extra-terrestrial aliens. This admixture creates radical bodily transformations among its subjects, with many taking on visible physical characteristics of the classic "grey" alien body beloved of late twentieth century conspiracy theorists and Roswell crash-site advocates. These transients (presumably named for the unstable hybridity of their physical bodies) are the target of much hostility and suspicion from the broadly intolerant and conservative powers that rule over *Transmetropolitan*'s sprawling urban metropolis, The City. The opening story details their oppression at the hands of police, their entrapment by law-enforcement agents into a terroristic resistance, and the subordination of this embattled community to a charismatic and exploitative leader in the form of Fred Christ, himself a posthuman alien hybrid. The protagonist of *Transmetropolitan*, the violently eccentric journalist Spider Jerusalem, is summoned from his mountain retreat and arrives to cover the story. Jerusalem discovers that Fred Christ has been paid by City authorities to incite a transient riot that will serve as justification for the overwhelming use of police force to purge the transients from the slum in which they live, called Angels 8. In defiance of the police, who beat him for his troubles, Jerusalem publishes a story that exposes the police plot and Fred Christ's betrayal of the transient community. Fred Christ himself is arrested by police after being caught engaging in paedophilia in the wake of the riots. The positioning and characterization of the transients of "Back on the Street" has been noted for its tempting allegorical resonances with the positioning of transgender people in US and UK society, though this vocabulary was rare in 1997 when the story was published. Here is a group of individuals engaged in radical body modification in pursuit of an authentic community and individual identity, whose liberation is compromised by the parasitic behaviour of a dishonest, megalomaniacal, and paedophilic leader. As such, if it is intended as an allegory of the transgender experience, it is far from a progressive portrayal of trans people, and Jerusalem's own seething contempt, verging on disgust for the transients to whom he is providing broadly sympathetic coverage is unmistakable. This opening storyline gives a sense of

Transmetropolitan's focus on the corruption and violence of police and government authorities, and the jaded nihilism with which it regards supposedly liberatory hero-figures. Even Jerusalem himself is presented as a dysfunctional, obnoxious, and toweringly arrogant man whose only redeeming feature is his dogged journalistic dedication to digging for the truth of an unjust situation. In this sense, he is a classic hero in the cyberpunk mold, a broken and embittered man driven to engage with wider society only by a combination of spite and intense economic pressure.

Written by Ellis, and illustrated by Darick Robertson throughout the duration of its five year run, *Transmetropolitan* provides an unflinchingly brutal and cynical extrapolation of a hyperbolised dystopian future. Though exact dates are never confirmed within the story itself, diegetic hints suggest a timeline occurring in the early 2200s. No meaningful space travel has ever taken place and humanity remains bound to planet Earth. Radical body modifications of one sort or another are common among the immiserated inhabitants of The City, which, like *2000AD*'s Mega-City One, is a version of a future New York, whose conurbations extend down the Eastern seaboard of the US. The ordinary, alienated working and non-working inhabitants of The City are named by Jerusalem as "the new scum", an epithet that belies his own sense of loyalty and belonging to a group who eke out lives of hedonistic nihilism under the carelessly authoritarian weight of The City's (and the country's) government. The setting of *Transmetropolitan*, despite being slightly further into the future than is typical within the genre's conventions, otherwise hews closely to the generic conditions of cyberpunk. Darick Robertson's expansive and minutely detailed art furnishes the page with much extraneous information about The City itself, and the people who live there. Some pages contain such an overwhelming wealth of background information that they approach baroque degrees of ornamental filigree[13]. Spider Jerusalem himself cuts a journalistic figure based loosely on Hunter S. Thompson's self-mythologizing semi-biographical character from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), an addled, reckless, and excitable man barely in control of his own impulsivity. As such,

[13] Appendix, Fig. 1.9.

Jerusalem, while written as an iconoclastic libertine truth-teller with no fear of reprisal for his actions, actually represents more closely the obliviously conservative privilege of the self-styled bad boy. Though *Transmetropolitan* revels in his defiantly rebellious and self-indulgently awful behaviour, it becomes evident over the course of the comic's run, in which the main storyline covers his years-long personal feud with the President of the US, that Jerusalem can offer no concrete political program, or even ideas, of his own. His insight is limited to "knowing" when someone is lying, and his only power is the power to attack and break down the subterfuges that hold up those in positions of authority. While his relentless personal war against the presidency produces individual victories, Jerusalem is unable to find a way to prevent his nemesis, the politician Gary "The Smiler" Callahan, from being elected president. Jerusalem's impotent rage at the election of Callahan only underlines the immaturity of his own project, and while the rest of the comic's run is devoted to Jerusalem's grudge and ultimately successful revenge, it is not clear at the story's close that the people of The City (from which Spider has once again fled to his mountain retreat) are any better off than they would have been without his interventions. Despite the hundreds of pages of energetic posturing, Jerusalem fails to accomplish any meaningful social or political change beyond the pursuit of his selfish personal agenda. Reading against the grain of the comic's surface, it operates as a scathing indictment of the narcissistic journalist-rogue and the various supporting characters (two-fisted editor Mitchell Royce, and the "filthy assistants", Yelena and Channon) who enable his strange odyssey of self-glorification.

While *Transmetropolitan*, through the lens of its rogue journalistic antihero protagonist, sees itself as an acerbic critique of US (and UK, if the analogy of Callahan the Smiler to the newly-elected PM, as of 1997, Tony Blair is accepted) politics, it cannot escape its own fundamentally reactionary temperament to suggest any better mode of ethical existence. Some of Warren Ellis's later, more mature work, such as *Ministry of Space* (2001-2004), seems like a conscious attempt to reckon with the failures of *Transmetropolitan*'s self-indulgence, and I look more closely at that comic, among others, in chapter three. While the British Invasion writers, and Ellis in particular, were keen to

display a cutting political insight into the way that power coerces compliance from its subjects in subtle and less subtle ways, they often failed to grasp how their own works, and in Ellis's case, his own behaviour [14], recapitulated the same kinds of parasitic power relations of which they were such vociferous critics.

[14] Details of Ellis's sexually coercive behaviour across two decades within the comics industry can be found at: https://www.somanyofus.com/

1.4. Comics vs. Politics: The Fascist Superhero

Perhaps the most tangible feature of the British Invasion and the works of its principal writers during the late 1980s and 1990s was the arrival of a newly spiky political consciousness in US mainstream superhero comics. As Chris Murray says: “The perception was that British writers were edgier than American ones, who seemed permanently enthralled by the mythology of the superhero” (42). This newly and explicitly political consciousness was prominently visible in the comics works of Alan Moore. *V for Vendetta* (1982) forecasted a grim future for an England dominated by the fascistic leanings already evident in Thatcherian Britain. The comic portrayed a future English society dominated by a white supremacist, Christian-fascist one-party police state complete with concentration camps, riddled with violent misogyny and homophobia, all under the oppressive eye of ubiquitous mass surveillance. From this dystopian brew, a singular and eccentric rebel emerges, the eponymous V, to fight a lonely anarchistic war against the overwhelming force of the rotten state, while dressed as Guy Fawkes. *V for Vendetta* made no secret of its angry disdain for the ideological foundations of Thatcherism and its despair over the direction in which British society was heading. The comic’s 2005 adaptation into a feature film of the same name refigured the setting to that of a dystopian American future, losing much of the specificity and precisely calibrated political satire of the original book in the process. In a 2006 interview with MTV.com, Moore attacked the Wachowski siblings’ script for its failure to understand what drove the comic’s story:

> “When I wrote "V," politics were taking a serious turn for the worse over here. We'd had [Conservative Party Prime Minister] Margaret Thatcher in for two or three years, we'd had anti-Thatcher riots, we'd got the National Front and the right wing making serious advances. "V for Vendetta" was specifically about things like fascism and anarchy. Those words, "fascism" and "anarchy," occur nowhere in the film. It's been turned into a Bush-era parable by people too timid to set a political satire in their own country . . . Now, in the film, you've got a sinister group of right-wing figures — not

fascists, but you know that they're bad guys — and what they have done is manufactured a bio-terror weapon in secret, so that they can fake a massive terrorist incident to get everybody on their side, so that they can pursue their right-wing agenda. It's a thwarted and frustrated and perhaps largely impotent American liberal fantasy of someone with American liberal values [standing up] against a state run by neo-conservatives — which is not what "V for Vendetta" was about. It was about fascism, it was about anarchy, it was about [England]. The intent of the film is nothing like the intent of the book as I wrote it." [15]

Where the comic drew on what Moore perceived as the growing fascism that underpinned the Thatcher government's rise to power and presented individualized anarchist resistance as the only honourable response to that, the film veered away from language and concepts that were unpalatable to the mainstream American public consciousness. In the transition from one to the other, the story is robbed of much of its astute political analysis, which for Moore is the reason the book exists in the first place. Moore has been similarly scathing over other live-action cinematic adaptations of his comics works, of which there have now been a striking number. Cinematic adaptations of *From Hell* (2001), *Constantine* (2005), *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), and most recently *Watchmen* (2009) have all attracted the writer's ire over their perceived failures to capture the essence of their respective originary comics, often due to the (mis)translation of a peculiarly British political perspective into American terms. This underlines the degree to which political agitation was always a part of Moore's comics writing. The established figure of the All-American superhero, unambiguously good and moral and universally adored, was seemingly an ill fit for such a writer. As Murray points out, "[t]he appropriation of superheroes as a form of American mythology did not come from an ideological connection to those values, but instead stemmed from

[15] Drawn from an archived page of an Alan Moore interview on MTV.com, dated April 15, 2006. Archive page can be viewed at: https://web.archive.org/web/20060901005535/http://www.mtv.com/shared/movies/interviews/m/moore_alan_060315/

a deeply cynical attitude to power, having been raised in a country partially colonized by American popular culture and used as an outpost of American military might" (Murray 44). This insight ties into the common history of the other British Invasion writers at *2000AD,* and its superstar character, Judge Dredd. Dredd was an unmistakably fascistic figure that parodied American conceptions about justice through a pitilessly sardonic British lens. While Dredd patrolled the highways of Mega-City One, a giant futuristic conurbation of the US eastern seaboard, Britain itself was relegated to the unglamorous nomenclature of Airstrip One, revealing the writers' attitude to obsequious British subservience to an American cultural hegemony that had long since eclipsed that of the former empire.

The political radicalism of Moore and the other British Invasion writers can be seen most tellingly in their cynicism about the figure of the superhero. While Moore's *Watchmen* has often been called (misleadingly, as I will explain in the next chapter) a deconstruction of the figure of the superhero, it is in fact something closer to an all-out attack on the institution of superhero comics and the gaudy one-dimensional characters that populate their pages. Moore and Gibbons's comic begins from the premise that the superhero is an inherently conservative figure. The classical superhero always fights to protect and uphold the status quo from the supervillains who wish to transform it in some fundamental way. While Superman, for example, lives, America can never experience any kind of meaningful social change. It is trapped within a conception of the world that belongs to the early twentieth century, where honest farm-boys are the wellspring of the nation's moral virtue, and journalists are bespectacled and honourable truth-tellers seeking only to right injustice. Despite his alien birth, Superman emerges from this milieu and he is so powerful and patriotic that he can defeat any challenge that might threaten it.

In *Watchmen* this insight, that superheroes ultimately stand in the way of social progress, forms the basis for the story's setting and shapes the role played by every character. In *Watchmen*'s alternate history of the world, superheroes have existed since the late 1930s, participating in major

events that altered the history of the twentieth century leading up to the comic's present-day 1985. The Watergate conspiracy was never revealed in this world, and Richard Nixon remains the president of the US in 1985, locked in an escalating cold war with the USSR. None of the heroic characters in *Watchmen* represent any kind of progressive hope for a world freed from American hegemony. In most cases the opposite is true. Most obviously in this respect, the Comedian, Edward Blake, is an unreconstructed nihilist, an assassin and a mercenary who serves the covert and violent agenda of the American government through the CIA. Dr. Manhattan, Jon Osterman, a being of unearthly power and the book's only true superhero in terms of his possession of supernatural powers, is likewise a functionary of the American state who allows himself to be used as a weapon of grossly asymmetric war against Vietnamese communist rebels who he incinerates in vast numbers. Ozymandias, Adrian Veidt, uses his superior intelligence to become a sort of prototype Elon Musk, a successful capitalist who invents electric cars and pioneers genetic therapies that can resurrect long-dead species but which still cannot cure cancer. Nite Owl, Dan Dreiberg, is a caricature of the ineffectual but well-meaning disillusioned US liberal, who has failed to deliver on their ethical intentions and now comforts themselves with the obsolete trappings of their glory days. Rorschach, Walter Kovacs, who despite Moore's later protestations to the contrary is the closest thing that the book has to a protagonist, has almost no larger political understanding of the state at all and is constrained to seeing justice as a libertarian matter of individualized interpersonal vengeance. Laurie Jupiter, the second Silk Spectre, is the figure of humanitarian modern feminism in the comic and this occasionally puts her into conflict with her own mother, Sally, who takes pleasure in an old Tijuana bible that features her in a titillating pornographic context. Laurie is, unknowingly as the story begins, the child of Sally and Edward Blake, and it is the bizarre and unlikely fact of this conception which proves to be the pivotal piece of information that tilts Dr. Manhattan away from his alienation from human society and returns him to Earth from Mars in time to intervene in the story's conclusion. In this context, Laurie's centrality to the story has nothing to do with her agency or any action she undertakes, but simply the facts of who she is and how she came to be. That is to

say, there is nothing that Laurie can do or say that can effect any meaningful change within the bounds of the story, her radical significance only exists when it is perceived and understood as such in the omniscient mind of Dr. Manhattan (*Watchmen* 304-307). Although Laurie's origin story does motivate Manhattan to intervene against Ozymandias, his intervention is ultimately meaningless in any moral sense. Ozymandias's plan is executed despite Manhattan's disapproval and in its aftermath Manhattan intervenes again to try to prevent the details of the plan becoming public knowledge by disintegrating Rorschach, in order to ensure that Ozymandias's plan to produce world peace by mass-deception is upheld.

"Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" or "who watches the watchmen?" is the philosophical question that underlies the story of *Watchmen*, appearing (partially) in English as a graffito on a wall in Dan Dreiberg's neighbourhood as early as page 9 of chapter 1 (*Watchmen* 17*)*. Originally drawn from the early second-century *Satires* of the Roman poet Juvenal, the phrase refers to the problem of how to find agents who can be trusted to enforce a moral order when all enforcers are themselves subject to corruption, whether from without or within. As it appears in *Watchmen*, it is a challenge to the whole genre and concept of the superhero comic, which asks readers to trust that the superpowered individuals who dominate their pages are indeed worthy of their exemption from merely human standards of morality. This salient and explicit critique of the figure and genre of the superhero, which is repeatedly ramified through much of the other comics work of Alan Moore, as well as that of Warren Ellis (*No Hero*, *Doktor Sleepless)*, Garth Ennis (*The Boys)*, and to a lesser extent the other writers of the British Invasion, seems to have become the least palatable element of the book for comics scholarship. Indeed, while *Watchmen* has come to occupy a canonical place in the heart of comics studies, there seems little willingness to engage with this central thematic concern of the book, with critical attention being diverted to the complexity of its formal elements, its supposedly deconstructive quality, its later influence on succeeding superhero comics, or almost anywhere else. Tracing the genealogy of Moore's comics work back through his time as a writer for the Judge Dredd comic in *2000AD* reveals that this preoccupation with the figure of the corrupt and

violent enforcer of public morality did not begin with *Watchmen*. Dredd himself is the judge, jury, and executioner of the laws of Mega-City One (although capital punishment is less common for perpetrators of crime in the mega-city than is being killed while resisting arrest). Dredd is also, and very clearly so, a savage parody of the fascist law-enforcement officer of a police state. While the readers of *2000AD* may vicariously exult in his brutal conquest of vile criminality, it is equally clear that the setting for these stories is a dystopian nightmare of sprawling, gargantuan proportions which the character of Dredd plays an instrumental part in upholding. Part of the futuristic horror of Judge Dredd is that society has broken down to the extent that there is a need for him to exist at all. In this sense, *Watchmen* presents a version of the thematic core of the Dredd stories in a context more readily accessible to readers of American superhero comics. The runaway popular and critical success of the comic ensured that this formula would be echoed and permutated by many of the British, and eventually American, comics writers that followed Moore, and it is primarily for the rupture marked by this explicit and critical political engagement that *Watchmen* became the foundational text of the British Invasion.

Far from being hidden in the subtext or encoded behind layers of narrative obfuscation, the argument of *Watchmen* that superheroes are inherently fascistic figures is relatively easily accessible once one understands that the supposedly heroic characters are not being presented as moral exemplars but each as a kind of villain in their own right. Nevertheless, the reluctance among comic scholars to engage with this core principle of the work remains powerful. Of the hundreds of academic journal articles published in the field of comics studies on *Watchmen*, a significant number approach the text seeking a way to recuperate or redeem the figure of the superhero from its grimy, bloodied grasp without conceding that the superhero is always already implicated in inculcating fascism to the minds of its audience[16]. Perhaps partly because a not-insignificant fraction of comics

[16] E.g., Dietrich 144; Miettinen 106; Song 124; Thomson 109, 116; but perhaps most obivously Chris Yogerst's essay "Superhero Films: A Fascist National Complex or Exemplars of Moral Virtue" in which the author strongly asserts the latter: "[S]uperheroes worked with the government for decades and only became a problem after they were outlawed, forcing those eager to help into vigilantism" (11). Here, working with the government is

scholarship draws from fan culture for its energy and inspiration, the idea that the superheroes whom many of these scholars have grown up idolizing are instrumental parts of the apparatus of regressive conservative inertia is often greeted with defensiveness if not outright hostility. Despite this hostility the crucial question remains unanswered: What is the pro-social mission of superheroes, if it is not simply to preserve the socio-political status quo? Almost uniformly, superheroes are entirely reactive and reactionary figures, seemingly incapable of taking pro-active steps to bring about any kind of meaningful social change for the better. Their attitude in general is more like that of firefighters, who can only respond to a fire already in progress, than that of a conscientious police force, whose pro-active presence in society might deter or entirely prevent violent crime from taking place. It is thus a settled staple of the superhero genre that taking meaningfully pro-active or pre-emptive steps to address the fundamental social problems that give rise to crime and villainy is simply not something that superheroes do. Instead these ageless, deathless figures "become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature" which "cannot hold surprises for us" (Eco 15). This fixed, eternal, and changeless quality of the superhero is bound up with the impossibility of their ever contributing to any pro-social objective. Instead they can only embody a "law, or a universal demand" (Eco 15), thereby reinscribing as a supreme individual the primacy of the universalized and legitimated over the individuated and delegitimized. In this signifying work, the figure of the superhero already lends itself to the totalizing hierarchies of fascist politics. Even where the genre has aimed to subvert this essential reactivity of the superhero, it has struggled to imagine superheroes as anything other than rogue dictators. *The Authority*, as written by Ellis and later Millar, presents a superhero group grown weary of always reacting to crises after they have happened and having decided to take a pro-active stance, seeking out superpowered threats to global equilibrium before they can fully manifest. The title of the comic (the eponymous name of the superhero group in question, mainly survivors of the previous Stormwatch superhero

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made synonymous with moral virtue, and it is only when forced into freelancing that *Watchmen*'s superheroes cross the line into villainy.

group) hints at the problematic political ethics of such an approach. The Authority are unaccountable to anyone as they strike at evil from the Carrier, their interdimensionally mobile spaceship base, having taken private superpowered vigilantism worldwide, relying only on the moral character of their group leadership, the formidable Jenny Sparks, to dictate the limits of their action. Sparks, alternately laments the conservative attitudes of earthly governments, "[t]hey only want servants down there, John. / They don't want anyone to be cleverer than them, and they don't want anyone to love more than them. / They don't want anyone to change the world" (*Stormwatch*, "Change or Die"), and delivers rhetorical challenges to invading alien gods that would not be out of place coming from a true autocrat: "I'm here to save the earth. / I'm here to get us all through this century. / You might think the planet behind us is yours to use, but here's the news: Earth is under new management. / This world is mine." (*The Authority*, "Outer Dark"). Sparks's rhetoric is sometimes softened to resemble that of a strict headteacher rather than a vainglorious saviour, but the essentially authoritarian content of the message remains the same: "We're here to give you a second chance. Make a world worth living in. / We are The Authority. Behave." (*The Authority*, "Shiftships"). The better world to come can only be ensured by the hand of violence constantly held over it in threat. Superior force is The Authority's justification for enacting their proactive agenda. While morally distinct from the ruthless utilitarianism of *Watchmen*'s Ozymandias (another proactive rather than reactive superhero), *The Authority*'s superpowered vigilantes unilaterally exerting their will on a global scale according only to their own ethical sense constructs a facsimile of justice that does not hold up to any serious scrutiny of its philosophical and political assumptions.

An early antecedent of the idea that superheroes are inherently fascist figures is found in *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) by the German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham. Wertham's findings were, and still are for the most part, treated as anathemic and unthinkable by those within the comics industry, and a direct line is often drawn between his work and the introduction of the Comics Code Authority later the same year, which laid down strict and ideologically very conservative rules for the type of content that could be represented in mainstream US comics. While

comics industry professionals may maintain that Wertham's book was directly responsible for the Code, its details were filtered primarily through a US congressional committee more interested in stamping out any hint of sexual impropriety or disobedience to law-enforcement, and the final form that the Comics Code took was the result of a very selective cherry-picking process in relation to Wertham's critique of superhero comics.

While Wertham's own sexually conservative politics informed much of his horror at the libidinous and often explicit imagery he found in the comic books of the 1950s, his criticism of the figure of the superhero takes on a more measured and philosophical character relative to, for example, his reactionary outrage at the portrayal of women behaving in un-ladylike ways. It remains an interesting outcome that having been filtered through a congressional committee, the Comics Code Authority reflected almost entirely the latter set of concerns and the former not at all. Whatever else may be said about Wertham's personal politics (and it is clear from his writing that he was not what we might recognize as progressive on issues of gender or sexuality) he does identify the respective racialization of superheroes and their counterpart villains as something closely akin to the propaganda distributed by the German Nazi party until only a decade or so before:

> "Actually, Superman (with the big S on his uniform – we should, I suppose, be thankful that it is not an S.S.) needs an endless stream of ever new submen, criminals and "foreign-looking" people not only to justify his existence but even to make it possible. It is this feature that engenders in children either one or the other of two attitudes: either they fantasy themselves as supermen, with the attendant prejudices against the submen, or it makes them submissive and receptive to the blandishments of strong men who will solve all their social problems for them – by force." (Wertham 34)

This analysis is not dissimilar to the insight of Moore's that underpins the tensions of *Watchmen*. The Nietzschean figure of the dominant and hypermasculine superman, powerful in his individuality and without regard for the wider society from which he emerges, is most obviously

applicable to the character of Ozymandias, a man who has spent his life in solitary pursuit of his own physical and mental perfection and who then applies that same perfectionist logic to society as a whole with apocalyptic effect. Wertham's specific argument in this context is that the details of the content of individual superhero stories are less important than this overarching relationship to power that is reinforced through endless repetition. Either one fancies oneself the hero, self-evidently superior to lesser beings and thereby freed from the constraints of normal morality, or one is psychologically prepared for the domination of society by such symbolic figures who promise to fix all society's problems by the application of self-validating violence. This is a psychology that prepares the ground for authoritarianism of every type, and even when heroes are shown, as they often were since the 1940s, fighting Nazis hand to hand, they do not represent any kind of democratic or liberatory impulse but only the collision of two different and competing violent nationalisms. In *Watchmen*, the figure of the giant blue Dr. Manhattan raining fire and death on Vietnamese rebels shows the empty amorality of the obedient superhero mobilized by the US state to pursue its foreign policy objectives. The social and political messages of superhero stories are all the more insidious when they are aimed at the minds of children and it seems reasonable to ask, in 2021, if the undeniably resurgent political presence of fascist movements in the UK, Europe, and the US, in the 2010s might not be related to the domination of cinematic entertainment over the last decade and a half by the overwhelming procession of dozens of superhero movies who reproduce and celebrate these fascistic relationships to power. Wertham argues that: "[b]rutality in fantasy creates brutality in fact" (109), and as the brutality of state power in the West ramps up against the homeless, the marginalized, and the dissident, at the very moment that costumed paragons of supposed Western values have become the single largest entertainment franchise on the planet, it may be worth considering anew what role the figure of the superhero has played in this process.

Wertham's analysis of superheroes as propaganda in this regard is supported by the later scholarship presented in Paul Hirsch's *Pulp Empire* (2013). The Writers' War Board (WWB), a "quasi-governmental agency" (31) in the US, collaborated directly with comics publishers, particularly with

Detective Comics (DC), to guide the tone and tenor of anti-German rhetoric in their publications. This collaboration resulted in “This Is Our Enemy” (1945), a “forty page denunciation of the German people, culture, and Nazism” (31) starring the most recognizable superheroes of the time, including Wonder Woman, the Green Lantern, and the Flash, but largely written and edited by members of the WWB to stoke up anti-German sentiment among American readers. Under the auspices of these creators, the violence and gore of superhero comics was ramped up to spark feelings of disgust and hatred. The Germans and the Japanese had to be presented as “fundamentally, irredeemably evil and violent” (33) in order to justify the mobilization of the American war effort. The ultra-violence abhorred by Wertham. and which later became a signature part of the comics works of the British Invasion, had its origins in the war-time propaganda of the 1940s, where its purpose was to demonstrate to the American mass-market that “a policy of unremitting violence was essential to the creation of a world in which democracy and tolerance could flourish” (33). Hirsch notes that publication of these comics coincided with the escalation of attacks against the civilian populations of the Axis countries, drawing a direct link between the narrative dehumanization of their people and the actual death and destruction rained on non-combatants by Allied militaries. Accompanying this racializing degradation of German and Japanese people as sub-humans were paradoxical counter-claims about the liberal racial tolerance of the free and democratic United States that aimed to “minimize the longstanding racial inequalities within American society” (34). This double-edged function of wartime superhero comics, to hyperbolically dehumanize the enemy as both individuals and collectives, while simultaneously representing American liberal democracy as a perfect society, has never entirely been expunged from superhero narratives, even seven decades after World War II concluded. The popularity of a mass-market genre, aimed at a generally less than mature audience, as a platform for nationalistic propaganda has proven hard for American comics publishers to let go.

It is important to recognize that when Wertham was writing in 1954, the superhero genre of comics had already waned into something approaching obsolescence[17]. The highly politicized propaganda comics featuring superheroes such as Superman and Captain America battling German Nazis had enjoyed widespread publication during the years of the Second World War, but the arrival of peacetime saw a significant contraction in the publication of such nationalistic narratives. Wertham's analysis might therefore already be seen to be a revisionist one, identifying explicitly anti-Nazi superheroes with the same kind of fascist ideology that they are presented as opposing. This counter-critique of Wertham however fails to account for the point made above that the nationalist anti-Nazi propaganda comics of the 1930s and 1940s are by no means inherently anti-fascist, but instead represent a similarly violent American nationalism that bears many of the same characteristics of its adversary, albeit under a different flag.

Despite his status as the *bête noire* of the superhero comics industry and comics studies more generally, Wertham was not the first critic of the figure of the superhero to make their reservations known. A decade before *Seduction of the Innocent*, the media theorist and cultural historian Walter J. Ong published an article in the *New York Times*, titled "The Hero and the Superstate", which has recently been republished in Charles Hatfield's *The Superhero Reader* (2013). Ong's critique, as may be inferred from the title of his article, concerns the role that the costumed superhero plays in consolidating the more explicit propaganda of fascist and authoritarian state entities in the minds of the people who occupy them. Ong rejected the idea that seeing e.g., Captain America fighting Nazis inherently made Captain America a useful or successful means of combating domestic fascist nationalism. Anticipating Wertham, Ong argued that while the specific contents of such comics revealed their covert allegiance to strategies of state domination, the minutiae of these

[17] Gabilliet describes the post-war shift in the comics market that all but wiped out the war-time superhero comics in favour of Romance, Western, and Crime titles: "[T]he genre's success peaked with forty different titles in 1944. A progressive but inexorable drop began the following year: thirty-three titles in 1945, twenty-eight in 1946, nineteen in 1947, fourteen in 1948, eight in 1949, four in 1950-1951, and three from 1952-1957 . . . The genre was visibly past its prime" (34). When Wertham published his damning critique of the figure of the superhero in 1954, those figures had already been largely supplanted in mass-market comics by less luridly fantastic figures familiar from more traditional pulp stories.

details mattered less than the general relationship to state power that was being broadcast and reinforced through their weekly publication:

> "The plan of the monolithic super state depends on there being a maneuverable mass of homogeneous beings that acts automatically. This is the herd. Its members must act, not via their intelligences, but from the impulse to be like the next man, the impulse to conformity. In the herd, differentiation is regarded with terror. Those differences that cannot be leveled— on some occasions racial, on other occasions party differences— are purged. To focus the impulse to conformity, everything is centered on one man— the leader, the hero, the *duce*, the *Fuhrer*. Herd responses not being on the rational level, this hero does not appeal by argument. He does not explain; he puts on a show. He builds on the herd's dreams: he hypnotizes." (Ong 35)

Ong identifies this herd mentality as the key feature of how fascist state power exerts its unquestioned authority, and he argues that the propagandized figure of the extraordinary superman helps to cement this mentality in the minds of the state's people. Because the herd's responses are not processed rationally but on an affective level, it matters less what the details of the hero's activities and behaviour are, than that he creates a bewitching spectacle for public consumption. This hypnotic power of the hero to disable the reason of the reading subject is what Moore's *Watchmen* subverts in its revelation of superheroes as megalomaniacal, or impotent, or inhuman, or nihilistic, or psychopathic. Ong argues for an understanding of the function of the figure of the comics superhero that is directly connected to the functions of Nazi propaganda: "The comics' habit of tinkering with the notion of the hero as the emotional correlative of the whole nation marches exactly the technique of Hitler, who was the prototype and hero of those who wanted to be "typical Germans" (37-38). So, for Ong, Superman and his costumed compatriots are prototypes for those who consider themselves "typical Americans" – itself a normalizing and deeply conservative construction that immediately and definitively excludes any marginalized person. In *Watchmen*, the

character of the Comedian most closely represents the figure of an emotional correlative to the US state in this sense, a cigar-chomping, gun-wielding veteran whose loyalty to the flag is allowed to excuse his interpersonally abusive and sexually predatory behaviour, at least in the eyes of his colleagues.

Another part of Ong's critique that has a salutary relevance to contemporary pop-cultural discussions about the place and role of the superhero, focuses on the claim, common even in 1945, that superhero comics and the narratives they propagate represent a modern (American) version of mythology and folklore. This idea has come to almost overwhelming prominence in the last decade or so, and is frequently given, inside and outside of the academy, as a reason why superhero comics ought to be treated with the same kind of reverential respect given to ancient stories that have survived through hundreds or thousands of years of human history. For Ong, this insistence is primarily revealing of the importance of superheroes in establishing a kind of covert nationalistic fervor. If superhero comics are folktales and myths, then they are American folktales and myths, and they construct a notion of the folk based around subscription to the kinds of violent values they inscribe:

> "The comic strips are supposed to have "created some of the towering figures of our American mythology," and "they are definitely a part of our native folklore," newspaper articles assure us . . . This is not the folklore superstition. The folklore superstition is pretty sloppy about artistic or social values. You can recognize it by its thoroughgoing indiscrimination, its persistent refusal to bother seriously about forming really critical estimates. If it can father a literary or any other work on the Volk , the Volk will be the work's entire justification. Mass approval has a magic value, and one must ask no questions . . . [A] recent report on the comics by a group of sociological, educational, and psychiatrical experts was rather awesome "until we realized that they were merely saying that the reason for the success of comic strips (and books) is that they fill in our

> generation the place of the old folk tale." Here is the superstition. Only say that the comics are like folk tales, and all misgivings vanish. The taut muscles of the mind relax. The mind bows before its fetish and is reassured. Why? The reason seems traceable, historically as well as logically, to an attitude toward das Volk on which the new orders build." (Ong 41-42)

The insistence that comics are a form of folklore works to disarm critical understanding of the cultural work that they do, as folklore and myth belong to a privileged category of literature that in many cases predates written literature itself. When critics and commentators argue, as many have[18], that superhero stories are a kind of modern mythology, they elide the material histories that gave rise to and preserved mythologies down the centuries. They also elide the material circumstance of industrial mass-culture from which comics emerged and in which they prosper that bears no resemblance to the kind of largely oral narrative transmission strata in which myths and folktales emerged and propagated. The material historical reasons for the enduring significance and cultural prominence of the myth of, for example, Odysseus, are completely different from the reasons for the cultural prominence of, for example, Batman. Not only are they different in the material circumstance of their origins, but they belong to entirely different orders of narrative object and interpretive community. Yet, making the claim that Batman and Odysseus, or Beowulf and the Incredible Hulk, or Red Riding Hood and Spiderman, belong in each case in the same literary category of mythology and folklore as each other is now treated as an unremarkable and uncontroversial contention across much of pop-cultural discourse. Quite apart from the critical shallowness of such unsubstantiated claims, there is a danger, as Ong points out, in collecting the products of a mass-industrial entertainment industry under the rubric of *völkisch* culture. When a sufficient mass of people have become convinced that superhero fables are indeed a form of North

[18] Not least Roland Barthes: "The cultural work done in the past by gods and epic sagas is now done by laundry-detergent commercials and comic-strip characters" (*Mythologies*, 89). Also Grant Morrison himself, in *Supergods* (2011).

American folk mythology, then superhero narratives, with all the attendant fascist leanings identified by Wertham, begin to inscribe the qualities of a new North American Volk. This new image of the Volk is grounded in primary-coloured heroic fantasy and detached from the material histories of capitalism, colonialism, dispossession, and oppression that produced contemporary North American culture, with all of its unresolved tensions. A society whose ideals of truth and justice are upheld by a Superman who unquestionably represents "the American Way" is not a society that is ready to confront its own participation in and responsibility for slavery and the genocide of indigenous people.

The political cynicism of the British Invasion writers, and their general disillusionment with the figure of the superhero, generated a rush of comics that attacked the idea that superhero comics were a kind of fantastical modern folklore. *Watchmen* is such a book, as are *Lazarus Churchyard*, and *The Boys*. Morrison's early work, such as *The Invisibles* (1994-2000) and *The Filth* (2002-2003) show superheroism as a morally fraught condition, with the heroes cast respectively as either marginalized outsiders rebelling against the oppressive force of a conservative society and often forced into doing morally unpalatable things to survive, or an unaccountable superpowered police force in service to the preservation of the status quo. Gaiman's *The Sandman* went in a different direction, setting out its own mythopoeic history of the world in mythological terms that were nevertheless detached from any singularly nationalist concepts of folklore. Later works of the British Invasion writers often reimagined the superhero as a more or less explicitly divine figure, as with *All-Star Superman* (2005-2008), by Morrison and Quitely, and *Supergod* (2009), by Ellis. Grant Morrison's non-fiction book *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (2011), takes as its critical premise the idea that superhero comics have filled a space in the public imagination left empty by the secular humanism of Enlightenment thought, as avatars of particular qualities and aspects of the human condition. It is in this double reaction against, on the one hand, the Enlightenment disenchantment of the world, and on the other, the Nietzschean hero-worship of the fascistic volksich super-man, that the writers of the British Invasion created a model of the superhero that owes more to Romantic and even

Baroque traditions of heroic literature than it does to classical or neo-classical conceptions of some idealized human paragon. I will describe this problematic lineage traced through the Romantic and the Baroque in more detail in the next chapter, but for now it is enough to make the claim that while this attempt to refigure the superhero was not always successful in the context of individual works by the British Invasion writers, the summed total effect of their jaded analytical perspective, and the resonance it found with readers, forced a shift in the moral complexity and political depth of superhero stories with which the recent and overwhelming wave of cinematic adaptations has yet to catch up.

Chapter Two: The Invasion Writers and the Literary Tradition

2.1 Restless Spirits of the Twentieth Century: Modernism and the British Invasion

2.2 A Baroque Postmodern

2.3 Images and Symbols: Modernism, Post-Modernism, and the British Invasion.

2.4. Dialectic Dissonance: *Watchmen* and *Doktor Sleepless*

somewhere in sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

--Yeats, W.B., “The Second Coming”

2.1 Restless Spirits of the Twentieth Century: Modernism and the British Invasion

The writers of the British Invasion are creatures of the twentieth century, rooted in the historical and material circumstances of their origin. Throughout their most important works, even when those works are set far into the future or in the distant medieval past, their themes distinctly reflect the broader literary movements and preoccupations of the twentieth century. The dawn of the twentieth century signalled the arrival of the Modernist movement in art and literature, a transatlantic shift away from the aesthetics of the Romantic and Victorian periods into radically new stylistic territories. The modernist exchange of writers and artists between the US and UK during the early twentieth century created a generational shift in expectations around literary production. Modernism was in part also a reaction to the increasing industrialization of the Western countries, and the new modes of living that these brought to the inhabitants of Britain and America. The destructive imperial adventurism of the First World War marked a moment of violent change and renewal in the cultures of the West, and the English-language literary production of the Modernist era reflects its destabilizing and demoralizing influence. As with other questions of aesthetic style and its relation to periodicity, Modernism was not simply a bounded era wherein literary production was marked by a few stylistic or thematic preoccupations. Modernism heralded the arrival of a new epistemic sensibility in English literature, in which older traditions of Romanticist or Victorian aesthetics were excoriated as moribund, and the urgent need for radically new aesthetic principles began to be recognized. The parallels between the British Invasion writers and the US/UK modernisms of the early twentieth century are numerous and compelling. As with the modernists, the British Invasion marked a moment when the epistemic and stylistic foundations of comics art on both sides of the Atlantic would be subjected to fierce interrogation by a cluster of radically innovative writers and artists dedicated to challenging the aesthetic and thematic assumptions that governed the production of superhero stories. In this section, I argue that the British Invasion writers

were responsible for a shift in American superhero comics that echoes the shift in English literature produced by the writers of the Modernist movement.

There are five clear characteristics of Modernist literature that emerge in the comics works of the British Invasion writers. Firstly, a tendency towards the pursuit of mimesis through parallax representations of multiple subjectivities. Secondly, a generic focus on the industrialized, technologically-mediated city as the exemplary site of contested human subjectivity and contemporary selfhood. Thirdly, a thematic preoccupation with the alienation, disorientation, and trauma produced by the experience of late modernity's social organization. Fourthly, a predisposition towards dense intertextuality, and the weaving together of numerous references and allusions within the fabric of a single comics text. Finally, a drive towards stylistic and formal innovation that represents a radical departure from the dominant established modes and genres of literary production. These formal and thematic parallels between the US/UK modernisms of the early twentieth century and the comics authored by the British Invasion writers reveal a persistent and ongoing fascination with a range of Modernist concerns. Foremost amongst these, the issues of alienation and the formation of the alienated subject are central to understanding the connection between the Modernist movement and the British Invasion of American comics.

Any definition of literary Modernism must contend with the tension between understanding it as a distinct period of artistic production located in the early twentieth century, and understanding it as an interconnected web of aesthetic styles, epistemic perspectives, and philosophical positions. The periodicity of Modernism is the least certain of its characteristics, as the precursors to Modernist ideas are visible in European cultures from the middle of the nineteenth century (Singal 7), and it might well be argued that postmodernism represents less a break from Modernist traditions and more of a turn within them, extending the Modernist period into the present day. As Singal points out, it is important not to confuse the specific term Modernism with the broader term modernity, which refers more generally to a post-Enlightenment era of advancing technological and

cultural progress of which Victorianism was, at the end of the nineteenth century, only the latest iteration. Modernism can be understood, in part, as a reaction against the changes wrought by modernity on human society (Singal 21).

Literary Modernism in English literature emerged primarily as a counter-reaction to the prevailing cultural orthodoxies of Victorianism whose ethos was "centered upon the classic bourgeois values of thrift, diligence, and persistence, so important for success in a burgeoning capitalist economy, along with an immense optimism about the progress that industrialization seemed sure to bring" (Singal 9). Victorianism drew heavily on Neoclassical influences in terms of both its artistic production and its social organization. The burgeoning capitalism of the Victorian era was founded upon the colonial practices of the British Empire, extracting wealth from colonies abroad and transferring it to the imperial core of the British Isles. Industrialization, which began in the UK in the previous century, had by the end of the nineteenth century accelerated to the point that British society itself was being radically transformed to better suit the needs of the elite capitalist classes. The art and literature favoured by the Victorian era, which presented a utopian view of the possibilities of an industrialized future, saw its contemporary relevance being rapidly outpaced by the deleterious changes to the lived experience of British people dwelling in the alienating cities of the industrial era. The philosophical foundations of Victorianism relied upon a form of scientized Christianity in which the rule of a loving God was visible in a system of universal and unchanging natural laws. This belief system gave rise to a "corresponding conviction that humankind was capable of arriving at a unified and fixed set of truths about all aspects of life, and an insistence on preserving absolute standards based on a radical dichotomy between that which was deemed "human" and that regarded as "animal"" (Singal 9). This distinction between the human and the animal was at the root of Victorianism's internal justification for the horrors of colonialism. The essence of humanity was inscribed as the rejection or suppression of base animal instincts and behaviour. Naturally, for the Victorians, their own cultural values were held up as the epitome of human aspiration and those of the societies they saw as primitive in relation to themselves were

regarded as no more than animals, with the concomitant dehumanization that such a perspective entails. This dualism fed not only into nationalist ideas about British superiority, but provided a firm philosophical foundation for the propagation of white supremacist ideas. The racialization of human beings into a categorical spectrum of value with black at the bottom and white at the top may not have been a strictly Victorian invention, but it was seized upon by Victorian scientists and thinkers as the best explanation for their own self-evident superiority, and the natural reason for their domination of indigenous peoples around the world. This hierarchizing of human value was not limited to colonized peoples and rival foreign powers, but was also applied internally within Britain along class lines as a justification for the continued and increasing exploitation of Britain's working poor by the wealthy. The Victorians reasoned into being a world in which the upper classes of England were natural successors to the classical dominance of the Roman Empire, by dint of their superior civilization based on devotion to Christian values and scientific reason. The Victorian episteme offered its exponents "moral certainty, spiritual balm, and the hope that civilization might at last rid itself of the barbaric baggage remaining from humankind's dark, preindustrial past" (Singal 10). The barbaric baggage in question here is the whole sweep of human history prior to the Victorian period, excepting a mythologized version of the classical era, ahistorically upheld as a golden age of reason, liberty, and proper morality.

Victorian-era literary production, overlapping the tail-end of the Romantic period, was largely preoccupied with mimesis; the faithful reproduction, imitation, or mimicry of reality in literature. Language was the foremost tool by which the truth of the world could be described, and the interpretation of an objective reality by the subject of the poet "affirm a continuity between the poet and his world" (Shaw 323). The more closely a piece of writing was able to reproduce the precise contours of objective reality, through description or interpretive analogy, the more value it had and the clearer the poet's connection to the world became. This conception of mimesis dates back to the very earliest surviving work of literary theory, Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 350 B.C.E), in which he argues that the value of works of art is found in how they "imitate different things, or imitate

them by different means, or in a different manner" (Aristotle 3). Aristotle finds a general susceptibility in humans for the pleasures of artful imitation, where even something obnoxious or repulsive in real life, like a cadaver, can still be entertaining in the form of its exact mimetic representation. This, he argues, is because even the least sophisticated minds love learning and in such cases, "they learn as they look" (Aristotle 7). For Aristotle, all drama, and by extension all literature, is characterized by how well it succeeds at mimesis. This conception, of the value of art as its mimetic fidelity, became influential in British literary culture following the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the Reformation, and remained so into the Victorian era, as evidenced by a critical lineage for mimesis that runs through several centuries. It is present in Joseph Addison's letters to the *Spectator* (1712) where he describes the human propensity to find "delight in all the actions and arts of mimicry" (Searle 310). It is referenced in Edward Young's letter to a patron, "Conjectures on Original Composition" (1795) when he admits that "imitation must be the lot (and often an honorable lot it is) of most writers" (Searle 354). Exact mimetic representation is the subject of William Hazlitt's essay "On Imitation" (1816) in which he recapitulates Aristotle when he argues that: "Imitation renders an object, displeasing in itself, a source of pleasure not by repetition of the same idea, but by suggesting new ideas, by detecting new properties, and endless shades of difference, just as a close and continued contemplation of the object itself would do" (Bate 298). This descriptive abstraction of a supposed objective reality allowed the Victorian poets to uphold the value of language as the most important tool of truth, while at the same time creating space for multiple interpretive schemes to coexist with each other. As Shaw argues, "[o]ne of the primary tasks Victorian poetics sets itself is to keep recreating other interpretative models and insisting on them as valid forms of imitation during the domination of the descriptive model of language and truth" (Shaw 303). While language remains the dominant (if not only) means by which reality can be described and expressed, it can be interpreted and then mimetically imitated in many different ways, according to the guiding principles of Victorian literature. Mimesis has remained an influential idea in Anglophone literary production since the Victorian period, but the advent of Modernism

shifted its emphasis away from attempts to reproduce objective reality towards an effort to capture reality as a sum total of numerous subjective lived experiences.

Modernism emerged as a counter-reaction to the smugly self-assured certainties of the Victorian era, and in particular to two distinct but related ideas. Firstly, the notion that the proper function of art was to exactly reproduce the objective details of reality through mimesis, as described above. Secondly, the idea that scientific epistemology, attached to the notion of objectivity, was capable of generating any universal moral truth. The early stirrings of discontent with this latter idea began to appear in the late eighteenth century, and Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lying in the Non-Moral Sense" (1873) is an example of the philosophical dissatisfaction with the complacent epistemologies of the Victorian era that were beginning to make themselves felt even before the turn of the century.

Nietzsche was particularly concerned with the problem of how people arrive at the conclusion that an idea or a characterization of reality is a truth, and how they come to attach moral value to the truths so generated. He points out that: "[H]uman beings allow themselves to be lied to in dreams every night of their lives, without their moral sense ever seeking to prevent this" (Leitch 765). If truth is a function of morality, this existence of dreams undermines any human claim to be moral, truthful creatures. Nietzsche argues that the "mysterious drive for truth" (766), the propulsive force behind the projects of science and reason, gives an unwarranted fixity to ideas by designating them in inflexible language that legislates and legitimizes their use in specific ways. These kinds of use-cases are unjustified because the social construction of the meanings of language creates words as expedient and ultimately unreliable shortcuts to the things they signify, especially so when the things signified are abstract concepts such as honesty. He refers to a "qualitas occulta" (767) or hidden property, that conceals the nature of such words as merely arbitrary, provisional, and contingent metaphorical instruments that conveniently designate imaginary concepts as real things. More fundamental than the drive for truth is the human drive to form metaphors, which

gives rise to language itself. This necessary feature of how humans make meaning through language has consequences over time for how we conceive of the things so designated: "[T]ruths are illusions of which we have forgotten they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour, coins, which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer coins" (Leitch 768). The category of truth can only emerge from an elision of the essentially metaphorical basis of all language. The project of reason is founded upon this category of truth, without recognizing that it is simply an abstraction by which the inherently chaotic and subjective data of sense perception are rendered "as something firmer, more general, more familiar, more human, and hence as something regulatory and imperative" (768). This argument for the impossibility of truth's representation in language constitutes an existential threat to the Victorian school of literary theory that regards mimesis, and the true descriptive imitation of objective reality it seeks, as the necessary goal and defining quality of literature. Nietzsche produced the earliest significant theoretical attack on the originally Aristotelian and later Neoclassical notion that literature is driven by the desire to reproduce reality, and while his arguments were only rarely cited among Anglophone writers engaged in Modernist literary production, the idea remained influential and played a crucial role in shaping the radically disruptive literary theories of the poststructuralists almost a century later.

One of the immediate aesthetic consequences of this post-Victorian turn away from the idea that truth could be expressed in a way that was at the same time singular, inflexible, objective, and universal was a shift towards the representation of reality through an aggregation of individualized interior perspectives, or parallax. This mode of multiplicitous narration is found most clearly in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1931), but is also a significant stylistic element of T.S. Eliot's 434-line poem *The Waste Land* (1922) and James Joyce's short story collection *Dubliners* (1914). Joyce's other major works sometimes dip into parallax narration, but the collection of short stories that comprise *Dubliners* represents an early attempt at capturing the reality of city life in the early twentieth century through a range of subjective perspectives that have almost no

contact with each other. The aggregated sense of Dublin built up through these multiple narratives taken together represents, to the Modernist sensibility, a more faithful reproduction of the life of the city than any singular perspective could ever offer. In *The Waste Land*, the voices of different characters drift in and out of the narration without dialogue tags or any other identifying context. The city of London is represented, outside of the speaker's narration, through an undifferentiable slurry of overlapping interjections by unknown speakers.

A preoccupation with the city as the definitive site of human drama and destiny, with the specificities of urban cultures and the limits and affordances of living as a part of the massed millions of the metropolitan precincts, marks the work of many of the preeminent writers of the Modernist movement in English literature. As Garry Leonard argues, "The experience of modernity is fostered by the rise of the modern city, and works of modernism do not so much convey this experience as they betray the strain of surviving it and detail their various strategies for doing so" (Leonard 79). For the Modernists, there was a new kind of consciousness that was unique to modern urban life, and it exacted a psychic toll on the inhabitants of cities that literature needed to explore. Eliot and Joyce both found things to fear in the increasing domination of human lives by the culture of city living, but neither was able to entirely quell their fascination at the tantalizing possibilities of redemption and renewal that urban life seemed to offer. A deep pessimism about the role of the modern industrialized city in shaping and limiting the lives and experiences of its citizens is present in both *The Waste Land* and *Dubliners*, but is more clearly marked in the former.

One of the recurring textual features of *The Waste Land* is the expression "Unreal City" which appears complete twice, (*TWL* 60, 207) and then a third time, in a list of cities, without the word "City" attached (*TWL* 376). The first instance of these is followed two lines later by the image of London Bridge, (*TWL* 62) symbolic of disastrous collapse in the children's nursery rhyme, and then on the next line by a reference to Dante's *Inferno* (1314), "I had not thought death had undone so many"(*TWL* 63), a reference highlighted by Eliot himself in the "Notes on The Waste Land" section

that followed the poem as it was originally published. In Dante, the multitude in question is the procession of damned souls marching into the depths of hell. In *The Waste Land*, the crowd is the early morning rush of bankers, clerks and other office workers of central London on their way to begin the working day. Eliot's own notes on the text must be treated as authorial trespass and with due caution, as they were added afterwards to bulk out the page count for publication, and Robert Day has argued for a more literal and mundane reading of these lines, “The density of such crowds is typical of the urban rush hour; "death" is their fate, a living death in the Hell of the City; "sighs, short and infrequent" may owe as much to smog as to Dante” (Day 287). Nevertheless, the parallels of the imagery establish an unsettling perspective on life in Eliot's Unreal City. The lifeless, hopeless sterility of the environment and its populace is further underlined by the description of the crowd's progress, “And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. / Flowed up the hill and down King William Street, To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours / With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine” (*TWL* 65-68). In *The Waste Land*, the city of London is the urban counterpart and successor to the “dark Satanic mills” of William Blake’s *Jerusalem* (Blake 8), its infernal character signified by the physical and moral degradation of its inhabitants. *Dubliners* likewise reveals a cynical view of the effect that life in a city has on its inhabitants. From the two boys at play who narrowly escape the corrupted and corrupting attentions of an implied paedophile in “An Encounter” to the tragic figure of Little Chandler in “A Little Cloud” whose ambitions of becoming a notable man of letters are crushed by the impossibility of their integration with the requirements of his daily life, the city is a site where innocence is already lost and dreams are necessarily crushed.

The Dubliners themselves are shaped and limited by their urban environment every bit as much as the denizens of the Unreal City. Brewster Ghiselin argues that, “Each story in *Dubliners* is an action defining amid different circumstances of degradation and difficulty in the environment a frustration or defeat of the soul” (Ghiselin 106). This analysis applies to the main characters throughout the collection of stories, among them the eponymous heroine of “Eveline”, unable to realise her dream of fleeing to the tropics because of a promise made to her mother, and Jimmy, the

impotently competitive protagonist of “After the Race” who “did not know exactly who was winning, but he knew that he was losing” (Joyce 31). The theme of aspiration thwarted is a unifying feature of the short stories in *Dubliners*, and it echoes the grinding down of the inhabitants of Eliot’s Unreal City. These constant defeats and frustrations have an abrasive effect on the system of values and morality that mediates the behaviour of individuals and holds society together. Interpersonal relationships become poisoned and fester, bitterness and hypocrisy grow rife, breeding isolation. In “Two Gallants”, Lenehan reflects on his own experiences of friendship and romance within the urban culture, “He had walked the streets long enough with friends and with girls. He knew what those friends were worth: he knew the girls too. Experience had embittered his heart against the world” (Joyce 39). Isolated from genuine and worthwhile human interaction for their whole lives, the reactions of characters who mistakenly believe they have found compassionate human contact come across as inappropriate and catch others by surprise, as in “A Painful Case” for the deeply miserable Mrs Sinico and the unfortunate Mr Duffy. “One night during which she had shown every sign of unusual excitement, Mrs Sinico caught up his hand passionately and pressed it to her cheek. Mr Duffy was very much surprised. Her interpretation of his words disillusioned him” (Joyce 80). This misunderstanding leads to the woman's (implied) suicide and by the story's closing line returns Duffy to the default state of the atomised city-dweller, “He could hear nothing: the night was perfectly silent. He listened again: perfectly silent. He felt that he was alone” (Joyce 84).

In *The Waste Land* the helpless isolation of the city's inhabitants is a by-product of a generalised spiritual sickness in Western societies, a fall from grace directly caused by life in the hostile urban environment:

> Above the antique mantel was displayed
> As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
> The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
> So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale

Filled all the desert with inviolable voice

And still she cried, and still the world pursues (*TWL* 97-102)

The "sylvan scene" refers to Book Four of *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, which is primarily concerned with the introduction of a prelapsarian Adam and Eve to the Garden of Eden while the shape-shifting Satan plots his revenge on God. This allusion ties the connotations of this passage directly to the foundational loss of innocence and subsequent collapse into sin in Christian mythology. "Philomel" refers to the tale of Philomela from ancient Greek mythology which features rape, mutilation, a story woven into a tapestry, cannibalism, and the divinely ordained metamorphosis of one character into a nightingale doomed to sing their sad, solitary song forever. Referring to this passage, Judith Hooper argues that: "The most important symbol of the spiritual decline of Western civilization in *The Waste Land* is, of course, the desert, desiccated, sterile, and unable to satisfy the needs of the thirsting soul" (Hooper 20). The city as a lifeless desert, a hostile wasteland, is the defining (even titular) image of Eliot's poem, and it finds a striking resonance in many of the comics works of the British Invasion authors. From Rorschach's opening meditation in *Watchmen* on the moral squalor of New York's inhabitants, to Spider Jerusalem's baffled rage at how the inhabitants of The City can continue to willingly vote for self-evidently evil presidential candidates, to the analogic vision of London as a parasitic alien monster granted to Dane McGowan by Tom O'Bedlam as part of his initiation in *The Invisibles*, the city as the site in which the human soul is placed in greatest peril is a common thread running through the British Invasion works.

The moral decay and emotional numbness caused by city life are further evidenced in Eliot's description of the loveless tryst between the typist and her estate-agent paramour, "Flushed and decided, he assaults at once, / Exploring hands encounter no defence; / His vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference" (*TWL* 239-242). There are no echoes of the poetry of Romanticism here, just the blunt and ugly recounting of an everyday reality. Once the man has left, the typist expresses some mild relief and merely, "Paces about her room again, alone, / She

smoothes her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone" (*TWL* 254-256), finding comfort in the compulsive superficiality of personal grooming and the technological delivery of recorded music. Explaining the presence of Tiresias the bi-gendered blind seer in this scene, Eliot's own notes on the poem make reference to a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which translates as "To wise Tiresias' judgement: he should know / What love was like, from either point of view. Once he had come upon two serpents mating / In the green woods, and struck them from each other" (*TWL* 218), an allusion that betrays a fundamentally unsympathetic hostility towards both these alienated and isolated lovers. Indeed, Eliot seems to evince a certain level of elitist disdain for the common populace of the Unreal City, both en masse and as individuals, as he recounts babbling taproom conversations in the latter part of "A Game Of Chess" (TWL 139-172) and in his haughty condescension towards the "human engine" (TWL 216) that destroys individuality to make the city run. The sheer density of allusion and intertextuality in the poem, which require a substantial knowledge of English literary history in order to parse successfully, is deliberately exclusionary of those without an extensive literary education. Andreas Huyssen argues that: "Modernists such as T.S. Eliot and Ortega y Gasset emphasized time and time again that it was their mission to salvage the purity of high art from the encroachments of . . . modern mass culture" (Huyssen 163). Eliot's own inflated image of himself and to some extent of the other Modernist iconoclasts who were breaking down the bad art of the Victorian era, lends his work a somewhat narcissistic quality when considered in this light. Even critics attempting to rehabilitate Eliot's reputation in this regard, such as David Chinitz, have conceded that, "central to twentieth-century literary history as it is currently represented is the image of Eliot as the hero or antihero of a losing struggle to defend a pristine and sacralized high art from the threatening pollution of "lower levels" of culture" (Chinitz 236). Among the UK Modernists, Eliot was far from alone in seeing his writing as an act of defence and defiance against a more easily accessible and populist literary culture. The "Bloomsbury Set" in general, largely Cambridge-educated and drawn from the upper strata of pre- and interwar British society, were emblematic of British Modernism's iconoclastic and innovative rejection of Victorian aesthetic

norms, while still maintaining a distinct hostility towards those areas or genres of Modernist art which they regarded as bourgeois or insufficiently refined. Much of their literary production was, like Eliot's, calibrated specifically to exclude those who did not share their highly educated and mannered perspective on literary culture. Joyce, conversely, though no less the literary intellectual and ground-breaking modernist experimenter, subverts and ridicules this snobbish elitism within the narratives of *Dubliners* by pointedly showing the hypocrisy of those highly educated few who consider themselves to be superior to the ordinary folk. In particular, Mr Duffy of "A Painful Case" is explicitly guilty of this kind of callous and unempathetic intellectual grandeur:

> "The workmen's discussions, he said, were too timorous; the interest they took in the question of wages was inordinate. He felt that they were hard-featured realists and that they resented an exactitude which was the produce of a leisure not within their reach. No social revolution, he told her, would be likely to strike Dublin for some centuries. She asked him why did he not write out his thoughts. For what, he asked her, with careful scorn. To compete with phrase-mongers incapable of thinking consecutively for sixty seconds? To submit himself to the criticisms of an obtuse middle class which entrusted its morality to policemen and its fine arts to impresarios?" (Joyce 79)

Duffy's hypocrisy and failure to take moral responsibility for himself is later underlined by his reaction to news of Mrs Sinico's death, "Evidently she had been unfit to live, without any strength of purpose, an easy prey to habits, one of the wrecks on which civilisation has been reared" (Joyce 83). Although he feels haunted by her ghostly presence and guilty for her death, he is unable to imagine taking any other course of action than the one he took (Joyce 84). Where Eliot scorns and seems to write off the possibility of any moral redemption or awakening for the urban working and lower middle classes, Joyce locates the moral failures of industrial society in those who have the education, status, and leisure to engage in intellectual and political issues but who dismiss the practical concerns of those they deem lesser. While the snobbery and elitism of the Modernist

movement is evident in many Modernist works, it is by no means a universal feature of Modernist writing.

An alternative, anti-urban way of life in *The Waste Land* is represented by Phlebas, the drowned Phoenician sailor who shares a name through transliteration with Philebus, the Socratic interlocutor who argued unsuccessfully for the primacy of pleasure over the pursuit of knowledge. Having forgotten the importance of "profit and loss" (*TWL* 314), the driving force of the City's power, in death he exists only as a cautionary tale for like-minded idealists tempted to steer against the prevailing currents of the era, "O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you" (*TWL* 320, 321). The figure of Phlebas is an ironic surrogate for the figure of the Modernist poet, a brave soul freed from the merely pragmatic economic concerns of the ordinary folk and who finds purpose in setting themselves on the course of most resistance. The image of his bones, scoured clean by the sea, while warning of the dangers of a wayward imagination, are also for Cleanth Brooks, an echo of ancient symbols of renewal and revitalization: "The drowned Phoenician Sailor is a type of the fertility god whose image was thrown into the sea annually as a symbol of the death of summer" (Brooks 142). This mythic allusion points to the eventual destination of the poem's thematic journey, as a heavily coded guide to the conditions of redemption both for English literature and life, more generally, under modernity. It is only through the death of the old, tired, and obsolete, and the birth of new and more vigorous forms that English literature regains its vitality. It is only through the death of the social and cultural forms that constructed the alienating but highly profitable industrial cities of modernity that human beings might be redeemed of their flat and empty existences and find some redemptive meaning in their renewed relation to one another.

While both *The Waste Land* and *Dubliners* focus on the lives and urban cultures of specific cities (London and Dublin respectively), the strangely uniform universality of the experience of living

in cities no matter where they are is a key element of both works. In *Dubliners* it is most clearly evidenced in “A Little Cloud”, during Chandler's conversation with Gallaher:

> 'Tell me,' he said, 'is it true that Paris is so... immoral as they say?'
>
> Ignatius Gallaher made a catholic gesture with his right arm.
>
> 'Every place is immoral,' he said, 'Of course you do find spicy bits in Paris'...
>
> 'Then it is an immoral city,' said Little Chandler, with timid insistence - 'I mean, compared with London or Dublin?'
>
> 'London!' said Ignatius Gallaher. 'It's six of one and half-a-dozen of the other.'
>
> (Joyce 53-54)

Through the eyes of the precocious Gallaher, all cities have an immoral aspect but none are so different from each other, so much more sunk in iniquity or conversely free from degradation that they can make any special claim to it. In *The Waste Land*, this same theme of the essential universality of urban precincts arises with the third instance of the term Unreal to describe the City, “What is the city over the mountains / Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air / Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal” (*TWL* 371-376) The first line suggests the hope that the “city over the mountains” must be somehow better or different than the familiar, a reforming of the known into something new. The “Falling towers” is a reference to the tarot cards from the first section of the poem, specifically in this case The Tower of the major arcana, itself an allusion to the biblical Tower of Babel, and an image of entropic change and renewal through the destruction of existing structures. The list of cities and the dwindling way that they are grouped is also highly suggestive: Jerusalem was and is a focal point of all three Abrahamic religions, for different reasons. Athens was the cradle of democracy and philosophy. Alexandria was the site of the burned Great Library of antiquity, a lost centre of learning and classical wisdom. All three of these cities have been, in different ways and different times, a crossroads of Eastern and Western cultures. On the second line of the list, Vienna was the birthplace in modernity of Freudian

psychoanalysis, the science of interiority, and London is the global locus of business and finance (or was, in the early 1920s). All these cities have produced something with a tangible impact felt in every other city around the world. They demonstrate the fundamental interconnectedness of all cities. Unreal, on the final line of the list, stands for the new universal alienation of the estranged city-dweller, divorced from authentic human contact by the dehumanizing pressure of proximity to great multitudes of people and a society fractured and fragmented by urban modernity.

The Waste Land and *Dubliners* both engage with the characteristic Modernist concerns about the nature of cities and their physical, emotional and psychological effects on the people that live in them. Although capable of generating great public goods and rich imaginative landscapes, urban centres simultaneously have an alienating and isolating effect on the individuals that populate them. Neither Eliot's poem nor Joyce's collection of short stories ever fall into the atavistic trap of believing that there was some mythical better time before the rise of the city-dweller, but both identify the city as the site in which the problems of modernity are most heightened, and through which those problems must be addressed if they are to be resolved. This Modernist staging of the city and its alienating effects as the site at which modernity must be judged and ultimately reformed resonates throughout the history of twentieth century literature and into the works of the authors of the British Invasion of American comics. The baroque cornucopian diversity of The City in *Transmetropolitan* is an extreme and hyperbolized version of Eliot's Unreal City. It is a place that traumatizes and continually shocks its inhabitants, degrading and debasing them with each new futuristic turn of the screw, a theme explored most concretely in the opening pages of *Transmetropolitan* 41, "There is a Reason". Many of The City's inhabitants are siloed away from each other in gated communities of interest or affinity, from the transients and the foglets to the reserves for the rumps of outdated civilizations and the various extremist Christian and other religious sects. Outside of these communities and inhabiting the dangerous and deranging terrain of the city streets are the common citizens, the "New Scum" as Spider Jerusalem characterizes them (*Transmetropolitan* 19). These urban survivors are those who have become anaesthetized to the

horrors produced by The City's pitiless march into the cyberpunk future. In this fallen state of apathetic numbness to their own political and social position, Jerusalem finds in the New Scum a hope of graceless salvation: "These are the new streets of this city, where the New Scum try to live. You and me. And here in these streets are the things that we want: sex and birth, votes and traits, money and guilt, television and teddy bears. But all we've actually got is each other. You decide what that means" (*Transmetropolitan* 21). Drowning together in the profusion of competing desires, which are either unattainable aspirations or meaningless mundanities, the New Scum form a de facto outcast community of their own. The powers that administrate and enforce The City's laws are depicted as universally corrupt in their dealings. From the violence of the police forces during the Angels 8 (*Transmetropolitan* 3) and Dante Street riots (*Transmetropolitan* 28), to the mendacious contortions of the presidential candidates Jerusalem interviews (*Transmetropolitan* 4 and 59), and even in the figure of the vengeful sapient police dog, Stomponato (*Transmetropolitan* 10), the authorities of The City are rotten, vicious, and wholly irredeemable. While this depiction of the modern city is taken to extremes relative to the more moderate critiques of the Modernist writers, it shares a lineage with them in its ambivalent perspective. Although Spider Jerusalem regularly expounds on his hatred for the city and all who live there in his customarily hyperbolic terms, "One day I'm going to drop a bomb on this city. A *contraceptive* bomb" (*Transmetropolitan* 9), he is also attached to and even dependent upon the city as the context which gives meaning to his own life. His poetic recognition of The City he both loves and loathes[19], as the only social environment capable of giving life worthwhile purpose, recapitulates the paradoxical relationship of the alienated high modernists. The scorn of Jerusalem (himself named for a city of historical significance) for the inhabitants of The City is an exaggerated echo of the disdain with which *The Waste Land* looks upon the inhabitants of the Unreal London.

[19] Appendix, Fig. 2.1.

Intertextuality is such a central element of *The Waste Land*'s literary value that it has been the subject of countless journal articles, books, and dissertations. Almost every one of the 434 lines of Eliot's poem contains at least one, if not more, allusion to another work of art or literature. From the opening line's reference to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the poem embarks on an allusive odyssey that encompasses the Christian Bible, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Shakespeare and Milton, Ovid and Virgil, St Augustine, Richard Wagner, the major arcana of the Tarot, as well as poets as diverse as Charles Baudelaire, Andrew Marvell, Edmund Spenser, Paul-Marie Verlaine, Oliver Goldsmith, Sappho, Herman Hesse, and Gerard de Nerval, and playwrights including Thomas Kyd and John Webster. These are only the allusions admitted to in the poem's notes, as provided by Eliot himself. A full accounting of *The Waste Land*'s intertextual acrobatics would require a chapter in itself. The effects of this hyperdense intertextuality are multiple, and of a piece with the poem's theme. The chaotic avalanche of allusions is a formal counterpart to the thematic focus on the fragmentation of society under modernity, but this fitting of fragmentary form to fragmented subject reveals a paradoxical underlying though indeterminate unity. Howarth argues that: "the more the poem's fragmented quotations and borrowings are explore, the more every single detail also seems twisted together into a cat's-cradle of implications and cross-references" (Howarth 443). While there is no singular central voice nor any figure resembling a protagonist (other than perhaps the unnamed, unknown speaker of the poem), this absence allows for the individual elements in the collage of various voices and references that the poem collects to come together as more or less equal pieces without a hierarchy of significance or value attached. This structure defers, or even denies, the possibility of any neat closure of the poem's meaning by a single interpretation, and so even while this structure unifies the fragments, it prevents the accomplishment of any final, unified understanding of its meaning and gestures instead towards an affective expression unrealisable in plain language. "By being that which escapes completion, the fragment is never subject to the rule of any all-embracing unity; instead its discontinuous collage expresses both the pathos of unredeemable trauma or exile, and the modern city's shocking, resistant, untotalisable freedom"

(Howarth 444). Rather than ordered and clear assemblages of meaning-making references, *The Waste Land*'s cavalcade of allusions generates something more like a set of loose organising motifs, which include "the simultaneity of time, the grail quest, and the living dead" (446). These motifs in turn necessarily inform any reading of the poem's thematics through their recurrence in the text. *The Waste Land* presents a world in which all poetry and literature (at least across European traditions) happens at once and is experienced all at once, outside of any linear flow of time. It identifies the Arthurian myth of the holy grail as the defining British mythology within this uchronal whirl of Englsh literary influences, and it meditates through numerous permutations on the meaningfulness of the distinction between life and death for figures as disparate as the Cumaean Sybil, Phlebas the drowned Phoenician, and the modern-day inhabitants of the city of London. The aggregated whole generated by the collision of these often-contradictory fragments of spatially and temporally distanced cultures amounts to a signifying totality that cannot be understood simply by unpicking and tracing the origins and histories of its component parts. This irreducibility of the poem's meaning-making work is, as Howarth points out (446), a signature feature of Romantic art as defined by Schlegel, which "delights in indissoluble mixtures, all contrarieties: nature and art, poetry and prose, seriousness and mirth, recollection and anticipation, spirituality and sensuality, terrestrial and celestial, life and death" (Schlegel 342). Despite Eliot's "much-vaunted hostility" (Howarth 442) towards Romanticism, *The Waste Land* recapitulates and carries to extremes this core Romantic principle of folding multiple oppositions into a conglomeration whose shape and structure can only be understood as containing and expressing each pole of these constituting contradictions without collapsing them. While unmistakeably Romantic in its organisation, *The Waste Land* also embodies the Modernist conviction that art works "by fusing together metaphorically the objective and subjective, the empirical and the introspective – breaking apart conventional beliefs and rejoining the resulting fragments in a manner that creates relationships and meanings not suspected before" (Singal 15). This remaking of sundered fragments into a new and fully integrated whole describes not only the formal structure of *The Waste Land* but also its central thematic concern. The panoply of

intertextual allusions is itself a kind of irreducible and indeterminate allegory for the confusion of isolated, atomised, individuality that constitutes human social life in the urban deserts of modernity. In the next section of this chapter, I argue that this kind of allegorical insolubility owes more to the Baroque than it does to Romanticism, and that while Howarth is right to identify Eliot's debt to the Romantics, the Romantics themselves owed the organizing principles of their own artistic production to the work of Baroque artists over a century earlier. Eliot, a scholar of the English permutation of the Baroque, as demonstrated by his essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), adapted not simply Romantic poetry, but the aesthetics and episteme of Baroque art in the construction of *The Waste Land*.

The influence of this Modernist predilection for dense intertextuality is perhaps the most obvious of the signature features of English literary Modernism to be reproduced by the comics works of the writers of the British Invasion. *The Invisibles*, written by Grant Morrison, is packed with allusions to the work of writers, artists, and radical political groups, as well as being heavily laced with references to a number of different mythological traditions. A conservative and incomplete list of allusions within the comic's run would include direct and indirect references to the works of Peter Kropotkin, William Burroughs, Terrence McKenna, Timothy Leary, Philip K Dick, Anthony Burgess, the Marquis de Sade, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, H.P. Lovecraft, Michael Moorcock, George Orwell, Joseph Campbell, Aleister Crowley, William Shakespeare, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Anton Wilson, Sylvia Plath, Tom Wolfe, Douglas Rushkoff, Bryan Talbot, William Blake, Thomas De Quincey, Ken Wilber, and John Lennon. The comic also references or otherwise brings into the story a huge number of fringe subversive or revolutionary political, spiritual, and artistic groups and movements, often but not always anarchistic, including but not limited to Romanticism, Situationism, Neoism, Dadaism, UAW/MF, Discordianism, Gnosticism, Vodou, Thelema, chaos magic, Aum Shinrikyo, the Freemasons, the Knights Templar, and the Baader-Meinhof gang. Singer reads this wildly diverse and dense intertextuality as a function of Morrison's desire to establish their literary bona-fides with a Vertigo audience who had proved, through the

commercial popularity of Gaiman's *The Sandman*, to have a taste for highbrow and self-consciously literary works (Singer 93). While this analysis may accurately reflect the pragmatic concerns of Morrison as a writer during this period, the sheer density of intertextual references – where, in the first volume, barely a page goes by without some reference to a writer or philosopher, and although in later volumes the density thins out, figures like Shelley, Byron, and de Sade become speaking characters in the narrative – recalls closely the frantic allusive energy of Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

The effect of the energetic mashing together of referents in *The Invisibles* has much in common with *The Waste Land*. Both seek to form a greater, holistic unity out of the disparate fragments of culture that they draw in. *The Waste Land* does so in a way that celebrates the aesthetic beauty of highbrow literary culture while simultaneously disdaining its contemporaneous literary culture as inadequate, where *The Invisibles* draws from some of the same referential sources – though casting a wider net that also draws in pop-culture and outsider art – to achieve a similar effect of celebrating art and literature while at the same time scorning its failure to deliver meaningful social or cultural change. Both works are focused on the alienation of the subject in the societies of modernity, not only from their social peers but also from themselves and their own status as autonomous subjects. Both works seek a kind of paradoxical redemption of the flawed and broken fragments of story which are shored against the ruins of modern selfhood. In Eliot's case, this has often been regarded by critics (including Howarth and Singal) as suggestive of his politically conservative impulses – a doomed and mournful complaint about the dissolution of the great aesthetic triumphs of the past in the emergence of an undiscriminating and populist mass-culture. In Morrison's work, critics (such as Round and Singer) have argued the opposite case, that the multiplicitous intersection of cultural fragments that makes up *The Invisibles* represents a radically emancipatory political programme. For Singer, "the Invisibles defend liberal democratic values of freedom and self-determination even as they battle nominally democratic governments . . . the Invisibles are the threat to the established order, seeking to reinvent society in ways the superhero genre does not normally permit" (92). The panoply of intertextual references deployed throughout

the story's numerous short arcs works to underline, almost to footnote, the revolutionary aesthetic generated by a surface reading of the books' story of the struggle between the Invisible College and the Archons of the Outer Church. But the notion that one produces revolutionary art simply by writing about revolutionaries is not borne out by a closer reading of *The Invisibles*' later volumes. *The Invisibles'* own epistemic perspective shifts numerous times throughout the comic's run, from the self-indulgent positioning of the Invisibles as heroic subversives in the first volume, to the more morally ambiguous and critical self-analysis of the same cast of characters in the second volume, to the third and final volume's esoteric philosophizing about the nature of reality and the self's relation to it. This haphazard evolution might chart, as Singer suggests, the personal philosophical journey of Morrison as a maturing writer (83-84), or it may equally indicate the buffeting of expediency in the absence of a consistent set of guiding principles.

By the end of *The Invisibles'* run the character King Mob, one of the central characters of the series (and, Singer suggests, a surrogate for Morrison themselves within the story), has come around to the belief that the cause of radical individual freedom, for which the Invisible College has expended so much energy in its secret war against the Outer Church, may actually be a poisoned chalice. The once unambiguous binary between the individualist Invisible College and the assimilationist Outer Church, is revealed to King Mob as a false dichotomy whose only purpose is to train the mind towards a more transcendent awakening. For Singer, this indicates that "*The Invisibles* refuses to assume that freedom and control, rebellion and authority, or good and evil are easily identifiable and mutually exclusive concepts" (97), but it can also be understood as revealing a fundamental shallowness and uncertainty that has underlain the story's aesthetic postures of revolution from the outset. As King mob comes to believe, and advocate, that the battle for meaningful social change against the callously authoritarian forces of establishment power is a distraction from the real human mission of self-improvement and enlightenment, Singer sees Morrison arguing that "struggle must be internal and psychological before it can be extended to social relations" (97-98). Far from being a politically radical perspective, this dovetails perfectly with

the kind of New Age neoliberalism from which Morrison draws throughout the comic's run. When the onus for securing a better world is on the individual to change their own subject relation to society, the structures of oppressive power that continue to produce immiseration and alienation are left untroubled by political radicalism. It recalls the pattern of neoliberal power relations where private citizens are instructed to recycle their waste and reduce their automobile use while energy corporations, heavy industry, and governments continue to pollute the environment unfettered. It is a reduction of the political to the limits of the purely personal. I argue that this is a more thoroughly conservative position than anything that can be concluded from *The Waste Land*'s less didactic and ultimately less decipherable political positioning.

While Morrison may have been the British Invasion writer who returned to the well of intertextuality most often, Moore, Gaiman, and Ellis all also made extensive use of literary and pop-cultural allusion as a way to connect with the more mature, and putatively sophisticated, audiences that were being cultivated by the Vertigo brand. With *The Sandman*, Gaiman took the name of a 1970s Jack Kirby comic and completely altered the protagonist and the setting to create a unique comic property that would come to define the literary timbre of the British Invasion almost as much as Moore's *Watchmen*. The original Kirby comic's protagonist, Wesley Dodds appears briefly in only the first volume of Gaiman's *The Sandman*, "Preludes and Nocturnes", forming an intertextual bridge between the two comics. Gaiman disposes of Dodds by turning him, within the diegetic world of his own story, into a stop-gap measure produced spontaneously by the universe to replace the true Sandman, Dream (or Morpheus), during his period of long imprisonment by the magician Roderick Burgess.

Gaiman's deployment of intertextuality is very different from that later adopted by Morrison in *The Invisibles*. Where Morrison uses a proliferation of allusions in a scattershot way to tie as many fragments of culture into their story as possible, often without a clearly readable purpose, Gaiman's allusions in *The Sandman* are more measured and involved, often tying directly into the story of

Dream and the Endless in a way that develops plot and character. An example of this is the recurring character of William Shakespeare, who agrees to a distinctly Faustian pact with Morpheus after the latter overhears Shakespeare saying to his contemporary Christopher Marlowe that he would give anything to have Marlowe's gift for writing. Shakespeare agrees to write two plays for Morpheus in return for having the power to "give men dreams that would live on ling after I am dead" (The Doll's House 64). Shakespeare returns to the narrative six issues later, in "A Midsummer Night's Dream", where he makes good on the first half of his deal with Morpheus by writing the titular play and seeing it performed for the fairy court of Titania. *The Sandman* weaves its own fable about the relationship of dreams and desires through the intertext of Shakespeare's play, drawing the themes of the latter into the former and expanding on them: "'What is the cost of attaining that desire?' And Gaiman's answer - presented in the prophecy of the Dream Lord speaking to Titania - contains as sharp a truth as that of any written by Shakespeare: "The price of getting what you want, is getting what you once wanted" (Lancaster 74, internal quote from *Dream Country* 81). Shakespeare's achievement of having produced a drama capable of entertaining the fairy court is revealed as a poisoned chalice which will later have repercussions for he and his family. He is as bewitched as the metafictional Titania of his play with an unsuitable partner, and one whose gift will ultimately prove even more disastrous for his own relationships. The first hints of this downfall are seen in the words of Hamnet, Shakespeare's son, in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" when the young child complains that his illustrious father has become "very distant…He doesn't seem like he is really there any more…I'm less real to him than any of the characters in his plays" (Dream Country 75). This fictional Shakespeare's receipt of Morpheus's boon, and the possibility of cultural immortality that comes with it, leads to the fragmentation of his family and his alienation from his son.

Shakespeare returns to the narrative of *The Sandman* one more time, at the very end of the comic's run, in the final issue of the final volume, *The Wake*, titled "The Tempest", as the arc of his personal tragedy reaches completion. Once again, the title of the issue of the comic is the title of Shakespeare's play, and the making good of the second half of his pact with Morpheus. Knowing

that he is approaching the end of his own existence (voluntarily so), Morpheus requests from Shakespeare a play whose theme is that of "graceful ends. I wanted a play about a king who drowns his books, and breaks his staff, and leaves his kingdom" (*The Wake* 181). Again Gaiman weaves the intertext of Shakespeare's historical *The Tempest* into the text of "The Tempest" to draw together the thematic resonances of both stories. Shakespeare by this time is a shadow of his former self, his life disfigured by the popular success he owes to Morpheus. His son Hamnet has died through Shakespeare's neglect of his family, and Shakespeare himself now recognizes how much his dreams of becoming the greatest writer and storyteller of all have cost him: "I watched my life as if it were happening to someone else. My son died, and I was hurt, but I watched my hurt, and even relished it a little, for now I could write a real death, a true loss" (The Wake 180). Shakespeare is alienated not just from his wife and the memory of his dead son, but is even estranged and dissociated from his own experiences. So disconnected is he from the reality in which he lives that something as terrible as the loss of a child registers with him only as rich source material for his own fiction (the story implies in passing that Hamnet may have been spirited away by Titania). Morpheus is not judgmental of this and seems to register his own complicity in the mess that Shakespeare has made of his life. It becomes an implicit part of his reasoning for ending his own existence as one of the Endless and allowing a successor to take his place.

Another, more subtle example of intertextuality in *The Sandman* appears in the comic's fifth volume, *A Game of You*, where the story of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* is used as a template for the adventures of a woman called Barbie (who had previously appeared as a minor character in *The Doll's House)* as she tries to recover her identity after divorce, travelling into a rich inner fantasy world to do so. Instead of a scarecrow, a lion, and a tin man, Barbie is accompanied in her quest to defeat the evil Cuckoo by a shrew, a monkey, and a dodo, each of whom is also seeking to complete themselves in some fundamental way. The story is a deliberately twisted analogue of *A Wizard of Oz*, and the correspondences are not one to one. Thessaly, a woman who lives in Barbie's building and is ultimately the main cause of Barbie's escape from the fantasy land in which she has got lost, is

revealed to be a witch. Wanda, a transgender woman who is Barbie's best friend, is from Kansas, and at the story's end is killed by a terrible windstorm that collapses the building in which Barbie lives, in an echo of *Wizard*'s tornado. The Cuckoo, whose malign presence in the dreamworld is the threat which Barbie must defeat to fulfil her quest, is revealed to be an aspect of Barbie's younger self whose domination of her adult identity has poisoned her inner life. In order for Barbie to escape the Cuckoo it is her real-world friends, the lesbian couple Hazel and Foxglove (also both recurring characters in the comic's continuity) who must, with the witch Thessaly's help, journey into the fantasy land and reaffirm Barbie's connection to a social world of living human beings who value and care about her. The intertextuality in *A Game of You* is more playful, even whimsical, than the deliberate interweaving of Shakespeare to the comic's narrative. The character of Barbie, a woman whose identity is besieged by the stereotyping of women at almost every stage of her life (her ex-husband's name is Ken), easily slips into the child-like role of a Dorothy, whose innocence and purity of heart are threatened by the mad vagaries of an unjust world. *A Game of You* turns the import of this roleplay on its head by showing that Barbie is not just Dorothy in this analogical version of the story, but is on some level the wizard too, responsible for the self-deception that allows the Cuckoo to prosper in the first place.

The allusive nature of *A Game of You* is underlined by the titles of the individual issues that make up its individual issues, which are all drawn, or adapted, from song lyrics. "Slaughter on Fifth Avenue" echoes "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" (1957) by Richard Rodgers, "Lullabies of Broadway" echoes Harry Warren and Al Dubin's "Lullaby of Broadway" (1935), "Bad Moon Rising" takes its name unchanged from a Creedence Clearwater Revival song written by John Fogarty (1969), "Beginning to See the Light" is likewise borrowed directly from a 1968 Velvet Underground song of the same name, written by Lou Reed, "Over the Sea to Sky" modifies a lyric from the Scottish folk song "The Skye Boat Song" (late C.19) about the escape of Charles Stuart after the failed Jacobite rebellion of 1745, and "I Woke Up and One of Us Was Crying" is a lyric taken from the Elvis Costello song "I Want You" (1986). This choice of intertextual connections lends the single issues that make

up the volume a tonal quality that varies over the course of the book from rambunctious, to soporific, to cheerfully apocalyptic, and finally to melancholy.

The Sandman's intertextuality is not limited to the two instances of Shakespeare and Barbie, although these are the two most developed allusions. The first volume in particular sees a raft of DC characters visit the pages of the comic, including John Constantine, a character central to the British Invasion authors and Vertigo, having been created by Alan Moore before being made the protagonist of his own comic, *Hellblazer,* at this time written by British author Jamie Delano. Constantine returns near the end of the comic's run, making him into a kind of intertextual bookend to the story of Dream. As a comic dealing with an immortal protagonist whose escapades extend throughout the duration of human history, *The Sandman* also features numerous historical and mythological allusions. Most significant of the mythological allusions is the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, where in the comic, Orpheus is reimagined as the son of the protagonist Morpheus, who survives his decapitation by the maenads to live on through to (and beyond) the era of the French Revolution as a disembodied head. His eventual release from this unfortunate existence by Dream is their eventual reconciliation after Morpheus's anger with him over the death of Eurydice. Other mythological figures who appear in the comic include the gods of Norse mythology, Odin, Thor, and Loki, the Christian Devil, as Lucifer Morningstar, along with demons such as Azazel and Beelzebub, as well as the ancient Egyptian goddess Bast, and the Mesopotamian deity Ishtar. The breadth of this multi-pantheon cast of gods and demons helps to foster a sense of an expansive pan-mythological universe in which all human myths and stories are realized. Allusions to historical characters include Caesar Augustus, Maximilien Robespierre, Marco Polo, and numerous writers including Thomas Paine, Mark Twain, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Ben Jonson, ground the comic in a fantastic atemporal world of epic historical adventure and intrigue, while at the same time signalling its deeply literary self-consciousness.

The technique of using allusive references as chapter titles was also used in a similar way by Alan Moore in *Watchmen*. Each of the twelve chapter (or issue) titles of *Watchmen* is a partial excerpt from a longer quotation that is presented in full at the end of that chapter. The effect here is different to the use of a similar technique in *The Sandman*, where its purpose is primarily to provide a tonal resonance for each issue. In *Watchmen*, the tonal resonances often still obtain but are more clearly thematic and gesture subtly toward the philosophical points or intellectual perspectives that underpin the book as a whole. Thus, the first chapter's title, "At Midnight, All the Agents," is reproduced in the longer chapter-closing quotation, "At midnight, all the agents and superhuman crew go out and round up everyone who knows more than they do", drawn from the Bob Dylan song Desolation Row (1965). This lyric points quite clearly to the Watchmen themselves as extra-judicial enforcers working on behalf of the state from outside the law, not so different to a secret police force. The full quotation also highlights their individual ignorance, and suggests that that ignorance is the motive for their strange behaviour.

The title of the second chapter, "Absent Friends" is taken from the lyric of the Elvis Costello song, "The Comedians" (1984), and is reproduced in longer form at chapter end: "And I'm up while the dawn is breaking, even though my heart is aching. I should be drinking a toast to absent friends instead of these comedians." In this case, the absent friend in question is the Comedian, Edward Blake, whose funeral here forms the basis for a series of memorial reflections by the other Watchmen. A fragmented history of Blake's life provides the substance of the rest of the chapter, subjectivized through the memories of his former colleagues and ending with Rorschach, whose interrogation of the dying villain Moloch in pursuit of answers about Blake's murder, reveals the Comedian's own crisis of identity in his final days alive. The melancholy air of chapter two is captured in the Costello lyric, and despite his many ugly crimes against everyone from his own colleagues to the enemies of the American state, Blake's death rehabilitates him here in the minds of those who knew him.

The title of the third chapter, “The Judge of All the Earth”, is a biblical quotation from Genesis 18:25, "Shall not the Judge of all the Earth do right?". The judge of all the earth in this case is Dr. Manhattan, Jon Ostermann, whose alienation from human society and subsequent escape to Mars forms the main part of this chapter’s story. The biblical quotation comes from the mouth of Abraham, as he is pleading with God not to destroy the corrupted and fallen cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Chapter three folds the story of Ostermann’s estrangement with a parallel narrative of growing Cold War nuclear tensions among ordinary New Yorkers, which is in turn folded with the first installment of the “Tales of the Black Freighter”, a pulpy pirate comic being read by a kid on the street, the story of which functions as a kind of ironic counterpoint to both the main plot of the comics as it unfolds, and to individual panels. For example, the panel showing the newsstand vendor and comic-reading kid that contains the snippet of Black Freighter narrative, “And I knew that life had no worse news to offer me”, is juxtaposed in the next panel with the image of a silhouetted Walter Kovacs (who we will later learn is Rorschach) grimacing fiercely outwards towards the reader (from the perspective of the news vendor) while tightly gripping a sign reading “The End is Nigh” that takes up almost half the area of the panel (*Watchmen* 78). In the rest of this chapter we see the fundamental distance between Ostermann, the book’s only traditionally super-powered character, and ordinary humanity. His relationship with Laurie Juspeczyk begins to collapse under the pressure of this alien-ness, and she seeks solace from Dan Dreiberg. Ostermann is then ambushed by a journalist (who we will later learn is a pawn of Ozyamndias) at a press conference, with apparent evidence that he is responsible for numerous former associates contracting cancer. This sequence is intercut with a scene of Laurie and Dan Dreiberg fighting off a group of street muggers while they are out walking through the city, using a technique reminiscent of (though if Groensteen is to be understood, quite different from) the parallel montage of cinema. The chapter ends with Dr. Manhattan leaving Earth for the peace and quiet of Mars, as the newspapers report that Russia has invaded Afghanistan, cranking up the apocalyptic tensions brewing since the first page of this issue. It is from Mars that Ostermann will sit in judgment on Earth, and on humanity, not returning until

chapter nine, once his judgment approaches completion. The biblical allusion of the title, with Abraham trying to argue against the apocalyptic destruction of the sinful urban precincts which offend his God so direly, dovetails neatly with the thematics of a chapter focused on a superbeing cast out by a fallen world.

The fourth chapter takes its title, "Watchmaker" from an Albert Einstein quote, "The release of atom power has changed everything except our way of thinking. The solution to this problem lies in the heart of mankind. If only I had known, I would have become a watchmaker", but is also a term that has multiple resonances through the history of modern philosophy, an allusion by Einstein himself. The Einstein quote builds on the nuclear anxieties established in the preceding chapter, and chapter four functions as a tour through the atemporal, and arguably amoral, subjectivity of Ostermann during his sojourn of self-isolation on the Martian surface. During these reflections, it is revealed that Ostermann's father was himself a watchmaker for whom the science of Einstein, particularly the theory of special relativity, and the detonation of the first atomic weapon at Hiroshima, signals the end of his profession's usefulness to the world. Ostermann senior discards the tools of his trade, scattering them from the fire escape of his Brooklyn apartment to his apprentice son's chagrin (*Watchmen* 113). The "watchmaker analogy", as represented in theology and philosophy, is an argument for the construction of the universe according to the vision of an intelligent designer. This argument has ultimately been discarded by modern science in favour of the more persuasive theory of evolution by natural selection, as presented by Charles Darwin, but it imagines a teleological universe in which every component serves a divine purpose. As the question of purpose, or telos, is central to the numerous crises of identity and morality that plague the characters of *Watchmen*, there is a stronger intertextual resonance in the comic with Einstein's own allusive reference to this theological argument than there is to his despair at the ends to which his own research had been put to produce atomic bombs. The story of *Watchmen* is a story in which each character unwittingly plays a vital teleological part like the components of a watch. The final panel of chapter four explicitly references this conception of the cosmos, but stripped of its

theological implications, where Ostermann says: “Above the Novus Gordii mountains, jewels in a maker-less mechanism, the first meteorites are starting to fall” (138). Even the book’s title, *Watchmen*, is suggestive of this relation to the analogy of the watchmaker – this is a story of men who are as constrained in their action as the components of a watch. The true watchmaker of the story is not Ostermann, but Ozymandias, Adrian Veidt, whose intricate and elaborately constructed utilitarian plot exemplifies the coldly teleological moral calculus of government and corporate elites with regard to the great mass of humanity. Conceived in this way, the only character who escapes the destiny of a cog is the dangerous and violent Rorschach, who is annihilated by Ostermann at the book’s conclusion for his failure to comply with Ozymandias’s methods. Each of the others plays their part in bringing about the murderous attack on New York and, paradoxically, it is the final actions of the Comedian, otherwise a willing functionary of evil *par excellence*, that set Rorschach on the trail that will eventually lead him to identify Veidt as the antagonist puppet-master of the story.

Chapter five of *Watchmen* uses part of a line from the William Blake poem “The Tyger” (1794) as its title, “Fearful Symmetry”. The full quotation, presented at the chapter’s end, “Tyger Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night; / What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” refers back to a question raised by the watchmaker analogy: If the whole cosmos is designed by an all-knowing, all-loving Christian God, then what is the purpose (telos) of fearsome predators like the tiger in such a universe? It is fitting that Ozymandias, Adrian Veidt, is the principal character of this chapter (after having been all but absent from the comic until now), and the fearful symmetry of the title also applies equally to the sinister figure of Rorschach, unmasked at the end of this chapter but whose mask design, like the Rorschach tests from which he takes his name, is always a symmetrical pattern onto which the viewer may project their own subconscious desires and fears. The Romantic poetry of Blake (whom the Comedian, Edward Blake is named for) in general, with its predilection for dialectical figurations, such as heaven and hell, the tiger and the lamb, and so forth, is an important reference point for both Alan Moore, who references Blake’s poetry in *V for* Vendetta and makes him a character in *From Hell*, and Grant Morrison, who references Blake’s

poetry several times in *The Invisibles*. The fearful symmetry is most strikingly ramified however by the page layout of this chapter, with a symmetrically organised double-page spread at the centre from which the symmetry spreads subtly out to either end of the chapter. While the page layouts and panel arrangements are exactly symmetrical on either side of the centre pages (except for the first and last panels), the symmetry of the chapter is a figurative symmetry rather than a precise geometric symmetry. The contents of the corresponding panels stretching to either end of the chapter outside of the double page-spread at its centre are not perfect reflections of each other, but rather thematic reflections. This flawed symmetry allows for meaningful connections to emerge from a unique spatio-topical arrangement. The setting up of Rorshach to be caught by the police (devised by Veidt to deter his investigation into the Comedian's murder) and the pantomime of Veidt's defeat of a would-be assassin (to deflect suspicion of his involvement in Blake's murder) are twisted reflections of each other, mirror images of deception that help to conceal Veidt's true plan. The symmetry of the colour palette is also relatively consistent throughout the chapter, with the alternating red/orange of the neon illumination and the purple/green when it flickers off being reproduced in an alternating pattern that sets a jarring, discordant tone. The two detectives, Bourquin and Fine, investigating the grisly murder-suicide of two daughters by their father in a home decorated with bloodstained images of the buddha are presented on matching pages equidistant from the centre. Likewise the Black Freighter interlude which presents on either side of the centre-pages, the spectacle of the marooned sailor consuming first gull and then shark. The Rumrunner, the bar whose symmetrical logo reflected in puddles of rainwater forms the bookend images to this chapter, reflects the diegetic pop-cultural fascination with pirates of a world in which superheroes have become a mundane feature of everyday life. The allusion to Blake's fearful symmetry in the chapter title becomes the leitmotif for chapter five, repeated in different syntactic and semantic figures across every page, giving this chapter a formal aesthetic unity through the concept of illusory duplication that exceeds anything in the rest of the book.

Watchmen's sixth chapter is named "The Abyss Gazes Also", with the quotation drawn from the famous aphorism from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), which is given in translation at the end of the chapter as: "Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." The allusion's thematic connection to the plot in this case is made immediately obvious as the chapter begins with the newly incarcerated and unmasked Rorschach, Walter Kovacs, being interviewed by the psychoanalyst Dr. Malcolm Long. The whole chapter is taken up exclusively with the interview process and Kovacs's early experiences in prison – the only chapter in which such a tight focus on a single member of the Watchmen is maintained – and by the chapter's end, Dr. Long is shown having fallen foul of the danger warned of by Nietzsche. Exposed to the brutal history of Walter Kovacs, the libertarian callousness of his philosophy, and the blunt, ugly facts of his life, Dr. Long begins to become alienated from his own friends and family, his behaviour becoming increasingly erratic and inappropriate. The deeper that Long looks into the abyss that is the lonely and isolated soul of Walter Kovacs, the more that abyss finds a resonance in his own perspective, until the last panels of the chapter show him consumed by the solitary darkness in which Kovacs has spent his entire life.

The seventh chapter, "A Brother to Dragons", once again uses a biblical allusion in its chapter title, this time taken from the King James Bible's Book of Job, given at the end of the chapter as "I am a brother to dragons, and a companion to owls. My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat." Book of Job Chapter 30, verses 29-30". The fraternity with dragons is manifested through the fire-spitting owlship of Nite Owl II, Dan Dreiberg, which in another neat bit of topological symmetry discharges its flame cannon twice in this chapter, on the second, and second last, pages, each time in a page-width panel along the bottom of the page. The unquoted part of the allusion, "a companion to owls", is the more obviously relevant section in terms of this chapter, which deals with the blossoming romance between Laurie Juspeczyk and Dreiberg. Indeed, Laurie facilitates Dreiberg's rediscovery of his own libido in this chapter, in both the sexual sense and in his desire to behave like a superhero. The biblical quotation suggests a figure of isolation and loneliness,

without any social connections but those other monstrous and isolated creatures that live apart from society. As Dreiberg's closest relationships up until this chapter seem to be with the original Nite Owl, the elderly Hollis Mason, and Rorschach, the allusion is doubly fitted to him.

Chapter eight takes its title, "Old Ghosts" from the Eleanor Farjeon poem, "Hallowe'en" (1928): "On Hallowe'en the old ghosts come about us, and they speak to some; to others they are dumb." The thematic resonance of the words is clear, with the chapter opening on the last day of October (attested to by the cover of *The New Frontiersman*), and showing Hollis Mason, the retired original Nite Owl, calling Sally Jupiter, the original Silk Spectre and Laurie's mother, to tell her that he suspects Dreiberg and Laurie have been adventuring again. But the reason for this particular choice of allusion is far less obvious. Farjeon was the composer of the famous hymn "Morning has Broken", as well as numerous books of early twentieth century fantasies, adventures, and children's stories. The poem Hallowe'en has a strange metric construction in which each of its four stanzas has two iambic tetrameter lines followed by a line of trimeter, giving the poem an oddly uneven feel. The chapter similarly lurches from scene to scene, introducing a number of doomed new characters (Big Figure, Hira Manish), and ends with the gruesome murder of Hollis Mason by a gang of thugs masquerading as trick or treaters, who beat him to death with the superhero statuette given to him "In Gratitude" for his crimefighting work as Nite Owl.

Chapter nine's title, "The Darkness of Mere Being" is a quotation from the Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1962), later given in full as: "As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being". The allusion to Jung here marks the comic's turn towards a more explicitly existentialist consideration of the value and purpose of human life. The title of the book by Jung which this quote is drawn from could work equally well as a subtitle for this chapter (or *Watchmen* as a whole), concerned as it is with the fallibility of memory, the fragility of dreams, and the necessity of reflection. This chapter also marks the turning point in Ostermann's self-imposed alienation from Earth and humanity as,

through the secret history of Laurie's origin, he comes to realise that Laurie herself represents the truly meaningful value of humanity: "To distill so specific a form from that chaos of improbability, like turning air to gold . . . That is the crowning unlikelihood . . . The thermo-dynamic miracle" (*Watchmen* 307). Ostermann's epiphany, arrived at through his recognition of the singularity of Laurie's being, is that each human life is unique and singular, unpredictable and vanishingly rare. This individual improbability is sufficient to generate a meaning-making force that redeems all of humanity's "wretched, grubby little human encounters" (301), and persuades him to return to Earth with Laurie in pursuit of that sense of wonder.

The title of chapter ten, "Two Riders Were Approaching…" alludes to the Bob Dylan song, "All Along the Watchtower" (1967), with the full quotation given at the end of the chapter as "Outside in the distance a wild cat did growl, two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl." The chapter begins with the landing of Air-Force One and Air-Force Two, carrying the President and Vice-President of the US respectively, at a secure military base where they are being sequestered in case of a sudden nuclear exchange with the USSR. This offers an easy thematic connection to the title, but as is so often the case in *Watchmen*, there is an extended series of nested reflections of that titular image, in the knowledge that Ostermann and Laurie are returning to Earth from Mars, in the reunited figures of Nite Owl and Rorschach once again on the trail of Blake's murderer, the characters of Max Shea and Hira Manish who are murdered by a bomb planted on Veidt's Pyramid Deliveries ship having completed their work designing his apocalypse, and in the two people on horseback murdered by the protagonist of the Black Freighter comic, then propped up on their horses and ridden into town (326-327, 337). The image of two riders approaching is also recapitulated, and given an explicitly eschatological connotation, in the dialogue between Nite Owl and Rorschach as they break into the Pyramid Deliveries office, when Rorschach says: "Need answers quickly. World on verge of apocalypse. Death and War already here. Other Horsemen can't be far behind" (334). This scene contains another textual reference to two riders, seen when Nite Owl is trying to hack into the Pyramid computer terminal. At the password prompt he enters the

word Rameses, and (inexplicably) the computer responds “Password Incomplete: Do you wish to add rider?”, Nite Owl adds the roman numeral II (2) to the word Rameses and the terminal is unlocked. The chapter’s final page shows Rorschach and Nite Owl approaching Karnak, Veidt’s secret Antarctic lair, as Veidt’s genetically modified lynx, Bubastis, gives off a low growl. The allusion to Dylan’s “Watchtower” is completed by this onomatopoeic interjection.

The eleventh chapter’s title, “Look On My Works, Ye Mighty…” alludes to the Percy Shelley poem, “Ozymandias”, and the full quotation is given at chapter’s close as “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings; look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” “Ozymandias” is a poem about the essentially transitory and ephemeral nature of worldly power, and the futile arrogance of kings in the face of the inexorable passage of time. There is an irony inherent in Shelley’s poem, which finds the defiant boast of Rameses II’s power on the broken, half-buried stone of a desert ruin. That irony is preserved here, in Veidt’s supervillain-esque recounting of the details of his plan to Nite Owl and Rorschach, deeming them powerless to resist something that has already taken place, when in actuality Rorschach has already pre-empted this victory by sending his journal to the staff of *The New Frontiersman*, who, as the story closes, are poised to publish the details of Veidt’s scheme. Chapter eleven also contains the end of the Black Freighter narrative, and in one of its final installments, the protagonist foreshadows the following chapter with the line: “How had I reached this appalling position, with love, only love, as my guide?” (357). The failure of love as a guide to moral action is one of the core themes of *Watchmen*, and it is in this embedded mise-en-abyme narrative that it finds its strongest and bleakest formulation.

Watchmen’s final chapter, “A Stronger Loving World”, draws its allusive title from the John Cale song “Sanctus (Sanities)” (1982) and the chapter end reference is given as: “It would be a stronger world, a stronger loving world, to die in”. The allusion seems straightforward enough, as the outcome of Veidt’s plan is to eliminate the petty squabbling of human beings and war itself

through the illusion of an extra-dimensional planetary threat. The lyrics of the song, however, seem to point towards Laurie as the subject of this allusion:

> She was so afraid / Since her mother, white with time / Told her / She was a failure / She was so ashamed / Of everything she said / And everything she did/ For her mother, white with time /
>
> Everything around her mother / White with time / And dirty / Her mother was greedy with dirt / Greedy

Following the events at Karnak, a transformed Laurie goes with Dan to visit her mother, Sally, and the two have a moment of mutual reconciliation and understanding. Laurie forgives her mother's deception about her true paternity, and Sally apologizes and tries to explain how shame had silenced her (411). The "stronger loving world" forcibly brought about by Ozymandias through the deaths of three million and ensured by the complicity of the world's only legitimate superbeing, Dr. Manhattan, is an ironic construction. This irony is punctuated by the six full-page splash panels that open the chapter, showing the devastation of New York and the slaughter of its inhabitants, including many of the minor characters shown squabbling with each other on the street in the previous chapter. The murder of Rorschach at the hands of Dr. Manhattan is the final confrontation between the duelling moralities that have faced off across the book's story. In the last gasp of his deontological ethics, Rorschach insists that: "Evil must be punished. People must be told (the truth)", even where that revelation might threaten the newly peaceful and putatively utopian world order obtained by the success of Veidt's plan. Ostermann, whose alien subjectivity renders human morality otherwise incomprehensible to him, nonetheless understands the utilitarian calculus of Veidt's gamble and feels ethically bound to uphold it by killing Kovacs to prevent him exposing the deception. This contest of moral systems and its outcome here are readable in different ways, whether one agrees with Veidt's plan and sanctions Rorschach's murder by Ostermann, or if one sees

Veidt's plan as exemplary of authoritarianism's worst excesses and finds Ostermann guilty of failing to grasp his own moral responsibility to combat evil and speak the truth. For many critics this presents a quandary: how is one to know who are the "goodies" in this story? Rorschach has been clearly shown to be someone capable of horrifying casual violence in pursuit of his goals, while Ostermann is a philosopher with access to the secrets of the cosmos that no mere human could grasp. The book seems to come down on the side of Veidt and Ostermann then, while still allowing Rorschach his posthumous revenge. This is perhaps the closest that *Watchmen* comes to offering a truly deconstructive reading experience, where these two opposed readings must both be admitted and the correspondence between them considered. I will look at this question further in the next chapter.

Watchmen's intertextuality is not limited to its chapter titles. There are numerous allusions scattered throughout the art and dialogue that serve to ground the text as a work of apocalyptic late twentieth century fiction. The New York picture house carries a banner for *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), an early science-fiction movie reflecting nuclear anxieties in which an alien comes to an atomic age earth with the warning that humanity will destroy itself if it does not change course. The fictional band, Pale Horse, and their logo, appear in several places through the story, most notably in the splash pages detailing the destruction of New York, where the Madison Square Garden billboard advertises their upcoming show. The name Pale Horse is another biblical allusion, to Revelation 6: 7-8, And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him" (KJV), underscoring the pervasive apocalypticism of *Watchmen*'s world. The Indian restaurant in which Dan and Laurie have lunch, Gunga Diner, is an allusion to the Rudyard Kipling poem, "Gunga Din" (1890), which relates the story of a regimental water-carrier, or *bhisti*, assigned to the British army in India. The main theme of "Gunga Din" is the disregard with which imperial power treats its colonized subjects, again echoing the casual cold-bloodedness with which Veidt destroys half of New York.

Planetary, written by Warren Ellis and illustrated by John Cassaday, is another major work by a British Invasion author that makes great use of intertextual allusion to generate multiple layers of meaning throughout the length of its story. *Planetary*'s intertexts are largely either pulp- or pop-cultural rather than specifically literary (with some exceptions). The framing of the story presents a world dominated by an evil analogue of the Fantastic Four, known simply as The Four. Each member of the Four is a precisely drawn parodic counterpart to the members of the Kirbyan Fantastic Four, sharing their powers and their social prominence. Ellis uses this satirical setup to imagine how the presence of superheroes in the world constrains the development of ordinary humanity. The Four use their advanced knowledge and capabilities to hoard secrets, wealth, and esoteric discoveries away from the grasp of human scientists. They murder analogues of Superman, Wonder Woman, and the Green Lantern to prevent the formation of any rival operation that might be based on DC's Justice League of America. This ironic subversion of one of Marvel's (and Kirby's) longest-lived and most beloved properties provides the framework for the story, in that the Planetary organization exists as a home for the "Archaeologists of the Impossible" who are dedicated to uncovering a secret history of the twentieth century that has been buried by the actions of the Four.

Planetary's allusions work very differently to those in *The Invisibles*, *Watchmen*, or *The Sandman*. They are usually embedded deep into the text, and not necessarily obvious to a reader who is not familiar with the text being alluded to. An example of this is the figure of Axel Brass, rescued by the team from decades of imprisonment at the console of a quantum computer built to protect Earth from invasion by superheroes from other dimensions. Brass has been trapped immobile for so long that he has lost the use of his legs, but he retains the competence and the code of honour that define his personality. Brass is an allusion to the Doc Savage character archetypal to the pulp era of the 1930s and 1940s.

The writers of the British Invasion drew heavily from the techniques of British literary modernism, and particularly those of T.S. Eliot, for the syntactic and semantic content of their comics works. From the use of parallax subjectivities in pursuit of a more faithful mimesis of the lived experience of reality to the profusion of intertextual allusions which fill the British Invasion's major works, and the principle of fragmentary form that builds to a holistic unity, writers such as Moore, Morrison, and Gaiman pioneered a new style and substance of mainstream US comics writing in the late 1980s and 1990s. While their literary works, much like those of the UK modernists, have been hailed by critics and readers as espousing progressive and even radical politics, close reading of these texts often reveals conservative impulses at work. The contradictions and complexities of the works of the British Invasion writers are not solely reducible to the influence of the Modernist movement on English literature.

2.2 A Baroque Postmodern

I once dreamed a word entirely

Baroque: a serpentine line of letters leaning

with the flourish of each touching the shoulder

of another so that one breath at the word's

beginning made them all collapse. *E spesso moiano*

parlando, Leonardo wrote: *we die, very often,*

while we speak

--Estes, Angie. "Ars Poetica"

British writers, and English literature in general, have always had a somewhat strange and deliberately distanced relationship to the baroque. While the Baroque era in continental Europe saw a prolific flourishing of radically new artistic styles in the fields of architecture, fine art, music, and writing, if you were to consult any one of a number of histories of the tradition of English literature, you might be forgiven for thinking that this generational, continent-spanning artistic wave had left the artists and creators of the British Isles entirely untouched. Jingoistic suspicions about the decadence and profanity of baroque European art haunted not only those British writers contemporary to the period, but have lingered throughout the history of the academic study of English literature. This is not to say that there was no English baroque, but rather that "scholars have largely elided the baroque from English literary history" (Vincent iii). This elision is not accidental, but the result of a careful process of nationalistic selection that chooses to unduly marginalize the importance of baroque works, ideas, and creative strategies in favour of more purely British (English)

schools of thought. In part, this erasure of baroque influence on English literature can be understood as being a gendered project that sought to delegitimize the works of early women authors within "the emergence of a uniquely female sphere of baroque discourse in early modern England" (Vincent 7). Female writers of the early modern period such as, notably, Margery Kempe, show distinctly the dissonant, over-complicating influences of baroque European art in their writing, using some of the narrative tropes and displaying many of the formal and stylistic features that have come to be associated with baroque writing. The English baroque has always been, and remains, a contested field, and one with which many serious scholars of English literature are reluctant to engage critically. This seems in part to be a result of hesitance among Anglophone scholars of the period to risk challenging an orthodoxy that uses the absence of a settled consensus to insist that there is no legitimate baroque presence within the tradition of English literature: "Early studies of the English baroque vary widely in their conclusions, and their differing interpretations led to skepticism about the consistency of the baroque as a concept and its relevance to English literature" (Vincent 4-5). This nervous skepticism persists in Anglophone literature studies into the present day while literary scholars in other European traditions enthusiastically participate in a renewed appetite for baroque concepts and imagery among not only academics but popular culture more broadly. Still, the contemporary reluctance to embrace the possibility of a British baroque is rooted in an Anglocentric hostility to a movement that in many ways runs counter to the image that English literary scholarship likes to present of itself as untrammelled by continental dissipation: "[t]he B-word, with all its sophisticated and cosmopolitan implications, is dubiously British and belongs too much to an international movement to be acceptable" (Davidson). This nationalistic prejudice that has marginalized baroque influences in English literature, is, however, fundamentally ahistorical and does a disservice to the many Anglophone writers of baroque art.

The Baroque period in the arts is bounded on one side by the Renaissance and the other by the Enlightenment. The Baroque gave way to the neo-classical period as the long post-Renaissance finally ended with the dawn of the Age of Reason. As with any question of aesthetic periodicity,

edge-cases can be difficult to distinguish, and the precise position of suggested boundaries is largely arbitrary. Baroque outliers exist in both directions outwith the 1625-1750 core period, and the Baroque manifested with different peculiarities and at different times across different European cultures. The critical and historical reluctance to admit to a significant baroque presence in English literature is being challenged by recent scholarship that re-evaluates many of the keystones of English literary study of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Where previously, canonical authors like Donne, Milton, and Marvell were celebrated by scholars for the unique originality of their works among English writers, they are lately coming to be recognized as having participated in an internationalist literary style that was the preeminent artistic form of its era.

> "It is ridiculous to assert that there is no English baroque: Donne's poems and sermons, the palaces and collections of the Stuart Kings, the music and machines of their masques, Milton's *Comus* and Marvell's *Nymph Complaining*, Purcell's *Funeral Music*, Blenheim and Seaton Delaval, the temple-scattered lake landscapes of Stourhead and Stowe, all of these are exercises in the cosmopolitan international mode, exercises in that international visual and verbal language which we call "baroque". But after Waterloo, the climate turned rainy and spiky, and Pugin and Ruskin contrasted the purities of Gothic with the international evils of the renaissance and those nameless decadences which followed it." (Davidson)

English literature in the period 1600-1750 was rich with baroque-inspired art of every form that, as Davidson and Shell argue, was quietly relabelled following the climactic battle of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. The wild and fecund proliferation of baroque art, and its immediate successor Rococo, came to be associated with continental decadence and corruption, in opposition to the cleaner, less cluttered and more piously constrained art forms of the Gothic and the neo-classical.

The belated recognition of an obfuscated English baroque marks an important departure from centuries of established criticism, and its stimulating impulse is as much political as it is purely

scholarly. As contemporary English culture has increasingly retreated from European cultural exchange, through its recent departure from the European Union, some scholars have sought out ways to undermine the deeply ingrained idea, historically supported in part by the internal marginalization of baroque influence, that English literature somehow emerged from, and now exists in, a splendid cultural isolation that owes nothing to the literary traditions of Europe as a whole. Vincent argues that "these new scholarly and theoretical trends reevaluate the baroque as an early modern style of globalization and colonization, but also as a postmodern style of pluralism and emancipation" (8). These thematic and formal connections between the baroque and the postmodern, and the positioning of the former as an internationalist style that embraces pluralistic approaches in service to questions of liberation, represent an important insight for explaining the relevance of their connection to comics writing, and the work of the British Invasion writers.

To understand how the maligned style of the baroque represents a crucial formative influence in English literature, it is necessary to gather some notes here towards a definition of baroque art as it has traditionally been understood. One of the key signifying features of the baroque is the presence of excess. "[E]xcess is *constitutive* of the Baroque, even if paradoxically constitutive, since excess is inimical to the very notion of coherent construction, debilitating even as it constitutes . . . The baroque, understood as a logic of excess, can lead to glory or catastrophe" (Burgard 13). Excess in scope, excess of detail, excess of ambition, excess of volume and excess in general as a guiding principle, are among the most readily identifiable features of baroque art. Even as this excessive character threatens to undermine the cohesion of the artistic form, it is unabashedly pursued by baroque artists. Baroque art is bigger than it needs to be, more complicated than it ought to be, more daring in its objectives, richer in its contents, and in every possible sense simply more fulsome and hyperbolic than the art of other eras. Baroque art is intended to overwhelm through its great unnecessary and often redundant surpluses. In addition to this inherent excessiveness, baroque art is often characterized by an ornate and alien oddness that provides "connotations of irregularity and strangeness, as well as other connotations of complexity,

dissonance, and excess" (Vincent 10). This "strangeness" of the baroque style might manifest as art that seems eerie, freakish, exotic, or grotesque in terms of its semantic content, or its formal and figural properties. Baroque art is adventurous, convoluted, and transgressive in its restless pursuit of elaborate complexity and the creation, often through jarring juxtaposition, of "dissonance". This quality of the baroque as dissonant and strange stems in part from its etymological origin in the Portuguese word *barroco*, referring to an irregularly-shaped pearl (Calloway 7). The baroque is self-consciously immersed in ideas of aesthetic beauty but it finds that beauty in deviation from the geometric certainties of classical aesthetics. Where the straight lines, flat planes, and flawless spheres and circles of Platonic ideals represent a divine uniform perfection of design, baroque turns away from these stable solar geometries towards serpentine, ruptured, flawed, and asymmetric forms and figures. In the writing of the baroque era, characters such as Cervantes's Don Quixote and Milton's Satan extend this alienating dissonance into the moral realm. Quixote is a myopic privileged fool, and a narcissistic self-styled saviour of those who do not need his help, and yet his moral character emerges as profoundly sympathetic – a man trying imperfectly to perform acts of what he believes goodness to be, against the backdrop of a baroque universe's mocking indifference. The Satan of *Paradise Lost* twists the expectations of the reader, presenting a compelling case for understanding the rule of the Christian God as a form of authoritarian patriarchal tyranny that denies any nuanced understanding of the moral complexity of mortal existence as one of His flawed creations.

I argue that if we consider the figure of the superhero in mainstream late twentieth century US comics, and how it was transformed by the arrival of the British Invasion writers, a parallel emerges with the preoccupations of baroque artists and writers. The baroque aversion to the simple certainties of classical design and its interest in the moral complexity of human nature are echoed in the British Invasion's shift away from the one-dimensional heroic fantasies of "Golden Age" and

"Silver Age"[20] comics set in cleanly gridded layouts that espouse the self-consciously unambiguous moral rectitude of their heroic fantasies. The formal innovations introduced by the British Invasion writers (as detailed in the last chapter, e.g., the decompressed style, manipulations of grid and gutter) greatly amplified the arthrological complications of comics reading, in effect expanding the spatio-topical grammar of comics to include newly dissonant techniques for parsing layouts. Vincent argues that "a baroque poetics emerged when authors became more focused on figural variation within individual poems than on variation of themes from one poem to another" (33), and in this figural (or formal) variation between texts that are thematically similar to each other, another baroque quality emerges in the comics works of the British Invasion writers. The multiframe symmetries in the fifth chapter of Moore's *Watchmen*, "Fearful Symmetry", and the book's strange temporal distortions, are a type of figural variation in comics page layouts and narrative flow that are later picked up and further developed by Morrison in *Pax Americana*. While these two books may be read as having similar themes, they approach the resolution of those thematic concerns from different, even opposite, angles. Where *Watchmen*'s Ozymandias decides that the murder of three million ordinary New Yorkers is the only way to ensure world peace, *Pax Americana*'s Peacemaker concludes that only one man needs to die to deliver the same outcome, and it is *Pax*'s Ozymandias analogue, President Harley. The figure of the classic all-American superhero as it is traduced across the works of the major British Invasion writers, from *Watchmen* and *Pax Americana* to Ennis's *The Boys*, and Ellis's *No Hero* and *Black Summer* (2007), represents a focused "figural variation" across numerous permutations, sharing a thematic intent, that all seek to complicate the supposed moral clarity of figures that Fredric Wertham and Walter Ong would have recognized as

[20] The Golden Age of (American) comics is reckoned to run from the late 1930s to the mid-1950s, and was succeeded by the Silver Age, which ends around 1970. The Bronze Age of comics runs for about fifteen years after the Silver Age and ends, uncoincidentally, at around the same time that the first works of the British Invasion writers began to be published in the US. The "Golden Age" coinage was minted by Richard Lupoff in 1960.

direct-line descendants of the Nietzschean Super-Man that underpinned the ideology of the Nazi state.

The arrival of this complexity, in a genre marked by the simplistic moral calculus of diametrically opposed heroes and villains, announces the emancipatory intent of the British Invasion writers. The degradation of the figure of the superhero was a necessary step in transcending the "herd mentality" that Ong warns of. The jejune ethical universe of the superheroes of the Golden, Silver, and Bronze ages needed to be exposed as participating in a nationalism-inflected oversimplification of the complex moral worlds inhabited by living human beings. Vincent describes how "contemporary English baroque authors mistrust the *clean and spare* style of *tyrannical simplification*. The baroque, in contrast, offers them a way to celebrate the logic of excess at the heart of life" (217-218). I argue that the formal and figural excesses of the British Invasion writers as a group, and their collective adversarial relationship to simplification, both in terms of the kinds of superheroes stories they would tell, and the means they would use to tell them, means that they ought to be considered as a key element of any contemporary British literary baroque, if not its most popular and critically-acclaimed forerunners. These writers uphold the excessive complexity of the human condition against the "tyrannical simplification" inscribed on the superhero genre, and on comics in general, by previous generations. There is a paradox inherent in this claim however, in that the historical baroque was not necessarily an emancipatory project. Vincent argues that: "the history of baroque propaganda makes it clear that the style is unusually amenable to authoritarianism and the politics of seduction" (215), and Cecchini notes that the historical baroque was "a protean phenomenon coinciding both with authoritarianism and aesthetic anarchy, with the strengthening of national identity and with individualistic extravagance and pathos, with the emergence of the scientific method and the encouragement of an emotional relationship with art" (Cecchini 654). From its birth among the fiercely independent and mutually hostile European city-states of the late medieval period, baroque artistic expression was an instrument of both martial nationalistic pride

and decadent personal indulgence. Baroque figurations come from an epistemological position that recognizes the rising primacy of science, while rejecting its totalizing claims of certainty.

While the Baroque is primarily recognized by the formal aesthetic features of excess, complexity, and dissonance that are discussed above, it is also, in part, an episteme. Baroque thinking, and the ways of knowing the world that such thinking produces, are a crucial factor in understanding why it gives rise to the formal variations by which it is known. Indeed, thought of this way, any aesthetic style represents an epistemic position from which the style is ultimately inextricable. Style and episteme are intertwined with each other at every level, and it is this epistemological quality of the baroque that sets it in radical opposition to the Renaissance that preceded it and to the neo-classicism of the Enlightenment that followed. For Cecchini, this baroque episteme is "a transhistorical sensibility more attuned to emotions, exceptions, and exaggerations than to general and objective rules – a form of knowledge that privileges imagination and intuition over reason" (654). Baroque thought rejects the stifling certainties of the scientific method in favour of the deeper human truths that may be arrived at through creative and instinctive fictions. For Vincent, the baroque "is the *art* of a world which has lost its center. The baroque is the translation of an episteme without center into art" (106). In this sense, the baroque is an aesthetic and epistemic principle that is always entangled with a kind of prescient apocalypticism. The baroque is the art of a world that is already in the throes of its own death and of its transformation into something new and unrecognizable.

In the context of an argument connecting the style and episteme of baroque art to the comics works of the writers of the British Invasion, a similar eschatological sensibility emerges as a reaction to the neoliberal world order heralded by the respective rises to power and influence of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US, at a moment when pre-millennial tensions were beginning to supplant Cold War anxieties in both British and American culture. The approach of the year 2000 was accompanied by diverse and widespread predictions of global

catastrophe and, more materially, the shifting of the centre of political gravity towards elite corporate power and away from the paternalist model of the state which had held sway for much of the late twentieth century. The early works of the British Invasion writers from *Watchmen*, *The Invisibles*, *The Sandman, Preacher*, and *Transmetropolitan*, all reflect the growing sense that the established global order of the twentieth century was something arbitrary, illusory, unstable, and ultimately bound to collapse. The taut buoyant rictus that characterized the face of the 1980s, which advocated greed as good and disavowed the possibility of society, was gradually giving way to a broader countercultural understanding of the world as a darker, more complex, more difficult milieu, which would require radically new epistemic and social approaches in order to navigate safely. This nuanced perspective on the predatory quality of the late-capitalist order, the apprehension of what Hunter S. Thompson described as the "grim meat-hook realities" (Thompson 178) that had been lying in wait all along for the hippies of the 1960s and 1970s, emerged primarily from the period between the slow collapse of the USSR (punctuated by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) and the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, the aftermath of which reasserted the brutal stark simplicity of the neoliberal global order in all its corporatized nationalistic fervor. In this sense, the British Invasion, and its enduring aesthetic influence, have a historical parallel with the artistic legacy of the baroque, marking the boundaries between the end of one world order and the rise of the next. As Vincent argues: "If not the end of the world, the baroque marks in any case the end of a world – the one marked by the optimism of the Renaissance – and inaugurates the emergence of new modalities of comprehending the universe and the individual" (105). While the baroque grew to prominence as a counter-reaction to Renaissance Europe's over-simplifying cultural propaganda, it would itself soon come to be treated with hostility by the Enlightenment's desire for a renewed moral clarity and aesthetic simplicity and its "distaste for things that are unnatural, intricate, confusing, and excessive to the point of absurdity" (Vincent 38). Baroque art's passion for profligate indulgence in complication, irregularity, and contradiction were at odds with the Enlightenment's Neoclassical love for clean, economical, geometric order. In a new

world order which located its own epistemic certainties in the perfect forms of Platonism and the mathematical proofs of Pythagoras and Archimedes, the Baroque's "excess of literary figuration is something later Neoclassical critics would ridicule as absurd" (Vincent 83). The later Neoclassical focus on the aesthetic principles of baroque art as incompatible with their more rarefied sensibilities, acts as cover for a deeper epistemic hostility to the logic underlying the expressions of baroque aesthetics. Because the aesthetics and the episteme from which they emerge are inseparable, disdain for one is axiomatically a disdain for the other.

The historical antagonism towards the notion of a British Baroque among scholars of English literature can be traced to its adversarial positioning relative to the empiricist philosophies of a national culture that came to deploy its devotion to science and scientific truth as a key justification (alongside, paradoxically, its protestant Christianity) for its enthusiastic participation in the colonization of indigenous people around the world. The disenchantment of the natural world which accompanied the Age of Reason left no room for the mystifications of the Baroque. This tension between the chilly clinical supremacy of unimpeachable scientific truth and the diverse intuitive epistemologies of the human world as it actually operated is a precursor to the ideological divide between the rival "empiricist" (mainly British) and "continental" (mainly European) traditions of philosophy that emerged in the nineteenth century. The presence of a legitimate baroque period in the canon of English literature would only undermine the ideological claim that British art and thought emerged in splendid isolation free from the corrupting influence of European decadence. Generations of scholars up to the present day have reinforced this distinction, giving the impression that "Anglophone culture thinks that it can write itself out of the international culture of the late Renaissance and the early modern world, indeed write itself out of international culture altogether" (Davidson). A historical analysis reveals a more complicated picture, where Anglophone writers of the baroque style have simply had the baroque qualities of their work ignored or relabelled as "metaphysical", a clumsy nomenclature which misunderstands both metaphysics and baroque poetry.

Popularized by the English writer Samuel Johnson, the adjective "metaphysical" as it was applied in post-Enlightenment England to poetry or to a poet was generally a sneering epithet designed to undermine their aesthetic value and credibility. In *The Lives of the Poets* (1781), Johnson's evaluation of the works of Abraham Cowley follows in the footsteps of John Dryden's critique of John Donne in identifying a distinct genre of English poetic production which eschewed the stately rhyme and meter, and the self-consciously didactic political mode, of post-Reformation Neoclassical poetics in favour of poetry that revelled in excesses of abstraction, complex allegorical play, tortuous formal innovation, and in difficult, unscientific philosophizing on the relationship between nature and the human condition. The members of this porous and shifting group of metaphysical poets included, depending on who was describing them, Abraham Cowley, Richard Crashaw, John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughn, while later scholars (such as Helen Gardner) have included John Milton and William Shakespeare as earlier precursors to the so-called metaphysical style. The disdain for this group among the Neoclassical poets of Enlightenment Britain was not limited to their aesthetic production, but, as suggested above, extended to their epistemic approach:

> "The meters of Crashaw and Cowley are irregular and out of proportion. Their metaphors are ridiculous and bizarre. Their syntax is excessively intricate. Their imagery is confusing and often pushed to absurdity. English literary critics since Johnson have called this style "metaphysical" – a word itself associated with the excesses of Scholastic reasoning." (Vincent 38)

There was a suspicion that the excessively "scholastic" nature of the works of the metaphysical poets made them unsuitable and ill-fitted in an English literary culture that still celebrated the metronomic monotony of iambic pentameter and treated allegory as a matter of simple one-to-one comparison. By naming this poetry as "metaphysical", Johnson, Dryden, and other Neoclassicists were able to recuperate it as authentically British cultural production without admitting to its

influences among continental European poetry of the period. This ought to be understood as a nationalistic subterfuge deliberately aimed at erasing the significant contributions of European, and largely Catholic, baroque poets to British literary cultures during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The reluctance to accept that the literary production of protestant England continued to be shaped in fundamental ways by the artistic output of contemporary European Catholics is a nakedly political and nationalistic position that elides the material history of the period, in favour of misnaming a genre in order to fabricate a particular false image of English literary culture as uniquely creative and refined. As Davidson and Shell argue, recognizing the existence of a British baroque is a first step in breaking down this self-mythologizing grandiosity: "Naturalising the idea of baroque verse would, though, make life easier, and bypass the political implications of 'metaphysical': a term which tells one less about literary characteristics than about how the English have wished to be seen" (Davidson). The recurrence of these well-defined literary characteristics of the baroque within the canon of English literature indicate the unmistakable presence of a subversive, even counter-cultural, epistemic perspective that threatens the presumed historical and philosophical purity of some of the canon's most historically prominent writers. As Vincent argues: "It is no coincidence that English critics from Drummond to Johnson describe this "metaphysical" style the same way that Enlightenment critics describe the logic of *Baroco* or the style of perplexingly ornate music, architecture, and painting. After all, they are describing the same thing. They are describing the baroque" (39).

The Baroque, then, is a term that not only represents an aesthetic tradition with its own distinct signature features, but also represents an epistemic rejection of simplicity, clarity, and parsimony as normative principles. For Vincent, baroque "is the name for a logic that moves a system to excess . . . Indeed, anything can be called baroque if it exhibits outlandish complexity or absurd confusion . . . Scholars have long appreciated the unique aesthetic traits of the baroque, including hyperbole, the fold, the spiral, the painterly, fragmentation, parody, and abstraction" (Vincent 39). The fold referred to here was theorized by Gilles Deleuze as the single most important

stylistic feature and epistemic principle of baroque art. For Deleuze, baroque art is formed and recognized by its willingness, or perhaps even its compulsion, to continually fold and unfold:

> "The Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds. It does not invent things: there are all kinds of folds coming from the East, Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, Classical folds. . . Yet the Baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other. The Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity." (Deleuze 5)

Deleuze describes the physical folds of baroque architecture, and the way that the baroque episteme intertwines bodies and souls to form "pleats of matter" (11) which have at once a mortal animality and a transcendent infinity. Through this inextricable braiding of material and divine, the baroque rejects the possibility of any singular or objective truth. The infinite folding of baroque epistemology generates instead a provisional model of reality which draws its descriptive and explanatory force from its interleaved plurality. Deleuze is at pains to point out that this is not simply moral relativism as it is commonly understood: "It is not a variation of truth according to the subject, but the condition in which the truth of a variation appears to the subject. This is the very idea of Baroque perspective" (20). This conception of the Baroque is of great importance in assessing what might be considered baroque literature. The folding together of different perspectives to form a multiplicitous understanding of reality bears a striking formal resemblance to the "parallax" style of narration later employed by the UK modernists of the early twentieth century. Were the historical hostility of the English literary establishment towards the baroque less intense, it might be more common for scholarship to recognize that the British modernists were engaged in a kind of covert Baroque revival. From Woolf's folding of multiple perspectives in pursuit of more perfect mimesis, Eliot's analysis and imitation of the metaphysical poets, through Joyce's riotously elaborate formal excesses, to Pound's iconoclastic injunctions to bury the art of the old world and devise new and dissonant forms, I argue that the leading lights of US/UK modernism in the early years of the

twentieth century represent the emergence of a long-suppressed baroque style and episteme into English literature.

If, as Vincent argues, any literary work or body of work that exhibits the specific mixture of stylistic features can be called baroque, then the works of the British Invasion authors, with their profusions of hyperbole, fragmentation, parody, abstraction, and folds, might most accurately be characterized as being part of a new Baroque era of literary production. The system of comics, the spatio-topical system theorized by Groensteen, is moved to exceed its conventional bounds by the restless formal innovations in the comics of the British Invasion writers. From the overwhelming abundance of detail and story packed into every page of *Transmetropolitan*, to the scholastically dense and allusive intertextuality of *The Invisibles*, the expansively ornate and complex storylines of *the Sandman*, and the often grotesquely dissonant over-indulgences of *The Boys*, the generic features of baroque art are present in different degrees across the whole span of works produced by the British Invasion authors. While these books demonstrate a sharp sense of political satire, they are more often focused philosophically on recognizably baroque ideas about the relationship between the individual and the world, and the nature of the human condition, exhibiting a baroque epistemic sensibility. While they circle around similar themes through the courses of their stories, they represent a set of quite distinct variations on the figure of the superhero. *Watchmen*, as the book which enabled and formed the foundation of the British Invasion, is an exemplary text in this regard. Moore and Gibbons's story is a story without a centre, without a true protagonist, that folds together a number of possible superhero perspectives and subject positions. It is a story about the end of one world, and the advent of a new way of thinking and living. It is a formally excessive and adventurous work of narrative comics art that manipulates its internal chronology in unusual and dissonant ways, and which tests the limits of the signifying language of panels and page layouts. It seems odd then, given its markedly baroque construction and epistemic foundation, that *Watchmen*

is often hailed as a triumphantly postmodern comic and has even been called a deconstruction of the figure of the superhero, when postmodernism and deconstruction are among the least of its influences. Moore draws more heavily on a blend of pop culture and the traditions of the baroque than he leans on any strictly postmodern apparatus. The later part of this chapter will address the relationship of the British Invasion writers to modernism and postmodernism in more detail, but this confusion marks another example of the reluctance of English language scholarship to admit to the deep persistent influence of baroque aesthetics on English literature.

One of *Watchmen*'s clearest baroque features is its focus on the relationship between humanity (or superhumanity) and nature. The universe of *Watchmen*, seen through the eyes of its supreme being Dr. Manhattan, is a strictly deterministic one. The putative free will of its characters is questionable at best, set against the workings of a cosmos that operates with the careful deliberate precision of a watch. Mortal human beings are bound to run along the fore-ordained tracks laid down for them by fate, unwittingly following their own immutable nature to its end. The conflicts and tensions that arise between them are functions of this fixed unchanging quality of their personhood. Even the narrative arcs of character development, such as Manhattan's sympathetic shift towards humanity, the Comedian's sad journey towards isolation and estranged fatherhood, Dreiberg's re-awakening to his own mediocre heroism, Ozymandias's ascent into supervillainy, and Rorschach's transition from traumatized psychopath to conscientious moral objector, are less changes in the personalities of the characters themselves than revelations of their true nature. Their respective destinies are inescapable from the moment that Ozymandias puts his diabolical plan into motion. This is a universe from which a divine presence is implicitly absent, given Manhattan's omniscient perspective. There is no internally stable moral framework by which the story sides with one or other of the central characters, only their rival moral tendencies competing with each other for recognition. The ruthless utilitarianism of Ozymandias, prepared to sacrifice three million New Yorkers for a chance at ending the Cold War before it turns hot, is opposed to the libertarian moral imperatives of Rorschach, who hunts down and murders individual criminals and refuses, at the cost

of his life, to be complicit in the mass murder to which the others consent. These are the two primary poles of the book's moral universe, neither of which has any real claim to superiority over the other, although Dan, Laurie, and ultimately Ostermann, find themselves coerced into supporting Ozymandias's position. This is, in a sense, a recapitulation of the Trolley Problem of moral philosophy, highlighting the irreconcilable tension between utilitarian ideas and Kantian deontological notions. Ozymandias sees a way to pull a (figurative) lever that will sacrifice some to avoid what he perceives as the inevitable death of many more. For Rorschach, and notably only for Rorschach, it is not morally permissible to pull this lever under any circumstances, no matter how many people it might save in the long run. Rorschach makes a poor avatar for deontological ethics of course, with his own long-standing professional commitment to extrajudicial murder. Outside of this polar moral schema is the Comedian, whose belligerently amoral and self-serving ideology belies the hyper-masculine nationalism that he evinces in life. It is however Dr. Manhattan's bowing to the superiority of Ozymandias's plan that reveals the moral emptiness that pervades *Watchmen*'s world. Even this being of supernatural sentience and puissance is persuaded in the end by the argument that what is done is done, and it would be more harmful to attempt to revert it.

The universe of *Watchmen* is one in which morality is formed and defined by those human beings who exercise it, rather than existing as some innate property of the metaphysical cosmos, and this, beyond any purely formal considerations of the work, is an essentially Baroque position. As Vincent says of the historical Baroque: "While the baroque image of nature led some to joy, it made others mourn. A world with no center and a universe with no end upset previous understandings of the harmonious proportions of nature" (65). The world of *Watchmen* is such a world without a moral centre, and its universe is the infinitely, intricately folded relativistic space of what Deleuze calls "perspectivism" (20). Deleuze argues that this specific understanding of perspective as a fundamental principle for the construction and ordering of reality belongs to a Baroque paradigm wherein "point of view is a variation or a *power of arranging cases*, a condition for the manifestation of reality" (22). This epistemic position eschews the putative scientific certainties of objectivity, the

view from nowhere, to insist that reality can not meaningfully be said to exist until a perspective on it has been created. Once a particular perspective on reality exists, it becomes part of an arrangement of cases or arguments about reality that themselves constitute the manifestation of reality. This is in part to say that reality is social, and emerges from the interactions between perspectives. This idea, first formalized in the aesthetics of the Baroque, later picked up by the modernist English literature writers of the early twentieth century, has more recently become one of the foundational philosophical touchstones of postmodern thought, following Lyotard's observation about the decay in credibility of the traditional grand or master narratives and the consequent fragmentation of public attempts to make sense of material history (Lyotard 8). This fragmentation is not an atomization into individuated particles cut free from all social bonds, but, as in *Watchmen*, the formation of new communities of shared experience and perspective in opposition to misleading and totalizing objective conceptions of the reality of the world.

Another way in which the epistemic complexity of the Baroque emerges through the works of the British Invasion authors is seen in the published comics scripts written by those authors as part of the process for creating some of the British Invasion's most notable works. An emblematic example is Alan Moore's script for the first panel of the first page of *Watchmen*, in which Moore uses an entire typed page of the manuscript to describe in baroquely intricate detail the contents of the single panel that opens the comic[21]. The level of complexity in the signifying detail that Moore requires for this single crucial panel, as well as his excessively verbose style of communication with Dave Gibbons, the illustrator, underline not only the British Invasion's foundational commitment to the aesthetic of the baroque, but also reveal the hypertrophic epistemic mode from which that commitment emerged. Moore first describes the hyperframe of the first page, before zeroing in on the details he wants to see in the first panel, providing Gibbons with the option to include a thematically relevant candy wrapper but asking him to use his artistic judgement as to whether the

[21] Appendix, Fig. 2.2.

addition is necessary. Apart from the notes about detail, Moore also provides Gibbons here with his reasoning, explaining the stylistic goal he is aiming for as the primary objective, over and above any considerations of *mise-en-scene*. Moore is keen to draw Gibbons into his own baroque epistemic position as a full creative collaborator rather than treating him as a prosthesis to the creative process. A similar degree of attention to fine detail that may or may not appear in the final comic is evident in Grant Morrison's script for issue one of *The Invisibles*[22]. Morrison lays out for the illustrator the references they are intending to draw attention to, (e.g., the Pollock Free State protests), and focuses on the intangible affective character of the sequence rather than the concrete formal representation they want to be produced. In contrast to these two British Invasion scripts we might consider the script of a Marvel contemporary such as Chris Claremont, whose partial script for the "Court Costs" story in *Solo Avengers #14: She-Hulk* (1989)[23], is published on the personal website of illustrator Alan Davis[24]. Claremont, an exemplar of the Marvel style of scriptwriting of this period, adopts a much looser approach in his scripts, particularly as regards the pacing and the breakdown of story beats into particular panels. The first paragraph of the script presented here was translated by Davis into a full-page panel to open the story[25], before breaking down into a more regular grid that captures the action of the rest of this script page over the following three pages of the finished comic. Absent from Claremont's script, relative to those of Moore and Morrison, is the fine-grained attention to the graphic contents of individual panels, and the careful construction of an epistemic position that is to be shared by writer and illustrator. The Invasion scripts are noticeably more focused on the fragments that comprise the whole, and the purpose of each of those fragments, while Claremont's script addresses the whole directly, leaving the composition of the fragments almost entirely to the illustrator.

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[22] Appendix, Fig. 2.3.
[23] Appendix, Fig. 2.4.
[24] From http://www.alandavis-comicart.com/scripts.html
[25] Appendix, Fig. 2.5.

The fragmentation of wholes evident in Baroque aesthetics is not simply a stylistic quirk, but the reflection of a human world that was shattered into epistemic chaos by the advent of modernity. "Walter Benjamin . . . argued that baroque authors did not imitate nature as much as they responded to its "fallen, fragmented" state in the modern world . . . the baroque is a melancholic reaction to a modernity of catastrophic fragmentation" (Vincent 67). In this understanding of the Baroque, the fractured assemblages of baroque art are not a representation of nature as such, but of the flawed and sorrowful state of humanity caught between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment Age of Reason. In *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1920), Benjamin writes that the disenchanting effect of these new scientific and broadly secular epistemes gave rise to the eschatological tendencies of Baroque art:

> "The beyond is emptied of everything in which even the slightest breath of world can be felt, and from it the Baroque extracts a profusion of things that tended to elude every formation and at its high point brings them to light in drastic form so as to clear a last heaven and to place it, as a vacuum, in a condition to swallow up the earth one day with catastrophic violence." (*Origin*, 50)

This emptying of the beyond, occasioned by the demystification of the medieval world with the arrival of the scientific method, produced an almost perverse Baroque fascination with the apocalyptic power still exercised by those numinous superstitions. Where science and reason sought to explain the world, and the cosmos, within a single, universal, totalizing set of terms, the Baroque "promoted an image of the world as infinitely heterogeneous" (Vincent 41). In the absence of a singular understanding of divinity, baroque authors turned towards the hypertrophic excess, dissonant diversity of form, and intricate overcomplication they saw in nature: "They cling to nature to find God. The baroque is mimetic insofar as it allegorizes natural forms to redeem the world" (Vincent 68). Baroque authors were engaged in an effort to rescue the numinous experience of art from a fallen, disenchanted world by reproducing the infinitely folded quality of a social reality that

defied simplistic attempts to describe and explain it. This reproduction of reality in baroque art is never straightforward, but heightened and hyperbolized, allegorizing the properties of nature's forms as rhetorical figures within works of Baroque writing.

The legacy of a Baroque aesthetic that deliberately indulges in excessive complexity, confusing dissonance, and recursive repetition with the aim of more perfectly describing the reality of a fallen world can be seen not only in the works of the British modernist writers of the early twentieth century, and indeed the works of the British Invasion comics writers, but in much of the critical theoretical writing of the late twentieth century, especially that of the French poststructuralists. In the difficult and abstracted rhetorical constructions of Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and those who later expanded poststructuralism into new territories, including Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Wendy Brown, Rey Chow, Luce Irigaray, Peggy Kamuf, and Umberto Eco, the signature Baroque features of excessive elaboration, cognitive dissonance, and filigreed, fine-grained complication of detail, are a unifying stylistic and epistemic characteristic of poststructuralist writing. Deconstruction, the term of poststructuralism which has been most successful in escaping purely poststructuralist discourses, is a distinctly Baroque category of aesthetic analysis. With its focus on the importance of peripheral details, its search for internally dissonant and oppositional readings contained within a text, and its hostility to the neat Neoclassical simplicity of perfect Platonic essences, Derridean deconstruction is an approach to reading that brings the epistemic confusion of Baroque literature to bear on the certainties of modernity in a postmodern context. The most common frustrations with poststructuralist writing, that it is abstruse, obscurantist, overly verbose, internally inconsistent, and at times bewilderingly complex or nonsensically allegorical, echo almost exactly the frustrations that the Neoclassical episteme expressed about the Baroque. In this sense, poststructuralist writing represents a similar reaction against the "tyrannical simplification" (Vincent 217) of the complexity of the human condition as that which was expressed by the authors of the historical Baroque. Emerging in the latter half of the twentieth century, from a postwar world in which the moral

superiority of Western democratic values had been asserted and proven by military contest, poststructuralism worked to undermine the self-assured meaningfulness of this new era by challenging the very basis of meaning itself. The dialectical opposition of the liberal, democratic allied countries to the oppressive, totalitarian axis states was taken to be as clear as good versus evil, right against wrong, light and dark. Poststructuralism, and Derridean deconstruction in particular, attacked this staging indirectly and implicitly, attacking the Hegelian understanding of dialectics to argue that binary oppositions of the sort deployed by Hegel, where thesis and antithesis produce synthesis, lacked sufficient nuance, failed to account for the complexities of human nature, and were ultimately fatally flawed when it came to describing reality.

Derrida's deconstructive approach, developed across his body of work from *Of Grammatology* (1967), through *Dissemination* (1969) to *Specters of Marx* (1993), suggests that only by addressing a multiplicity of perspectives could anything resembling a complete picture of reality be assembled. This insight is rooted in the foundational poststructuralist idea that meaning does not inhere to an essence, that is, that words do not draw their meaning from some Platonic realm of forms upon which language rests, but that meaning emerges from difference and contrast between words. This position decentralizes the reading subject, who may naively have assumed that the meaning they understood from a given text was universal and fixed, in favour of an understanding of meaning as something always fluid and unstable, contingent upon the reader. The coherence of any particular text's meaning is always a function, for poststructuralists, of the reading that is brought to, or imposed upon, it. The parallel between this poststructuralist epistemic understanding, of aesthetics drawing from the tangible matter of an imperfect world rather than from the beyond, and the governing episteme of Baroque art is no coincidence, but rather the legacy of a *refusenik* continental philosophical tradition that is suspicious of mere empiricism's claim to a singular, totalizing truth. For Baroque writers, and for the (broadly) Marxian critical theorists and poststructuralists of the late twentieth century, truth was itself a form of illusion, and the self-conscious illusions of artists, philosophers, and writers, had an equal claim to represent the truth:

> "Baroque art, like early modern science, was rooted in the understanding that a fabricated image could not only reveal the truth but also be the truth. As Gilles Deleuze explains, "[T]he Baroque entails neither falling into nor emerging from illusion but rather *realizing* something in illusion itself . . . The Baroque artists know well that hallucination does not feign presence, but that presence is hallucinatory." This double movement between the illusion of reality and the reality of illusion is a hallmark of baroque aesthetics."
>
> (Vincent 203)
>
> Internal quote from Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold* (125).

Poststructuralism, which more than any other school of philosophy has come to represent the intellectual traditions of postmodernism, was always already baroque. I argue that it is the elision of a baroque genealogy in the scholarship of English literature that has led to a broad misunderstanding of the works of the British Invasion comics authors as postmodernist when they are, for the most part, more accurately described as being works of the neo-Baroque. This is not to say that all postmodernism can necessarily trace a baroque lineage. Poststructuralism is a distinct school of thought within the more general postmodernist movement whose own aesthetic and epistemic focuses are multiplicitous and wide-ranging, but are, as Lyotard suggests, focused around challenging and dismantling the master-narratives of modernity whose cultural weight supported the enterprises of imperial colonialism and capitalism. Poststructuralism, in contrast, focuses very specifically on the way that meaning is produced by the interaction of a given text with the contexts in which it was created and is encountered. It is this quite narrow concern with the meaning-making relationship between texts and contexts that distinguishes poststructuralism from the larger postmodernist project, and which illustrates the poststructuralist (though not otherwise postmodern) influence in the works of the British invasion authors, whose works do more than other comics of the era in terms of establishing their own relationship to a broader social, cultural, and political context.

2.3 Images and Symbols: Modernism, Post-Modernism, and the British Invasion.

The question of what postmodernism is, exactly, is one that has arguably never been settled to anyone's lasting satisfaction. From Fredric Jameson's deceptively provocative claim that postmodernism is "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson iv), to Jean-Francois Lyotard's argument that postmodernism emerges from a twentieth-century "incredulity to metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984 xxiv), the putative range and scope of postmodernism remains one of the great contested fields of literary scholarship. Postmodernism is said to include theoretical arguments as various as those of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Guy Debord, Alain Badiou, and Michel Foucault, as well as the psycho-analytical rivalries of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan. This focus on white, male, French scholars as some of the most recognizable touchstones of postmodernism is at risk of eliding the equally (or in some cases more) important contributions of thinkers such as Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Kimberle Crenshaw, Frantz Fanon, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha – among many possible others. The first question about the term postmodernism then, perhaps ought to be about whether a single term that can encompass the diverse and heterogeneous work of all of these many thinkers can ever do meaningful explicatory or descriptive work.

The prefix "post" naturally suggests that some element of periodicity is in play, and in order to move towards a closer understanding of how the term emerged, it is worth looking first at the modernist movement to which postmodernism exists (at least in terminology) as either a successor or a reaction to. The modernist movement, arriving with or shortly before the dawn of the twentieth century, is almost as susceptible to competing characterizations as postmodernism, though, at least in the UK and the US, it is primarily viewed through the lens of a relatively smaller number of writers who for the most part practiced modernism in the context of their own creative works, rather than theorizing it in the context of academic scholarship. Indeed, the theorization of modernism's wider cultural ramifications has largely been left to the postmoderns. Chapter three of this dissertation

analyzes the postmodern and poststructuralist relation to figures of otherness in more detail. The fourth section of this chapter uses the examples of *Watchmen* and *Doktor Sleepless* to analyse the extent to which dialectical figures, which themselves trace a lineage from the Baroque through the postmodern, have influenced the graphic narratives of the British Invasion writers. The rest of this section argues that the foundational work of the British Invasion, Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, generates a critique of the distinction between image and symbol that is emblematic of the British Invasion's engagement with modernist preoccupations.

For Ezra Pound, the propulsive, insistent, disruptive demand of literary modernism could later be summed up in the simple instruction to "Make it new!" (Pound 1934 xv). This mandate for novelty extended not just to questions of content (writing about new kinds of things) but also questions of style and form (writing in new kinds of ways). Pound was therefore something of an early gatekeeper for this new movement, and it was principally his cohorts and favourites that came to define the early period of literary modernism in both the UK and US. Writers such as T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce became the most enduringly recognizable names associated with the flowering of modernism as a literary movement in the UK, often in part because of their proximity to Pound. The rise of the imagist movement in poetry was in many ways emblematic of modernism's antagonism to what was perceived as the obsolete, decadent, and formally exhausted late-or post-Romantic poetry of the Victorian era. Though Pound was not the progenitor of imagism, within a few years he had assumed a foundational importance in the movement with his poem, "In a Station of the Metro", which J. T. Barbarese identifies as "imagism's enabling text" (Barbarese 89).

Imagism brought together a number of the threads of Pound's conception of literary modernism. Barbarese describes it as "essentially an elliptical approach to poetic design, substituting juxtaposed for connected meanings" (Barbarese 75). This approach depends upon the imagination of the reader to devise for themselves a meaningful connection between the juxtaposed images that

is explicitly not provided for in the body of the text. “In a Station of the Metro” (Pound) presents a relatively simple and manageable example of this:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
>
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

The colon at the end of the first line simultaneously implies a simile while explicitly ruling it out. There are faces in the crowd, and there are petals on a wet, black bough. There is no clear sense of a metaphorical relation between these parts, but their colon-hinged proximity to each other all but forces the necessity of a connection upon the reader. Neither is either of these two parts a symbol for anything other than itself, according to the poet. Pound insisted that “Imagisme is not symbolism” and conceived of imagism as, at least in part, a rupture from the dishonest rhetoric of the Symbolists that preceded them.

This rejection of symbolism is an important part of imagism, but it is also somewhat disingenuous, or it misunderstands how symbols function. Pound’s insistence that the image is not a symbol is part of a tradition of literary production that assigns total control over the text to the writer, and which sees the reader as a completely passive consumer of the writer’s meaning. This autocratic approach to signification, where the author is presumed to hold full control over how their work might make meaning, is an element of modernist artistic production, and particularly of Pound’s artistic production, that has since been almost entirely superseded by the theoretical work of the poststructuralists, most notably with Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” (1967). While Pound may not have intended his “faces in the crowd” or the “petals” or the “wet, black bough” as symbols, this does not prevent them from taking on symbolic value for the reader. It is not unreasonable, with the benefit of hindsight, to argue that the subjective mimetic relation of faces to petals “In a Station of the Metro” functions as a symbolic representation of imagism itself, or of Pound’s modernist work more generally.

This question of the tension between the image and the symbol is an important issue when considering *Watchmen*. The comic is marked, from its first panels, and then repeatedly throughout the book, with the image of a yellow smiley face. This image is at first the badge worn by the Comedian, Edward Blake, which is found by Rorschach after his murder and presented to Nite Owl. The image recurs again on the Martian surface, as Dr. Manhattan ends his sabbatical meditation from earth. The image of the smiley face in the 1980s might be read differently on each side of the Atlantic. In the UK, the smiley face was perhaps most commonly known as a symbol of the Acid House rave culture movement, while in the US it had a looser, blander, and more purely positive connotation, often appearing on bumper-stickers alongside the expression "Shit happens", as in the movie *Forrest Gump*. So, the yellow smiley face pin badge was already a symbol in use across the English-speaking world when Moore wrote *Watchmen*, but Moore's deployment of it seems to reject either of these symbolic associations. In *Watchmen*, the smiley face seems to purport to be a pure image in the mode of Pound, freed from the necessity of serving as a symbol by its occurrence across a range of narrative scenarios that bear little coherent consistency other than that they belong to the same story. It is tempting though, for the reader to try to read the smiley face as a symbol anyway, in the context of the book, and it is not impossible to do so. The smiley face might stand in for the Comedian's sneering, mocking nihilism in which there is no point to human social existence other than to please oneself. Equally, the smiley face might stand for Dr. Manhattan's cold-blooded and inhuman exploration of his own morality. Increasingly bereft of empathy and human connection, the smiley face left on the Martian surface by Manhattan might represent his placid, fatalistic resignation to the inexorability of human mortality. The smiley face pin badge, as it is used by Rorschach, becomes a token of proof, evidence of Blake's murder when presented to Dan Dreiberg, and in that context might be a symbol of the pointlessness of allowing oneself to become subordinated to government authority. *Watchmen*'s smiley face then is an image and a symbol. It is in some sense irreducible to simile or metaphor, but it can symbolize different things at different moments of the story. In the end, the image of the smiley face (with its signature stain) is the

enduring and recognizable symbol of the book and story of *Watchmen* in its totality, the mindless grin and sunburst yellow adorning the cover of every published collection of the work. Asking what the symbol of the smiley face means is simply a less compelling question than asking what are the ways that the image of the smiley face can make meaning, and it is this second, more complex question that is at the heart of *Watchmen*'s graphic narrative and its enduring canonical significance as a work of comics art.

The smiley face, often smeared with blood or otherwise stained, appears more than fifty times throughout *Watchmen*'s twelve chapters. For Dietrich, this image signifies that "[t]he search for order is doomed to failure" (125). The desire for order, which is a desire to see the order in things, "is symbolized in a stain, one that first appears on a smiley face button" (Dietrich 126). The blood smeared across the eye of the smiley face marks the impossibility of any cosmic order ever being made visible. This image of an eye marked or stained by some kind of smear is one that turns up repeatedly in the comic. Dietrich lists a number of instances, but one of the most formally striking is the appearance on the first page of chapter seven, where the googles hanging around the neck of the unused Nite Owl costume are seen, reflecting the large ocular windows at the front of the owlship. A smear runs across the lens of the goggles, passing across the "eye" of the reflected owlship and the page's third panel reveals that this smear is a kind of negative smear – caused by Laurie drawing her finger through the accumulation of dust that has built up on the Nite Owl costume. She then walks over to the owlship and draws her hand across the window, reproducing the same shaped smear there (*Watchmen* 213). The smear in both cases here is a revelatory intervention rather than an obscuring one. The smear on the owlship's window, in later panels in this chapter, allows "natural" colour to pass through the grey film of age that otherwise obscures the ship's interior (219). Laurie then cleans the goggles with a duster and Dreiberg holds them over her eyes to demonstrate their functionality, saying "no matter how black it got, when I looked through these goggles . . . Everything was clear as day" (221). The goggles are then returned to their place in storage and are shown once more before Dreiberg and Laurie return upstairs to the apartment. In

this final glimpse, the lens of the goggles is clear, and unstained, reflecting only the silhouette of Dreiberg as he closes the basement door. This chapter is an important moment in both the relationship between Laurie and Dan, and Dreiberg's own transition out of the inertia he has found himself stuck in and back towards his heroic calling. The clearing of the smear from the eye marks the moment in which not just his positive conception of his own identity, but his libidinous desire is returned. This sits uneasily with Dietrich's observation that: "We are the shadows. We are the stains. We are what gets in the way of seeing. We are what we see" (Dietrich 129).

2.4. Dialectic Dissonance: *Watchmen* and *Doktor Sleepless*

The publication of *Watchmen* as twelve single issues through 1986, later collected and marketed very successfully as a complete graphic novel from 1987, was arguably the catalysing event that made the entire British Invasion possible. The commercial success of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), published by DC the year prior to *Watchmen*'s run, which similarly brought an energetic formal aesthetic to a dark and gritty update of a established characters, may have helped to initially assure comics publishers that a market existed for such properties. Yet, while *TDKR* has taken its place as one among many rival representations of Batman, *Watchmen* has found a towering canonical importance within comics scholarship, alongside other works of historic political and artistic significance, such as Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1981), Bechdel'*s Fun Home* (2006), and Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000). This canonical centrality has fed into a tendency to distort evaluations of *Watchmen*'s literary value. This is not to say that *Watchmen* is not worthy of deep critical consideration, it assuredly is, but that in relative terms it is not so much more artful or dense with literary flair than many other (ostensible) superhero comics by other mature, confident creators at their creative and intellectual peak.

The relatively hyperbolic scholarly, commercial, and critical fascination with *Watchmen* is worth examining in closer detail for what it reveals about comics and their critics. It is not simply the meaning of the story presented in the comic itself, but what *Watchmen*, as an aesthetic moment in comics history, has come to mean that has led it to be held in such high esteem. As the inciting event of the British Invasion, *Watchmen* has come to be held as retrospectively prototypical of the Invasion's formal preoccupations and exemplary of its thematic concerns. In the course of this widespread scholarly celebration however, the arguments about what *Watchmen* means have often become disjointed from what *Watchmen* actually says, or does. There are, as suggested above, a great number of scholarly critical analyses that purport to explain *Watchmen* in terms of how its deliberately heavy symbolism and temptingly allegorical plot ought to be understood. Perhaps the

most common descriptor attached to *Watchmen* (and often to the other major works of the British Invasion writers, such as *Flex Mentallo,* or *Planetary*) by comics scholars is that of "postmodern" or "postmodernist", closely followed by the claim that it is "deconstructive", and these terms are occasionally used interchangeably.

For example, Brent Fishbaugh claims that "(t)he work began to take on a much more postmodern feel as the layers of the book began to deepen" (Fishbaugh 191). Bryan Dietrich calls it "the grandchild of Postmodern masters such as Barth, Borges, Nabokov, Vonnegut and Woolf" (Dietrich 120). Graham Murphy has called *Watchmen* "a deliberately deconstructionist exploration of the superhero genre" (Murphy 2). Adnan Mahmutovic says that "(t)he creativity of *Watchmen* is often highlighted with reference to its postmodern experimentation with narrative form . . . employment of pastiche (Jameson), deconstruction (Derrida), crisis of epistemology and deep concern with ontology (Lyotard, Heidegger, McHale)" (Mahmutovic 2). Mervi Miettinen has claimed that "*Watchmen* deconstructs the superhero genre by rewriting masculine tropes such as vigilantism and patriotism and by exposing the inherent contradictions within" (Miettinen 104). Kathryn Frank states that "deconstructive or postmodern use of form and language are two of the most explored topics in *Watchmen* scholarship" (Frank 1). Ho-Rim Song argues that "the novel illustrates the postmodern understanding of interpretation of text and reality through the destruction of the traditional relationship between text and reader" (Song 118). Stacy Ryan Ange suggests that "Moore's deconstruction of the superhero archetype, in some ways, was meant to shed light on the darker aspects of superheroes, namely, their fascist undercurrents" (Ange 7), and further that "*Watchmen* is a postmodern statement on the nature of power, authority, and how one constructs a morality in the absence of God" (Ange 10). Iain Thomson notes that it was by its "revolutionary reorientation of the entire genre of superhero comic books that *Watchmen* established itself as a great work, a work of postmodern deconstruction" (Thomson 104). There are uncountably many more similar such declarations in the copious scholarly literature about *Watchmen*. I argue that this virtually unanimous critical consensus about *Watchmen* being a literary expression of postmodern

aesthetics, and more specifically, that it is a work preoccupied with the Derridean practice of deconstruction, is based on a handful of related misunderstandings about postmodernism, deconstruction, and the literary traditions from which *Watchmen* emerges. Deconstruction is at its heart a process interested in opposing binary figures, but which approaches these antinomial figures differently to Hegel's own dialectic understanding. A dialectical Hegelian reading of a text like *Watchmen* would seek to identify a thesis interpretation and an opposing antithesis interpretation, from the interaction between which the true synthesis interpretation could emerge as a kind of hidden aporia that was there all along. By contrast, for the deconstructionist, the meaning of a text always evades any final closure or identification. While deconstruction tracks the emergence of competing hypotheses about the interpretation of a text, it seeks to use these to open or widen the range of possible interpretive responses about a text's meaning, rather than to fix it as a consequence of the interaction of those hypotheses.

First and foremost, deconstruction is self-consciously an intervention into the possible interpretation of the text. It does not pretend to an objective epistemic posture whereby it might claim some access to impartial truth: "Deconstruction, I have insisted, is never neutral. It intervenes." (Derrida "Response" 58). Deconstruction is not in the business of merely illuminating some pre-existing interpretive facet of a text. It is a stratagem, or ruse, of the interpreter, intended to engage with a text as a multivalent meaning-making object without lapsing into totalizing claims about some encoded or ulterior meaning that text might be seen to possess. Through this stance, Derrida's deconstruction is actively opposed to the discursive projects of the Hegelian dialectic: "Were there a definition of *différance*, it would be precisely the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian sublation everywhere that it is operative" (Derrida "Positions" 35). The figure of the Hegelian *aufhebung*, the sublation or idealization of a definitive dialectical synthesis from the rival interpretive strata of thesis and antithesis out of which it is supposed to emerge, is fundamentally at odds with deconstruction's project of overturning the binary oppositions upon

which such readings depend. For Derrida, such binary oppositions overlook the quality of hierarchy that is already inherent in their structure:

> One of the two terms controls the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), holds the superior position. To deconstruct the opposition is first, at a given moment, to overthrow the hierarchy. To neglect this phase of inversion is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of the opposition. It is then to move too quickly, without keeping a hold on the previous opposition to a *neutralization* which, *in practice*, would leave the previous sphere intact, would entail giving up all means of actually *intervening* there."
>
> ("Positions" 36, italics in original)

In practice, while the Hegelian dialectical operation seeks to synthesize two competing discourses of interpretation to generate its synthetic third term, thereby preserving the structural relations of the hierarchy that forms and is formed by those rival discourses, deconstruction approaches the same competing discourses aiming to stage an interpretive intervention that interrogates and accounts for the nature of the hierarchy that characterizes their relationship in the first place. Deconstruction centres its interpretive focus on the "simulative units, "false" verbal, nominal or semantic properties, which escape from inclusion in the philosophical (binary) opposition and which nonetheless inhabit it, resist and disorganize it, but *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever occasioning a solution in the form of speculative dialectics" ("Positions" 36, italics in original). The generation of a conclusive synthesis from these conflicting simulative units, as in the speculative dialectics of Hegel, is, for Derrida, a kind of betrayal of a text's openness to interpretation. The function of deconstruction as a critical enterprise is to work against this "incessant reappropriation" ("Positions" 36) of the simulative properties of a text towards reconciliation by Hegelian idealism, and to reject the consequent resolution of a synthesis that contains their signifying properties within a hierarchical framework. Instead, deconstruction sees meaning as spectral, an indeterminacy that

haunts a text and which is expressed through an open—ended series of interpretive reversals that refuse the possibility of any final reconciliation. To take Derrida's discussion of the ghost of Hamlet's father in *Specters of Marx* as an example, it is not enough to posit that the ghost is either a real ghost or a figment of Hamlet's imagination, nor is it some synthesis of these two contradictory theses. The ghost ought to be interpreted and understood as at once both real and imaginary, simultaneously existing and not. These two readings can (indeed must) coexist in deconstruction without the need of a resolution. This bifurcating interpretation of the figure of the ghost of the dead Danish king in *Hamlet* offers a more powerful critical perspective from which to read the play, than to settle on one or the other, or to extrapolate some third position of synthesis. In this case the deconstructive analysis unsettles the hierarchy of ontology itself, where neither being nor non-being is given primacy as the guiding force of interpretation. I return to this hauntological analysis in more detail in Chapter Four, but for now it suffices to illustrate the nature of Derrida's rejection of the Hegelian dialectic. Of key importance to the consideration of *Watchmen* in particular is the observation that while deconstruction, like speculative dialectics, considers both interpretive hypothesis and counter-hypothesis, it rejects the resolution of those competing discursive forces into a synthetic reconciliation.

Watchmen offers some temptingly dialectical figures among its male characters. The Comedian and Nite Owl are a form of thesis-antithesis pair. One ruthless, easygoing, virile, violent. The other compassionate, awkward, emasculated, gentle. Where Edward Blake is a rapist and a murderer, Dan Dreiberg is considerate of consent and squeamish about death. Where Blake revels in the legacy of his years as a superhero long after they are finished, Dreiberg hides his costume and equipment away in something like shame. One is the father of Laurie, and the other her lover. Rorschach and Ozymandias represent another, and more fundamental, pairing of binary opposites. Both are men capable of doing great evil in the name of the greater good because both are guided by extreme moral codes that set them in eternal and implacable opposition to each other. If there is a classically philosophical dialectic discourse presented in *Watchmen*, it is in the tension between

the philosophies of these two radically opposed individuals. One is an extremist authoritarian utilitarian, the other an extremist libertarian objectivist. Ozymandias uses his great wealth, fame, and influence to engineer a variation on the solution to the infamous "trolley-car problem" of moral philosophy. His morality is constructed in the abstract, is reasoned and flexible. Rorschach uses his obvious lack of temporal influence to pass invisibly in plain sight (from the first panels of the comic) and exercise brutal vigilante violence in person against dangerous criminals who have escaped justice. His morality is immediate, imperative, and concrete. His sense for how to respond to the world's evil is intuitive and uncompromising. This is not a case of a classic hero and villain pairing. Both of their positions are morally heinous, and neither is elevated or diminished by the absence or presence of reason. Only the sheer scale of Ozymandias's utilitarian enterprise makes the moral weight of his actions significantly different to anything Rorschach might have achieved. On the surface of the text we can interpret the figures of Rorschach and Ozymandias as hypothesis and counter-hypothesis, or as philosophical thesis and antithesis. The polar oppositions they embody in relation to each other might seem to signal the activity of a deconstructive influence. But that deconstructive tendency is undone by the resolution that the text itself offers. While Ozymandias succeeds in his plan to devastate New York, it is clearly Rorschach who, despite his own death, claims victory in the contest of philosophies as his diary arrives at the offices of the *New Frontiersman*. As argued elsewhere in this thesis, the story of *Watchmen* is focalized for the most part through the perspective of Rorschach and it requires no interpretive stratagem to understand that his death at the hands of Dr. Manhattan is the vindication, rather than the defeat, of his philosophical ideals. A deconstructive *Watchmen*, if we are to accept that a text itself can be inherently deconstructive, would complicate and undermine the clarity of this conclusion such that it could not be reconciled.

In "Deconstruction and Love" (2005), Peggy Kamuf identifies a further key component of deconstruction. Deconstruction, she argues, is not the nihilistic destruction of meaning it is sometimes imagined as by its critics. Nor is it a merely technical surgery, parsing signifying details

from the body of a text. Rather, for Kamuf, deconstruction is a function of the love of a text, and an affirmation of its subjective value to the reader as a meaning-making object: "[D]econstruction in the "right manner," deconstruction accompanied by affirmation rather than confined to a negative or technical operation, has never been performed by just anyone at all" (31). Kamuf's argument that deconstruction is necessarily an act of love rather than one of coolly clinical criticism, presents a further problem for those comics scholars who insist that *Watchmen* is a deconstruction of the superhero. *Watchmen*'s relentlessly negative representations of the figure of the American superhero are destructive rather than deconstructive. There is no secret love affair with the superhero as superhero in Moore's grimly cynical text. Instead, there is only the degradation of the figure of the superhero as a figure of violent hyper-masculine sociopathy, coldly superior inhumanity, impotent incompetence, or regressively nationalistic proto-fascism. For *Watchmen* itself to function as a deconstruction of the superhero comic, as many scholars claim it does, would require the counter-hypothesis of an affirmation of the figure of the superhero that was capable of recuperating the book's unabated savaging of the genre.

None of *Watchmen*'s dualistic and dialectical figures then, are either strictly postmodern or deconstructive. The dualistic narrative construction of the dialectic style that *Watchmen* presents can be found at least as far back as the original pre-Hegelian understanding of the term, from the Ancient Greek, as a rhetorical argument staged between two opposed figures. The Socratic dialogues recorded by Plato are examples of such dialectic discourses, which often had an explicitly didactic purpose. This type of classical dialectic did not axiomatically lead to synthesis, as in the Hegelian model, but might have a range of possible outcomes. This classical understanding of dialectics has no vital connection to postmodernism, but did become a favourite figure of the writers and artists of the Baroque thanks to the newly eternal resurrection of the classical world initiated by the Renaissance. The use of the antithesis as a rhetorical or artistic figure was a common feature of Baroque art and literature, as identified by Wellek who called the Baroque "an art despised before because of its conventions, its supposedly tasteless metaphors, its violent contrasts and antitheses"

(Wellek 80). It was less than a century after the Baroque period had dissolved into Rococo, that German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel theorized the dialectic of "The Lord and Bondsman" in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). This work set forth the Hegelian understanding of dialectics that would go on (partly through Marx) to form a semiological and rhetorical basis for much of what is now broadly recognized as postmodernism. The deconstruction of Derrida, the psychoanalysis of Lacan, the schizoanalysis of Deleuze and Guattari, and all of the theoretical and philosophical work that flows from these distinct schools owes part of its genealogy to Hegel, even though, in each case and for different reasons, they reject the operations of his speculative dialectics. The influential force of Hegel's dialectic is that of a negative pressure, that has pushed later theorists to analyse its faults and formulate their own theoretical interventions to address its flaws. In crucial distinction to classical dialectics, Hegel argues for the necessity of a synthesis for every thesis and antithesis pair, no matter how radical, asymmetric, or irreconcilable they might appear to be. Hegel shows that in the very terms of their opposition to each other, diametrically opposed pairs in fact depend upon each other, and are each responsible for forming the others' subjection in unanticipated ways. In the meeting of thesis and antithesis the generation of a synthesis, derived from not just the two counterpoles but the exact details of their relation to each other, is always a necessary consequence. This reconciliation of opposites through synthesis, which both Derridean deconstruction and Deleuzean schizoanalysis regard as the reprehensible operation of a philosophy of identity, is the signature feature of the Hegelian dialectic.

This theoretical insight of Hegel's lies among the foundations of a great many influential schools of thought beyond that of its most politically famous exponent, Karl Marx, and the self-styled dialectical materialists who followed him. Deconstruction is of course among the most famous (and famously misunderstood) of the postmodern responses to the problems of the Hegelian dialectic, but Jacques Derrida is a relative latecomer to the field, in which writers such as Frantz Fanon had already done powerful work demonstrating the political importance of the dialectic as both a rhetorical and semiological mode in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Contemporary public

philosopher Slavoj Žižek borrows heavily from Hegelian dialectic traditions in his public discourse, in large part because of their centrality to the question of subject formation in the work of Jacques Lacan, whose psychoanalytic work forms the basis of Zizek's theoretical apparatus, and Karl Marx, whose theory Žižek often synthesizes (sometimes paradoxically) with Lacan. This comparatively recent popular interest in dialectics through their adoption in the works of self-consciously postmodern creators may be somewhat responsible for the public impression of a two hundred year old field of discourse being misunderstood as postmodern. The dialectics of Moore's *Watchmen*, as perhaps the self-consciously classical origin of its title in Juvenal ought to suggest, are those dialectics that would have been familiar to Aristotle and Zeno, and consequently the writers of the Baroque, as readily as they might be recognized as the idealist speculative dialectics of Hegel. In this sense alone, there is a firm foundation for the argument that *Watchmen* is not a deconstructive work at all, but rather a thoroughly, even comprehensively, dialectical one.

Another reason that *Watchmen* might have been termed postmodern, and specifically deconstructive, is its unstated foundational premise that the superhero is a fundamentally conservative figure who very rarely uses whatever power they might have to bring about anything like positive social change, and is nearly always working to preserve or, in worst-case scenarios, restore the status quo. This seems like the type of oppositional dialectical position that must incite deconstructive readings, though it remains a subtextual feature of *Watchmen*'s story rather than an explicitly made point. This covert political insight embedded deep in the story's framing but expressed implicitly throughout, marks the real change in superhero comics that followed *Watchmen* and which initially distinguished Moore among US superhero comics writers. As a new rhetorical framing of the superhero, it is a large part of the reason that the book has become so influential historically and so-often studied by comics scholars. Perhaps because of their intangibility, the details of this rhetorical turn in superhero comics post-*Watchmen* has rarely been addressed in critique. That this subtle and subversive political sensibility seemed radically new in US comics, but did not particularly distinguish Moore from the British comics writers of 2000AD, is a large part of

the reason for the British Invasion of American Comics initiated by Karen Berger. The ramifications of this unstated premise about the inherent conservatism of the superhero play out most starkly in the case of Dr. Manhattan. A nearly godlike being with ambiguously infinite power, for most of the story he exercises no moral judgement at all. It is not that he is immoral, like the Comedian, or that his morality is twisted, like Ozymandias and Rorschach, but that his vast power has detached him from all human moral considerations. He is perfectly amoral, unable to make a judgement on right or wrong and willing to be an obedient servant to the temporal powers of the US government – even to the point of unquestioningly carrying out its foreign policy objectives in Vietnam. This is the superhero as the nuclear bomb. A proprietary technology harnessed by nationalism that generates a vast power differential between America and the rest of the world. But *Watchmen* offers no counter-hypothesis to this central premise that the superhero is a fundamentally conservative figure who serves in all times and places only to perpetuate the status quo. Even the actions of Ozymandias, which might seem to represent a counter-hypothetical rupture from the status quo through the sheer audacity of their authoritarian violence, are rendered a mere continuation of the power relations of the status quo through exactly the continuity of authoritarian violence. There is no significant moral difference between the actions of Ozymandias, the richest and most intelligent man on the planet, and the actions of the various national governments whose authority he seeks to supplant. Where a deconstructive reading would look for an antithetical point, a "simulative unit", that seems to recoup or rehabilitate the figure of the superhero, thereby by undermining or disproving *Watchmen*'s overarching critique of the costumed crimefighting, no such alternative reading is to be found. The closest the book offers is the sequence of Dreiberg and Laurie saving citizens from a burning building, where the threat they are combating is depersonalized and environmental rather than specific danger posed by a supervillain.

The narrative braiding within Watchmen of the "Tales of the Black Freighter" with the main plot is another example of an element that is often read as being deconstructive, but has much older aesthetic roots. A deconstructive braided narrative might offer the counter-hypothesis that

undermines the central premise of the story. No such thing occurs here however, and the nested story of the undead pirate freighter only underlines the ubiquity in pulp fiction of the brutal, bitter, and vindictive hypermasculine violence (the violence of Rorschach) which by the climax of the story is in the process of being eliminated from the new world delivered by Ozymandias, guaranteed by the supremely rational Dr. Manhattan. The Black Freighter interludes are no postmodern aesthetic maneuver but a baroquely filigreed mise-en-abyme evoking the eternal and omnipresent recurrence of tragedy, death, and evil in a depraved and sinful world. At each place where this braiding recurs in the story, the thematics of the braided narrative work to reinforce the thematics of the main plot. This narratorial legacy of braiding narrative threads ran through Miguel de Cervantes, Luis de Góngora, and the Culteranismo writers of the Spanish Baroque long before any postmodernist encountered it. Narrative braiding is key to the interaction between the framing narrative and individual stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*, which was first translated for European audiences in 1704, at the height of the Baroque era.

The narrative braiding in *Watchmen* thus owes more to the writers and the fiction of the Baroque than it does to any twentieth century avant garde movement. The setting, the characters, the formal elements of the page, the plot itself, and even the narrative focalization - the positioning of the reader's perspective in relation to the events unfolding - are all riddled with signifying details. This formally complicated aesthetic excess is perhaps the most typical characteristic of baroque art in general. In *Watchmen*, the formal complications are layered in such abundance that they are easily overlooked as mere background textures. From the symmetries drawn out through the nine panel grid, and the rupture of that symmetry at moments of affective climax, through the careful interweaving of multiple flashbacks into a non-linear narrative structure that nonetheless propels the story to its inescapably logical conclusion, to the clashing, sometimes bilious colour palette, *Watchmen* is calculated to generate dissonance through its formal complications. Thematically, there are strong baroque resonances in the story's principal concerns. The stoic irrelevance of the ostensible forces of good in the face of an indifferent world full of diverse and banal cruelties. The

seemingly mad actions of one great man that offer salvation for all at a terrible price, and the invincible inhuman perfection of science.

In no small part due to the popular success of *V for Vendetta*, Alan Moore has sometimes been treated as a progressive hero figure. In interviews, he wears his anarchist politics on his sleeve, living a life seemingly unaffected by public and critical adulation in the town of Northampton, where he is broadly regarded as something of a mysterious local treasure. This progressive reputation has seemingly escaped almost unscathed from the recent trend for retrospective readings of major white male authors that tests the morality of their works in a contemporary context, especially with reference to dynamics of gender and race. In this regard *Watchmen* is a difficult book to defend. There is only one female character among the team of six, Laurie, who is reduced to the role of token inclusion – even self-consciously so as part of a tradition of knowingly token inclusion begun by her mother – and becomes the object of contested romantic interest between the lonely figures of Nite Owl and Dr. Manhattan.

Critics have pointed out problematic treatments of gender and race in *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen*, but little critical attention has been paid to one of Moore's most ambitious, later-career comics works, *Promethea*. *Promethea* sets out an essentially dualistic and binary understanding of gender that has all the eternal and absolute qualities of the baroque, and none of the subtle multiplicity of postmodernism. In the process of constructing a powerful female protagonist, who is unmistakably intended as a feminist figure, in Sophie Bangs, Moore sets out gender as something immutable and eternal: Relationships between men and women are an echo of the mythopoeic dance between the figures of the serpent and the moon. The inclusion of a canonically trans character, Roger, as part of the ironic super-team, Five Swell Guys, is at pains to point out how unremarkable his transition is, but fails to reconcile this comic figure with the book's central thesis of eternal binary genders. The character Barbara Shelley begins to assume the characteristics of Promethea because her comics illustrator husband starts to draw the character Promethea to look

like her in his metafictional comic book, in contravention of the idea that women have agency independent of the men in their lives. This type of rhetorical figure in literature, where the work of art exerts transformative supernatural power on human bodies pre-dates the postmodern by centuries. If read as self-referential (which is the clearest surface interpretation) the comic book about a comics book artist creating his real wife anew in his comic book art suggests a narcissistic and misogynistic attitude that is at odds with Moore's reputation as a writer of progressive and iconoclastic fiction.

While it certainly occupies a position of canonical centrality in comics scholarship, it is not always clear to what extent the huge and enduring critical and commercial success of *Watchmen* has affected the creative trajectories of the other British Invasion writers. The work of Grant Morrison in particular has sometimes seemed to be shaped by his prickly philosophical opposition to Alan Moore, most openly in *Pax Americana,* as discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. Peter Milligan's *Shade, The Changing Man*, charts a course that might be economically described as baroque with postmodern influences – a compromise of sorts between Moore's murky cosmic dread and Morrison's dazzling postmodern mysticism, but one that leans into the baroque for the major elements of its premise and story. Garth Ennis's *Preacher* is a brutal picaresque that walks the fine line between satire and self-indulgence somewhat unsteadily at times. Thematically, *Preacher* resonates with the bleakness of *Watchmen* but the stylistic features of the baroque are absent and the framing of Ennis's story is the more familiar framing of the modern road movie. *Preacher*'s protagonist Jesse Custer retreads the conspicuously Modernist path of the odyssey, but it is Warren Ellis's *Transmetropolitan*, illustrated by Darick Robertson, that is the most self-consciously baroque work of the later British Invasion writers The metropolis of the book's title is simply The City, a vast sprawling cyberpunk conurbation that stretches in unknown, perhaps mythical, dimensions.

Grant Morrison has generally proved to be a far more adept and enthusiastic postmodernist than Alan Moore, perhaps motivated by the widespread avant garde acclaim for Moore's work.

Among Morrison's early work at Vertigo, *The Invisibles* stands out as a comic packed with intertextual allusions to literature, philosophy, subversive politics, radical art, conspiracy theories, new age spiritualism, and a host of other alternative fields. Morrison has discussed the work as a "hypersigil" – a working of literary magic intended to serve as an icon of desire that is retransmitted in culture through reference in other works. *All-Star Superman*, written by Morrison and illustrated by Frank Quitely, is an almost kneejerk reaction to the grim, dark grittiness that *Watchmen* had brought to US superhero comics. It consciously takes as its premise an idea that stands in direct opposition to the legacy of *Watchmen*. What if superheroes were happy, and capable of providing social good?

Whatever the truth of the supposed rivalry between Morrison and Moore, Grant Morrison's collaboration with long-time artistic partner Frank Quitely on *Pax Americana* was a final and superbly postmodern flourish that appears to have settled the matter. *Pax* takes the original Charlton Comics characters, whose identities were refaced by Moore for Watchmen, and places them into a history with some parallel dynamics to that of *Watchmen*. The thematics of the story offer a dialectical counterpoint to the paternalistic utilitarianism espoused by Ozymandias in Moore's work. *Pax* is an extremely formally ambitious superhero comic that is much more consciously postmodern in its conception and construction than *Watchmen* (or than it is baroque) but nevertheless met with critical acclaim. Almost every element of the book and the story can be read as a postmodernist challenge to the primacy of *Watchmen* in the public imagination (and in the scholarship) as the book that redefined the superhero genre with its postmodern genius. Where Moore's work uses intricate formal constructions to bring a meandering plotline to richly sinister life over a dozen issues, Morrison's riposte takes one issue, begins with its climax played in reverse and seems to trace events backward from there. While it develops its own uniquely distinctive visual storytelling mode that relates to its legitimated illustrious ancestor as a referent to be superseded, much of *Pax*'s iconography necessarily remains formed by its shared heritage with *Watchmen*. In terms of how the moral lesson of its story may be read, *Pax* is much more readily understood as

deconstructive than *Watchmen*, as it refuses any easy resolution of its chronologically disjointed storyline's possible interpretive hypotheses.

Peter Milligan, another British writer brought to DC by Karen Berger prior to the launch of Vertigo, is likely best known for his run on *Shade, the Changing Man* (1990-1996). There were seventy regular issues of the comic, the last 37 of which were published under the Vertigo imprint. The character was first created by Steve Ditko in 1977, but had languished before being revived by Milligan and artist Chris Bachalo under Berger's eye in 1990. *Shade* was another formally and epistemically baroque property and in many ways anticipated the aesthetic direction that the Moore and the other British Invasion writers would follow. Its eponymous protagonist, Rac Shade, is an alien stranded on earth by treachery who can survive only by possessing the bodies of human beings, killing the person in the process. For this reason, Rac Shade tries to possess only the bodies of terrible people of one sort or another. In the first issue, this happens to be a convicted killer facing death row.

Rac Shade pursues or is pursued by his supernatural adversary, The American Scream, a heavily symbolic antagonist that is a malevolent spiritual manifestation of all that is sick and evil in US culture. This Manichean quality to Milligan's work offers a moral simplicity that is absent from much of the work of the Invasion writers other than occasionally Morrison, but as with Morrison it is never a simple opposition of light and dark. In the mid-nineties, *Shade* was addressing, however clumsily, the essential genderfluidity of an alien who could pass between differently gendered bodies in a way that no other mainstream superhero comic (many of them featuring shape-changing characters) had yet dared to do. Later in the run, Rac Shade's deceased son would come to serve as his sidekick, inhabiting the remade body of his murdered mother, Kathy, Rac's late wife. This preoccupation with the dislocation between bodies and the souls who occupy them emerges in many places throughout the later works of the Invasion writers. Rac Shade is an interesting figure among the protagonists of the Invasion writers' works, in that perhaps more than any other he fits

the stereotype of the baroque protagonist. Trapped, but stoic and pragmatic in the face of overwhelming injustice. Surrounded by a world of human monsters and their victims he is forced to do morally dreadful things to survive and is haunted by them. He is effectively immortal, taking on a new physical host whenever his current body is destroyed, giving him a semi-godlike quality.

Shades of the baroque have haunted several of Warren Ellis's major works such as *Transmetropolitan* and *Planetary*, in common with the other British Invasion authors. In *Doktor Sleepless: Engines of Desire*, and its sibling book *Captain Swing and the Electrical Pirates of Cindery Island*, Ellis moves from the densely allusive and formal mode of *Planetary* into a more self-consciously didactic dialecticism. *Engines of Desire* is a self-contained story of nested binary pairs, and the follow-up book, *Captain Swing*, is an intertextual epilogue rather than a sequel, and projects the first book's mise-en-abyme into a broader fictional cosmos.

Engines of Desire does more than simply repeat *Watchmen*'s trick of repackaging baroque aesthetics and episteme as postmodern. In the book's most striking passage, the "authenticity rant" (part 5, pages 6-11), the Doktor, narrating via a pirate radio broadcast, performs a characteristically bombastic and unmistakably deconstructive analysis of the constructed-ness of authenticity. This sequence draws much of its power from the apparent oppositional tension between the seemingly stark antinomy of its terms; authentic and artificial. The Doktor offers one possible synthesis of these opposed terms: Authenticity can only exist because it is constructed, self-conscious artifice is the only true authenticity. Artifice is ontologically essential to the creation of the real. While this synthetic resolution might appear to suggest a dialectical discourse, there is no third term that emerges from this reconciliation. The terms authentic and artificial sit alongside each other in their mutually incompatible juxtaposition, nonetheless inseparable. This irreconcilable tension that holds the terms authentic and artificial in locked orbit around each other reproduces very closely the same relationship that holds between the ideas of preservation and destruction as aspects of love in *The Aspern Papers* (1888), as described by Peggy Kamuf. Kamuf argues that James's text "deconstructs

the opposition between preservation and destruction" (Kamuf 26) by showing that the tension between the competing desires of the two central characters revolve around a similar polar axis in which the preservation of Aspern's papers (in their original context) through their destruction (by burning), and the destruction of the same papers (as the destruction of the context that makes them meaningful) through their preservation (as part of an archive of the author's works) form an irreconcilable, unresolvable deconstructive binary that rejects, as the rant of Doktor Sleepless does, the possibility of an emergent synthetic third term.

A more clearly articulated display of Derridean deconstruction than *Engines of Desire* presents would have been hard to imagine in a relatively mainstream comics publication before Ellis, but self-consciously critical dialectic and deconstructive discourses have become an increasingly common feature of US comics in the years since. As one example, Ales Kot's *Material* (2015) presents an array of binary pairings moored in explicit reference through extensive footnotes to deconstructive theory.

The story of *Engines* suggests that the Doktor is not an ordinarily human person but the artificial and deliberate construction of John Rhinehart, created through his thought and will; a "tulpa". This possibility is presented as an esoteric binary that Police Commissioner Preston Stoker must take seriously in order to determine if they are holding the right person in a cell. This is to say that the figure of Doktor Sleepless is already ontologically unstable. If we take his story at face value, then we have to doubt how real Doktor Sleepless is, even in this story that carries his name. The reader extrapolates the Doktor's subject position in the first instance through the focalizing narrative eye of Ivan Rodriguez's illustration as well as through Ellis's writing. The narrative distance created by the focalization through images that seem disconnected from the accompanying narration in this first encounter with the Doktor creates a deliberate sense of unease, giving the Doktor an air of mystery that borders on the sinister.

The six panels of the first page of Part One of *Engines* offers a relatively dense field of signification that generates a great many possibilities for readings of the book's story. The arrangement is a regular grid of six roughly square panel in two columns and three tiers, with dark gutters and bleed. There are several things to note about this very brief sequence but it is productive to begin with the visual storytelling before turning to the words[26].

In the first panel we see Doktor Sleepless standing with only the stark shadows of Rodriguez's heavy inks keeping his nudity implied. This is the only time we see Doktor Sleepless, as such, without the signature glowing blue goggles that he will wear for the rest of the book, although even here the detail of his eyes remains hidden in deep pools of ink. His stance is proud and heroic, facing just off-centre with shoulders thrown back and chest pushed out, as he poses in front of a free-standing candelabrum depicting a winged figure in bronze holding aloft a pair of lit candles. Panel two is the same shot but zoomed in slightly, as he reaches for his goggles. In panel three the same shot again but he is donning the goggles, while the pair of candles in the candlestick, both already greatly reduced, have gone out. Panel five is an extreme close up of the Doktor's face, his fingers curling from the bottom of the panel, as if to beckon, or grasp. Panel six switches to a reverse shot above and behind the Doktor and we see that we have been looking at his double, his reflection, all along (the position of the candlestick confirms this) as he stands within kissing distance of a full-length mirror. The twin candelabrum suggests a stately, gothic presence in an otherwise indistinct frame. The candles both being extinguished in the fourth panel without any visible intervention suggest a mystery. This fairly innocuous detail can be read very smoothly as a sinister and distinctly villainous aesthetic effect. The candles snuffed out by some supernatural force. Or less fancifully, it might suggest that the Doktor, who seems to be looking out of the comic, is actually looking out of a window and has just opened it, though the page's sixth panel reveals this assumption as false. Or perhaps there is some distortion of time happening in this sequence? It

[26] Appendix, Fig. 2.3.

could be that the Doktor has been standing motionless, inches from his mirror and occasionally muttering the lines of dialogue over the course of the several hours that it would take for the candles to burn all the way out by themselves. The sixth panel reinscribes the notion of a dual reality, and one where the constructed, artificial reality is more true than the mundane real. The room that the Doktor himself stands in is featureless, a black void space, but the room reflected in the mirror, the room we have been looking at as the background for the first five panels, appears as normal and real. In terms of the visual storytelling at work in the six panels of the first page of *Engines*, there are a number of elements suggesting the idea of doubling, duplicity, and duality. Some cosmic conflict is suggested in the clash of iconography between visual motifs of heroism and villainy, and a graphically implicit undermining of the real in favour of the illusion.

The odd moment of Doktor Sleepless standing naked in front of the mirror appears momentarily in a flashback panel later in the story, during the "authenticity is bullshit" rant sequence. The authenticity polemic discussed above gives a solid philosophical and discursive spine to the story and is arguably the intellectual core of the book. The inclusion of the single flashback panel in that coruscating rhetorical sequence recalls that Doktor Sleepless, the artificial construction of John Reinhardt, may have a very personal stake in degrading the value of authenticity.

There are a number of elements in the graphic narrative unfolding in this initial sequence which are particularly suited to support the idea that this is a work of fiction which is on some self-conscious level directly addressing the nature of dualities. It is about binary understandings and specifically about the epistemically troubled dichotomy of truth versus fiction, authenticity versus artifice, reality versus falsehood. The story is readable as an extended deconstructive analysis that explores the thesis that truth is more valuable than fiction, as well as its antithesis that artifice (and especially construction, modification) is superior to the apparently natural reality of the real world. *Engines* eschews the dialectical maneuver of reconciling these two countervailing ideas, allowing them to continue to coexist with each other in uneasy tension.

The specific explicit argument expressed through the “authenticity is bullshit” (part 5, pages 6-11) sequence is that artists’ lives are caught up and often but not always mangled in some way by the industries of media and entertainment. The reality that is constructed by industry to represent them to the public becomes something oppressive and ultimately intolerable for many. The actual life stories and human presence of the artificers who construct the representations of quotidian reality that we encounter in mass media are often erased (as in the case of Big Bill Broonzy) by deliberate construction of a knowingly false reality, or simply by being misreported and misunderstood. This is self-consciously an argument about the morality of labour conditions in the pop culture industries, woven into a much more deconstructive argument about authenticity as a general category of identity. It presents the antithesis case against authenticity - and with some venom: “authenticity is bullshit” - but concludes by recognizing the paradoxical centrality of authenticity to identity, despite its artificial construction, with the directive to “Be authentic to your dreams. Be authentic to your own ideas about yourself” (part 5, page 11). Ellis moves beyond the dialectical mode to expound a deconstructionist discourse that resists reduction into a third term. As if to punctuate the end of this passage, the Doktor is then seen pressing a big red button on a tablet computer clearly labelled “DO NOT PRESS”, which causes the electricity to be shut off and all the lights to go out across the city of Heavenside.

Doktor Sleepless is a science-fictional comic rather than strictly a superhero comic and adheres closely to the sub-generic conventions of cyberpunk stories. The key genre convention of science-fiction is the presence of the “novum”, as theorized by Darko Suvin. This term refers to “a strange newness, a novum” that appears in the narrative and defines it as what Suvin calls “estranged fiction” instead of the more mundane literary, or “naturalistic fiction” (Suvin 4, 18). The presence of the novum in the narrative is what causes it to diverge from the reality that readers know. This uncanny presence directs the attention of the reader towards the social world represented in the text and how the novum interacts with it to alter social norms and morality. “SF sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore

subject to a *cognitive* view" (Suvin 7). The novum is Suvin's name for the estranging feature of a science-fictional text, that which renders it alien from mundane reality, and directs attention towards its social consequences. Most cyberpunk stories have a well-established generic novum, as detailed in the previous chapter, of a simulated reality formed of digital information (a matrix or metaverse) which exists as a sort of mythic underworld relative to the mundane reality of "meatspace" into which protagonists must often journey to advance their quests. *Doktor Sleepless*, as a very late cyberpunk work, offers no such digital pseudo-realm but layers the digital and informational as a tangible and entirely quotidian superimposition pervading the fabric of social reality. Its figuring of information technology and its social impacts is more grounded in actual internet technologies developed since the turn of the millennium, such as social media and haptics, than the early cyberpunk writers' dreams of other worlds. *Doktor Sleepless* bases its estranging technologies on technologies that are already familiar to the vast majority of its readers, set in a future that maybe less than fifteen minutes away.

Engines was a book that stepped nimbly into its own online discourse, creating the subculture it required for a readership through its loud and legible commentary on technology and identity. *Engines* spoke confidently of its own "datashadow" and even now, after the book is several years out of print, and most contemporary fan/meta sites have fallen foul of link decay, the impressions left on the internet by *Engines of Desire* remain. Several seemingly unrelated characters in the story are revealed to have a common historical connection through shared authorship of a group blog, and Ellis explicitly reached out to fans of the book to take heed of this. The group blog grinding.be was launched in the wake of Doktor Sleepless, with a group of posters that mostly used online pseudonyms, in a deliberate echo of the immanent.sea blog in the comic.

One of the themes of Doktor Sleepless, as a post-twitter cyberpunk work, is about how central social media has become to daily experience. True to the book's theme of defiance of authority, and the cyberpunk suspicion of corporate villainy, social media in the book – and many of

the systems used by the Doktor, the Shrieky Girls, and the Grinders in general – run on a pirate social media service called Clatter built into a wearable contact lens interface. From the backmatter of *Engines*: “Clatter is a wireless IM messaging system built on to a soft contact lens. Clatter differs from other commercial lens services by being open source and “riding” other services to create free cross-platform access” (part 6, page 9). Clatter is really a subsidiary system of *Engines*’s Suvinian novum: the tag. This unglamorously named but ubiquitous microchip is implanted into the human body and acts as a relay for biometric information as well as all other sorts of data. As such, it is also a part of the surveillance apparatus of the authorities in Heavenside. The Doktor claims responsibility for inventing the tag as a prodigal but selfish sixteen year old who, “didn’t really, you know, realise what I was letting into the world. At the time it just seemed a good way to never have to work again” (part7, page 11). The tag is the innovation at the root of the estrangement of Heavenside as a science-fictional location.

Chapter Three: Ministry of the Other

3.1 Monster Police, Divine Inventions, and Border Incursions

3.2 Agency Embodied: Alterity in the Comics of the British Invasion

3.3 Home is Where the Haunt Is: Means of Deconstruction

"But woe to him, the stranger! He shall die"

-- Bierce, Ambrose. "Famine's Realm."

3.1 Monster Police, Divine Inventions, and Border Incursions

The figure of the other, as the estranged counterpart to the self, is one that has persistently haunted philosophy, literature, literary analysis, and by extension comics and graphic narrative. It is the figure of an entity that is fundamentally different and outside of that which is known and understood by the perceiving subject. The figures of otherness might be represented as monsters, sublime divinities, or simply as strangers, but they are always alien objects imbued with a sense of menace, or danger, for the subject. Others transgress or collapse the classifying distinctions between categories that permit the neat and bounded ordering of the foundational concepts and principles of culture and thereby "threaten the known with the unknown" (Kearney 3). These others, whatever specific form they take, are liminal exiles from the schemes of knowledge and power that make the world knowable and for that reason they represent a challenge to the established order, one which must be understood and contained or driven off and destroyed. This chapter will examine the theorization of the other in the three different forms of the monster, the god-like, and the stranger, and show how comics, and particularly the comics works of the British Invasion writers, have wrestled with the problems of the representation of these kinds of otherness. It will then turn to graphic narrative representations in British Invasion works of otherness and marginality through

what Karin Kukkonen has called the “embodied approach” and finally will explore a fourth kind of otherness, the Derridean specter of hauntology, and its place in the comics of the British Invasion authors.

The figure of the monstrous other in literature is perhaps the most accessible and easily analyzable of all the representations of otherness. From the vampires of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and the grisly creation of Victor Frankenstein, the monster is known primarily by the alienness of its body, and by the impressions or traces that its monstrous body leaves upon the world. In this sense the monstrous body comes to be known as an assemblage of isolated evidentiary signifiers whose condition of synthesis (and therefore of understanding it as a whole) is an active interpretive intuition. As Cohen has said: “monstrous interpretation is as much process as epiphany, a work that must content itself with fragments (footprints, bones, talismans, teeth, shadows, obscured glimpses— signifiers of monstrous passing that stand in for the monstrous body itself)” (Cohen 6). The transition of the monster from abstracted and unsettling unknown into concrete and terrifying known is accomplished through the slow aggregation of these sinister and destabilizing points of data. What makes the figure of the monster so threatening to established epistemologies is its innate hybridity, the “ontological liminality” (Cohen 6) whereby it exceeds the bounded categories of epistemic stability. The monstrous body is not knowable according to the dominant schemes of rational understanding and its very existence represents their inevitable failure. This property of the monster remains true across numerous and diverse historical schemes of epistemological enclosure. Whatever the preeminent model of conceptual understanding might be in any given period of history, the monsters produced by that period exist to challenge and undermine it. For this reason, the monstrous other is an unusually telling figure that highlights the specific anxieties of culture in a way that quotidian analysis of those anxieties struggles to achieve. This demonstrative function of the figure of the monster is indicated in its etymological origin in the Latin *monstrum*, “"that which reveals," "that which warns"” (Cohen 4). A monster is already the

projection of a warning, a lesson to be read, and a carefully constructed epiphany-in-waiting about what a given culture deems dangerous.

The figure of Frankenstein's monster speaks in great and specific detail about the lurking anxieties of the early-Victorian Romantics regarding the all-conquering rationalist episteme of science and its totalizing ambitions. The figure of Count Dracula illustrates late-Victorian fears of the Eastern foreigner and the corrupting lure of sensuous self-indulgence with which he poisons the minds of English women and drains them of their Christian virtue. In contrast to Frankenstein, *Dracula* presents technology and empirical science as the counter-pole to the monstrous threat. The safe and knowable enclosures of rationalist Western thought, seemingly secure behind the double boundaries of empiricism and faith, are unexpectedly revealed as dangerously porous and permeable by the monstrous figures of Stoker's vampire and Shelley's monster. What was once certain is thrown into question. The rhetorical and ontological antitheses of Eastern and Western, rationality and the supernatural, even death and life, are subverted by the presence of such creatures. Belonging both to the categories of the familiar and of the other at the same time, "the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a "system" allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration" (Cohen 7). The presence of the hybridized monster is threatening exactly in that it threatens dualistic conceptions of antinomy with a chaotic pluralizing complexity. The body of the monster as alterity made flesh is the incarnated confrontation of a culture's epistemological prejudices. As such, the interpretation of the monstrous other's meaning is always a contested field that evades any final discursive closure.

Distinctions between ontological and rhetorical categories are primarily epistemological distinctions, which is to say they are first distinctions about what is known. Ontology is the construction of a taxonomy or order of things that exist based on the contemporaneous epistemological apprehension of them. These categories are then put to rhetorical use within the

social and cultural spheres, giving shape to the emergence of the categories of individualized difference between subjects, and between subjects and objects, that are referred to as sex, race, human, animal, machine, and so on. The monstrous other is a flagrant, even grotesque, disavowal of the distinctions between such categories:

> This refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things" is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. (Cohen 6)

In this respect, in its subversive relationship to established epistemic binaries, the monstrous other (and indeed otherness in general) is an inherently deconstructive entity, and a figurative expression of deconstruction's evasion and undoing of binary modes of understanding, which Jacques Derrida has variously explored through the concepts of the trace, the supplement, *différance*, and the specter. The monster's destabilizing effect on ontological certainty is the false hypothesis of deconstruction rendered in fictive flesh. Both are a means by which the comforting known quantity of the self can be challenged and rendered radically estranging. Derrida's work on otherness draws heavily on the work of Emmanuel Levinas in this regard, where, as Kearney notes, "we already find a tendency to conflate the irrepresentable horrors of the 'there is' (*il y a*) with the equally irrepresentable strangeness of the absolute Other (*illéité*). In both cases, the self finds itself traumatically persecuted" (Kearney 71). Levinas's construction of *illéité* is translated by Harshav and Smith as "illeity" or "I-ness", an irreducible quality of the self that recognizes the other in itself. Levinas himself seems to attribute a semi-divine connotation of the infinite to illeity, contrasting it with the ipseity which is the "I-ness" of the self as the self, the essential element of individual identity. The conflation that Kearney refers to then, is a blurring of the distinction between what is

known and recognized as being the object other outside the self (*il y a*) and the absolute otherness that resides in the depths of a subject's own consciousness.

This identification of the other within and without the self has Lacanian parallels with the Big Other, "the despot whose laws we obey only because we cannot rid ourselves of our dependence on it" (Choat 91), reflected within the little other (*l'objet petit a*), the reflection of the otherness of the outside world found in the insatiable desire of the split subject, othered against itself. The presence of such mutual contradictions, of the monstrous alien other within the self, and the self contained within a monstrous alien other, represents a destructive paradox for the antinomic concept of self and other as two mutually exclusive categories. As Cohen says, "From its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes" (Cohen 12). The figure of the monstrous other – whether it be a Victorian vampire, an animated corpse composited from sutured limbs, or a disfigured supervillain driven to insanity in pursuit of revenge – is already a deconstructive presence that presents itself as an othered version of the self, an "I-ness" founded upon its radical estrangement from anything that is known.

The Monstrous Other in Superhero Comics

Perhaps the most memorable and popular figure of the monstrous other in superhero comics is the arch-nemesis of Batman, the Joker. The Joker appears as an antithesis of everything that Batman stands for. Where Batman is guided by a strict code of morality in pursuit of justice, the Joker rejects both normal morality and the concept of justice itself. While Batman adheres to a self-imposed injunction not to kill in the course of his nocturnal vigilantism, the Joker is bound by no such ethical ordinance. The formative trauma of Batman's alter-ego, Bruce Wayne, was the witnessing of the murder of his parents during a street robbery at the hands of a gangster – an experience that made him determined to ensure that nobody else should have to suffer as he had suffered. The formative trauma of the Joker, at least according to Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988), was his plunge into a vat of caustic unprocessed anti-psychotic drugs during a robbery gone

awry. The warping of his body and shattering of his mind that ensued from that experience made him determined to traumatize other people to the extent that their sanity would be broken – that everyone should endure a similar degree of physical and psychological suffering as he had, in order to open their minds to the possibilities of unfettered chaos. Yet through these diametrical oppositions between the two characters, a deep underlying kinship emerges from their mirror image contradictions. Batman and the Joker are more alike to each other than at least Batman is willing to recognize. *The Killing Joke* plays upon the parallels between the characters' personalities and makes their strange equivalence into a central motif of its storytelling.

The Killing Joke opens with Batman visiting Arkham Asylum to speak with the Joker[27]. On his way into the prison, he passes the cell of Harvey Dent, the supervillain Two-Face, whose face, half normal and half warped, can be seen staring through the bars of his cell as Batman strides through the corridors. One of the vertical bars in the cell door's window neatly divides the two halves of his face, a persistent visual motif of the comic connoting a divided unity. Two-Face is in his own way a representation of internal duality turned against itself, as a former District Attorney scarred by acid and driven into criminal insanity. Batman then confronts the Joker in his cell, where the Joker appears to be playing the game "Patience" (or something very similar) with a deck of cards. The panels on the fourth page of the comic (arrayed in a standard nine-panel grid) show first Batman, from the Joker's perspective, then the Joker, from Batman's perspective[28]. The playing cards laid out on the table are visible in both panels, their left-to-right order reversed, but because of the rotational symmetry of playing cards that makes them readable from either side, they are readable, reversed, from both perspectives. The pack's two jokers are laid to one side, face up on the table, suggesting, as will soon be revealed, that the Joker has already escaped his confinement. The perspective of the following panels moves first to an oblique overhead position, showing the two rivals' hands on the table, mirroring each other. It then switches from one perpendicular side of the

[27] Appendix, Fig. 3.1.
[28] Appendix, Fig. 3.2.

table to the other, first showing the darkness of the cell with Commissioner Gordon's face visible through the barred window in its door, then swapping to Gordon's perspective, with Batman and the Joker visible at the table, with one of the cell door's vertical bars neatly dividing them from each other. This sequence of opposite perspectives, at right angles from each other and arranged around the central staging of the playing cards' rotational symmetry, suggests very clearly a relationship of dialectical tension between the two characters. Batman's monologue in this scene lays out the moral core of the story that follows: Batman seeks to establish some form of empathy or understanding with the Joker that will halt their violent rivalry before it ends in one or both of their deaths.

The symmetry between the two characters is further illustrated throughout the story of *The Killing Joke*. While their ultimate goals may be opposed, both Batman and the Joker are motivated primarily by a desire for vengeance. In Batman's case this need for revenge is expressed as a hunger for justice, while the Joker conceals the deeply personal nature of his vengeful impulses behind grand schemes that harm innocents as a means of hurting Batman. Pages 25 and 26 of *The Killing Joke* juxtapose the two characters engaged in the business of "showing pictures"[29]. The Joker tortures Commissioner Gordon with photographs of his daughter Barbara in a state of undress after being shot. Batman is seen taking a poster of the Joker from a wall, and then shoves it in the face of a series of underworld figures as he hunts his nemesis. The column of panels on the left edge of page 26 (and continued on page 27) shows a series of images from within the ghost train ride that the Joker has placed Gordon on. Gordon's fists grip the metal safety bar as a sequence of symmetrical images of monstrous faces, each divided down its center by a black line, flashes before him.

As Batman's pursuit nears its conclusion, the Joker explicitly references the fundamental similarity between himself and Batman: "That's how far the world is from where I am. Just one bad day. / You had a bad day once, am I right? / I know I am. I can tell. You had a bad day and everything changed. / Why else would you dress up like a flying rat? / You had a bad day and it drove you as

[29] Appendix, Fig. 3.3.

crazy as everybody else… / Only you won't admit it" (*TKJ* 38). The Joker sees Batman as being driven by the same destructive madness that propels him to torture and murder people. The Joker embraces the parallels between himself and Batman, willfully blurring the distinction between the two characters, while Batman rejects any such parallel. On the following page, the Joker guesses at the nature of Batman's formative trauma and draws the parallel between them more explicitly: "Something like that happened to me, you know. I… I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another…" (*TKJ* 39). The Joker's own memory of his villainous origin is obscured by the trauma of the experience. He admits to being an unreliable narrator, even celebrating the unreliability of his own narration, unaware that Batman himself was instrumentally responsible for his current condition. The Joker revels in his role as an agent of chaos, and the orderly narration of his own history and origin are antithetical to that end. As Cohen notes about the relationship of the monstrous other to the field of historical construction: "History itself becomes a monster: defeaturing, self-deconstructive, always in danger of exposing the sutures that bind its disparate elements into a single, unnatural body" (Cohen 9). The Joker cannot reconcile himself to a single fixed and coherent personal history because to do so would be to relinquish his position as the monster, and to surrender one of the monster's most potent weapons against oppressive normativity.

The final scene of *The Killing Joke* finds the Joker cornered and beaten by Batman and the core moral of the story is made explicit in the dialogue again where Batman says:

> We're both running out of alternatives… / and we both know it. / Maybe it all hinges on tonight. Maybe this is our last chance to sort this bloody mess out. / If you don't take it, then we're locked onto a suicide course. / Both of us. To the death. / It doesn't have to end that way. I don't know what it was that bent your life out of shape, but who knows? Maybe I've been there too. (*TKJ* 44)

The kinship between the Dark Knight and his most persistent nemesis is finally recognized by Batman himself in this scene. Despite the radical differences in their goals and methods, they are more similar than different. Both are scarred by an originary trauma that has alienated them from the more normal spaces of everyday society. Both seek revenge and vindication through costumed violence. Batman's admission to himself and to the Joker of his recognition of these similarities is the philosophical core of the story, and naturally the Joker, who has pressed for this recognition throughout the book, disavows its potential for reconciliation when it finally arrives. He rejects the possibility that the seemingly inexorable course of their entwined destinies towards mutual destruction can be altered, instead retreating into a joke about the impossibility of trust between two people who know each other to be insane. The structure of this interaction seems to suggest that while Batman seeks the pair's reconciliation in a dialectical synthesis, the Joker rejects that such a resolution can hold any value for either of them. The story functions, therefore, in a strange and heavily encoded way, as a recapitulation of the persistent tension between dialecticism and deconstruction.

The ending of *The Killing Joke* is tantalizingly ambiguous, with the final row of panels showing only the rain pooling on the wet night-time concrete with the reflection of a vehicle headlight's beam dividing the panel as the Joker's maniacal laughter is cut off[30]. The final panel shows only the rain on the concrete, the beam of light extinguished. It seems that a police car, its siren wailing, may have arrived to take the Joker into custody and return him to Arkham Asylum. It might also be read, as it has been by Grant Morrison[31] and somewhat against the grain of the comic, as the killing of the Joker by Batman. Whichever of these readings is preferred, the comic nonetheless ends on a fundamentally indeterminate note. The only firm conclusion available is that there is no true and clear resolution of the dialectical tension between the avatar of law and order and the champion of chaos. In fact, the disappearance of the dividing vertical beam of light in the

[30] Appendix, Fig. 3.4.
[31] "Did Batman Kill the Joker at the End of The Killing Joke" by Andrew Crump for Screenrant.com

comic's final panel suggests that the division between Batman and the Joker ultimately collapses in this moment, as deconstruction collapses binary figures as a rejection of the dialectical approach. It is the final victory of the Joker, and by proxy his deconstructive perspective, over the naïve dialecticism of Batman. In this sense, the eternal violent contest between Batman and the Joker illustrates in some detail the condition of the monstrous other as a figure of ongoing relevance in superhero literature. The otherness of the Joker to Batman (and to the reader identified with the heroic protagonist, Batman) is no absolute binary otherness. It is instead a specific form of relation that identifies features of the self-same within the figure of the uncanny other. As Kearney says: "The divided self seeks to protect itself against its own inner division by projecting its 'other self' onto someone other than itself . . . The quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted – a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect" (Kearney 74). Both Batman and the Joker are just such divided selves. This reading sees Bruce Wayne, the alter-ego of Batman, as a survivor of trauma that has fundamentally damaged his psychology. In the Joker, Wayne finds the uncanny double of his other self, and he feels sympathy or pity for the Joker's failure to surmount his own formative trauma in the way that Wayne believes he has accomplished for himself. As Cohen says: "The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond— of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within" (Cohen 8). The initial dialectical opposition that can be read between the Batman (the thesis representing order and discipline) and the Joker (his antithesis representing chaos and dissolution) refuses a neat synthetic resolution and requires instead a deconstructive breaking down of that binary, which finds irrational chaos and disorder at the heart of law, and, conversely, disciplined adherence to a normative action-guiding theory of behaviour as the central principle of anarchistic chaos.

The Joker is the emblematic figure of the monstrous other in the Batman comics and arguably therefore (given the celebrated position of Batman comics within the canon of superhero

comics) the emblematic figure of the monstrous other in superhero comics as a general category. Few other antagonist villains have their mutually dependent dialectical relation to the protagonist so explicitly and precisely illustrated as the Joker. It is exactly the proximity mandated through this parallel relation of difference by inversion that makes the Joker such a disturbing and destabilizing monstrous figure, capable of dissolving the moral certainties that support Batman's own ethical framework. "By revealing that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential, the monster threatens to destroy not just individual members of a society, but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed" (Cohen 12). In *The Killing Joke*, the Joker explicitly aims to shatter Commissioner Gordon's (and thereby Batman's) sanity through traumatic overload. He fails in this primary endeavor, seemingly due to Gordon's unshakeable ethical sense, but the end of the comic does strongly suggest that the Joker has succeeded in undermining the ironclad individualism that permits Batman the self-indulgent catharsis of his nocturnal vigilante operations. He goads Batman towards the realization that the caped crusader is no more a figure of law and order than the Joker himself, and that Batman's putative pursuit of justice is merely an insatiable, incoherent desire for vengeful violence that reflects the Joker's own traumatized madness.

The monstrous other reveals that "[o]therness is a horizon of selfhood" (Kearney 16) and that the recognition of the other is a condition of possibility for the self. Without the other, the idea of the self has no coherent or concrete meaning. This understanding of otherness, while it fits neatly with the deconstructionist Derridean analysis of the other, runs counter to the conceptualization of otherness, and its ethical implications, as laid out by Levinas. Levinas's philosophy of otherness draws on the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger to theorize a model of the other that is not dependent upon any object-relation to a subjective self. Levinas suggests a mode of being for the other which is "[w]ithout recourse or reduction to an 'objectifying subject,' to a transcendental subject, being precedes and gathers itself in its own way, in the guise of a concern for being, proper to its 'event' of being" (Levinas 209). This is to say that the other does not manifest

as an object already in some subordinate relation to the subject's own horizons of consciousness and experience, but as an entirely independent node of self-expression. This is the other as "[a]bsolutely, not relatively, other" (Kearney 16). This absolute otherness, in contrast to the always already relational otherness of the deconstructive approach, is nonetheless a condition, through the ultimately inevitable possibility of the other's death, of the emergence of the ego, representing the ineluctable unknowability of the infinite rather than the limits of the subjective self.

Derrida draws much of his theorization of the other from the prior work of Levinas, but while the Derridean other is constructed through its relation to the self, and vice versa, the Levinasian other emerges standing aloof from such simplistic entanglements: "The meeting with the other person consists in the fact that . . . I do not possess him. He does not enter entirely into the opening of being in which I already stand as in the field of my freedom" (Levinas 9). This claim suggests implicitly that the Derridean other, formed through a relationship of possession by the subject as part of their own subjection, can never truly qualify as the other in Levinasian terms. They are two mutually exclusive categories of otherness. The Levinasian other represents an epistemological quandary for the self: "I understand him in terms of his history, his environment, his habits. What escapes understanding in him is himself, the being . . . The other is the only being whose negation can be declared only as total: a murder. The other is the only being I can want to kill" (9). That which we might ever desire to kill must necessarily be the other, and so otherness becomes the defining property of all that we might wish to kill.

For Levinas, this absolute other can never truly be known while on the horizons of the self's experience, never understood from the safely removed distance of subject-object observation or through the rationalizations of language, but only ever in the unfiltered immediacy of the face-to-face encounter: "To be in relation with the other face to face – is to be unable to kill. This is also the situation of discourse" (10). The only true relationality possible with the Levinasian other is the peril of the direct and egalitarian encounter where the face of the self is presented to the face of the

other, and vice versa. The immediacy of this encounter makes it impossible to mediate through ideology, language, or other conceptual frameworks: "The "face" of the other cannot be read for a secret meaning, and the imperative it delivers is not immediately translatable into a prescription that might be linguistically formulated and followed" (Butler 131). The face is not an utterance ordered by the ordinary semiology of language. Its meaning is not secret but exceeds, or perhaps transcends, the capability of language to encompass. The meaning of the face of the other is "that for which no words really work; the face seems to be a kind of sound, the sound of language evacuating its sense" (134). Butler describes the post-lingual utterance of the other's face as a kind of cry, one which imposes an ethical imperative on us to interpret its meaning despite the inherent impossibility of such a feat: "the face operates to produce a struggle for me, and establishes this struggle at the heart of ethics" (135). This struggle centres around the assertion that the face of the other "at once tempts me to murder and prohibits me from acting upon it" (135). It is this inherent tension in the imperatives posed by the face-to-face encounter with the other that shapes Levinas's (and ultimately Butler's) understanding of what ethics requires from us as individuals: to tolerate the irreconcilable of the encounter with the other's face as one that simultaneously forecloses the possibility of a discursive understanding of its meaning, and yet is the condition of possibility for discourse to emerge at all. The face of the other is unbounded in its possibility. It is the face of the infinite, the means by which the desire to kill makes itself manifest and the only means by which killing can end and meaningful discourse begin.

Unlike the Derridean other, which presupposes the awareness of the subject, the Levinasian other is "a condition for consciousness *tout court*" (Levinas 11). This meeting, through the face of the other, with infinity is the beginning of not only discourse, but thought. "Thought begins the very moment consciousness becomes consciousness of its own particularity, that is to say, when it conceives of the exteriority, beyond its nature as a living being, that encloses it; when thought becomes conscious of itself and at the same time conscious of the exteriority that goes beyond its nature" (15). In this Levinasian exchange, the other is not subordinated to the subject-formation of

the self but becomes the condition of possibility by which a thinking self can emerge for the first time. This process undermines the insistence on an absolute otherness that begins Levinas's theorization of the other and suggests, as Kearney has said, that, "there can be no relation to the other that does not in some respect transform the absolute other into a relative other" (Kearney 79). This transformative aspect of the encounter with the other, rather than being contradictory, is key to understanding Levinas's conception of the dynamic of otherness. Only such an absolute other is capable of entering into the kind of transformative encounter that reshapes and restructures the ego. An otherness constructed *prima facie* through the relational mode is not an otherness that can be met face to face. It lacks the autonomy to resist subordination by the ego.

For a reading of the Joker as the monstrous other to Batman's self in *The Killing Joke*, this Levinasian conception of absolute otherness whose only relation is in the face-to-face encounter seems particularly apposite. In the final moment of confrontation, with protagonist and nemesis finally face-to-face, Batman's overriding impulse is not to kill. Morrison has argued that Batman's putative murder of the Joker in the comic's final panel represents the "ultimate Batman/Joker story" (Crump), but it may be that rather than being the moment that the Batman/Joker story ends, this encounter represents the moment in which it properly begins. With the recognition of the kinship between self and other that emerges from the violence of this encounter, of the "exteriority that goes beyond its nature" of Batman's consciousness as he meets the infinite otherness of the Joker who both contains Batman within himself and is contained within Batman, the condition of possibility for Batman to exist as a complete self is finally satisfied. In the final panels of *The Killing Joke*, the Joker emerges as a character for who it is possible for the reader to feel sympathy, even identification, despite his psychopathic criminality. The extinguishing of the beam of the approaching police car's headlights does not signify death, but the dissolution of an imagined opposition. It is not just Batman that begins to exist in this moment then, but the Joker in his modern incarnation. This post-*Killing Joke* understanding of the Joker has informed every version of the Joker since, most notably the cinematic versions, from Tim Burton's *Batman* (1988), portrayed

by Jack Nicholson; through the first two films of the Christopher Nolan trilogy (2005, 2008) portrayed by Heath Ledger; and into *Joker* (2019) by Todd Phillips where the title character was portrayed by Joaquin Phoenix. It is not an exaggeration to say that *The Killing Joke* marks the birth of the Joker as a protagonist in his own right, and not merely the antagonist to Batman. The Joker is the most enduring and popular example of the monstrous other as a Levinasian foil to the indulgences of Batman's somewhat monstrous self. *The Killing Joke* represents the dynamic of alterity cycling through failure of recognition on the horizon, fear and hatred, the unravelling of the ego through the face to face encounter and ultimately the reconciliation with the naked face of the other enabled by the recognition of its essential kinship to the self.

The Divine Other in Superhero Comics

The divine or deific other has been a subject of enduring fascination for the British Invasion writers, especially Moore, Morrison, and Ellis. Moore returns to the idea of a divine otherness repeatedly in his comics, but most notably in *Promethea*, where a human woman comes to be inhabited by a divine (or at least semi-divine) spirit who is a harbinger of the apocalypse. In *Watchmen*, concerned primarily with the fallibility of superheroes, Dr. Manhattan acquires powers of near-omniscience and near omnipotence that are referred to by other characters as godlike in their scope. Manhattan's temporally disjointed perception offers a glimpse into the chaotic incomprehensibility of the vision of the all-seeing eye. Morrison's spiritualist and shamanic tendencies are on display throughout the run of *The Invisibles*, where numerous divine and semi-divine entities, including an apotheosized John Lennon, Vodou *lwa*, and ancient sentient orbital satellites play roles in the chaotic and expansive plot. Morrison's non-fiction work about the history and cultural position of superhero comics, *Supergods* (2011), argues for a conception of superheroes as modern-day incarnations of the heroic qualities once assigned to the divine beings of myth. In Garth Ennis's *Preacher*, the protagonist Jesse Custer finds his mind playing host to a fugitive renegade angel, putatively of the Christian tradition, called Genesis. In the works of Warren Ellis,

divine others have also featured, most explicitly in *Supergod* (2009-2010), which imagines an international arms race in pursuit of the construction of deities. Latter-day successors and imitators of the main British Invasion writers, such as Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie and their comic *The Wicked + The Divine* (2014-2019), have followed less imaginatively in the path worn by their more illustrious and influential predecessors, wearing out any supposed metaphorical or poetic correlation between gods and superheroes with bludgeoning literal-mindedness. The limits of the idea that connects ancient deities from across world history with the figure of the modern superhero are made obvious in a comic that treats cultural appropriation as a box-ticking exercise by two more white British men in which the objective is to represent as many cultural traditions as possible through the coopting of their distinct divine others into figures of pop-culture. Ellis's *Supergod* might be accused of some of the same problems, with its idea of realized national deity projects that represent the cultural traditions and values of their respective nations. *Supergod* however at least makes its divine others terrifying, alien, and unknowable, rather than trying to imagine them as relatable, commodifiable celebrities of the social media age and thereby stripping them of the essential qualities of sublime otherness that signifiy the divine.

Ellis's *Supergod* begins with a despairing monologue by Dr. Simon Reddin, a British scientist sitting in the burning ruins of London and reflecting on his part in the global arms race to create ultra-powerful incarnate gods, and humanity's need for representations of the divine: "The whole of religious history is about us trying to build amazing creatures that will save the world" (*Supergod* 1). Reddin sits by the broken rubble of Westminster and pontificates, while smoking a cannabis joint, about the human need for faith: "We're hardwired for the need to fashion gods. / Great invisible space daddies that will descend from someplace beyond the sky to tell us what to do and make everything nice. Messiahs dressed in human form that will save us all. / Anyway, that's all the great superhuman projects of the twentieth century were" (*Supergod* 4). Reddin's jaded perspective, flashing back from the apocalyptic ending of the story's deific arms race, clearly sees deities as human-produced entities, and makes the explicit connection between "superhuman projects" and

gods that plays such a central role in the philosophy of Grant Morrison. This strange and rather fragile conception, that gods, and divine others in general, are a superior form of the human, and that therefore superior forms of the human are akin to gods, forms the intellectual backbone of much of the comics work of Moore, Morrison, and Ellis. The messianic superhero, a redeemer, saviour, and deliverer, is not a figure unique to comics – one thinks of Paul Atreides in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, and other protagonists of various heroic fantasies – but it is in comics that this type of figure is very commonly found, and heavily leant upon as a model for the protagonist. While Marvel's Thor and Loki characters are perhaps the clearest-cut examples of divine superheroes, many other superheroes canonically trace their heritage or origin to divine or semi-divine sources, including Wonder Woman, Star-Lord, Cable, and Nightcrawler to name just a few of the most recognizable. The superhero as a divine other is a trope that recurs throughout superhero comics but forms a central and conscious aspect of the works of the main British Invasion writers.

Richard Kearney's characterization of the divine other might double as a description for the superhero as deity imagined by Morrison, Moore, and Ellis:

> "Gods are the names given by most mythologies and religions to those beings whose numinous power and mystery exceed our grasp and bid us kneel and worship. Sometimes they are benign, at other times cruel and capricious. But whatever their character they refuse to be reduced to the bidding of mortals. Transcending laws of time and space, they readily take on immortal or protean status. Gods' ways are not our ways. They bedazzle and surprise us." (4)

The key qualities of the divine other here are its unbiddable autonomous agency and its capacity to exceed mortal expectations and understandings by dint of its godlike perspective. The divine other is a being whose frame of reference and point of view share nothing with those of mortals, even its most devout believers. *Supergod* touches on this when Krishna, India's constructed deific avatar, turns Pakistan's launched nuclear missiles back on their country of origin: "[A] superhuman, by

definition, does not think like us, and certainly does not act like us" (*Supergod* 17). A god simply does not have a human interpretation of the world. The overwhelming power and knowledge of the divine other makes that power and knowledge inaccessible and incomprehensible to the human mind. This is the same dynamic that drives the alienation of Jon Osterman, *Watchmen*'s Dr. Manhattan. Osterman's attempts to communicate his perspective, especially to Laurie, only result in him scaring her and driving her away.

In *Supergod*, the god devised by British scientists, Morrigan Lugus, speaks to a younger Simon Reddin in a flashback scene which reveals something of its essentially alien and inhuman perspective:

> "I am for that thing in your genome that demands it. I am for that thing which keeps you animals alive . . . / In the harsh environment you refer to as a habitable planet, group behaviors are required to survive long enough to procreate. / Since you are stupid monkeys, you have no natural affinity for group altruism. / And so you have evolved a genetic pump that delivers pleasant chemicals to your monkey brains. / One that is triggered by awe and fear of an anthropomorphism in your environment." (*Supergod* 52)

The outlook of the Morrigan Lugus is the outlook of a god comprised of the minds and bodies of three British astronauts joined together by an alien fungus into a mycelial gestalt entity. It is neither truly animal or vegetable, and while its judgement of humans as presented in the flashback scene with Reddin seems harsh, it is the least violently destructive of all the supergods. In the comic's final pages, it appears that the Morrigan Lugus's mycelial network has colonized the entirety of Europe and Asia after the climactic confrontation of Dajjal with Krishna and the American supergod, Jerry Craven. This totalizing colonization of the East can be read as a logical extension of the imperial

ambitions of the British state realized at last through its constructed deity's survival of the apocalyptic clash of the rest of the world's gods[32].

Kearney's observation of the "protean", ever-transforming nature of the divine other is reflected across the works of the British Invasion writers. *Supergod*'s Krishna inhabits a body "infected with tailored bacteria that excrete metal, controllable by the AI net, so that it could grow its own circuitry" (*Supergod* 12), giving it the capacity to reshape and reform itself at will and survive catastrophic physical damage. The animating spirit of Moore's *Promethea*, an ancient immortal woman, inhabits the physical body of eight different women throughout the long centuries of her existence and is only summoned into these incarnate forms when a living woman imagines her as real, taking on a different morphology on each occasion. This essential eternal mutability of the divine other represents a reconciliation of the tension between what Levinas describes as "illeity" – the "unassimilable otherness, absolute difference in relation to everything that can be shown, symbolized, announced, and recalled" (Levinas 57) of the infinite – and the "*il y a*" – the merely empirical episteme that concerns itself only with what is ontologically demonstrable and rejects the presence of the mystic or numinous. For Levinas, as Kearney explains, "the experience of irreducible alterity (divine Illeity) is at bottom indistinguishable from the experience of irreducible abjection (atheistic *Il y a*). The high becomes so high and the low so low that they slip over the edge and begin to converge – sometimes to the point of indifferenciation. The God beyond being becomes an abyss beneath being. The Other becomes Alien" (Kearney 9). This analysis finds the divine other in the paradoxical position of sharing its fundamental nature with its antinomic opposite. The divine other, eternal and eternally mutable, ultimately transcends this exchange intact, its otherness immanentized as a mirror image of itself below, as above. In contrast, the supposedly faithless and prosaic empiricism of the *il y a* is revealed as an emptiness in which its self-imposed abjection is turned upside down and becomes the tautological proof of its own transcendent alterity.

[32] Appendix, Fig. 3.5.

The entangling relation of divine illeity to the quotidian *il y a* through the Levinasian lens of otherness reflects the necessity of the ultimate recognition of oneself as the other, or the other in oneself. The failure of that recognition, as with Batman's failure to recognize the Joker's otherness in himself, is a psychological wound that makes self-knowledge or self-acceptance impossible. Representations of the divine other in comics and other literatures represent a fictive neutral terrain in which the essential otherness of the self can be admitted and negotiated with, preserving the radical strangeness of the encounter with the monstrous other while shifting its horrific and confrontational alterity into a more transcendent and less easily refused mode of relation. The traversal and investigation of these border territories that separate the known self from the unknown other are ways in which the self may come to know the unrealized and unrecognized other that it contains within itself (Kearney 20). The ground of fiction, and especially the ground of that industrialized, mass-market fiction often traduced as juvenile and merely spectacular entertainment, is the ground upon which the self may come face to face with its own internal divisions.

The idea of the divine other is, as Levinas says, "[T]he idea of the infinite in us" (Levinas 219) and, correspondingly through the dialectical reversal, it contains the idea that we as individual subjects partake in the infinite. The figure of the divine other in superhero comics, even when represented as fundamentally estranged from or even hostile to basic humanity, as with *Watchmen*'s Dr. Manhattan or the vengeful deities of *Supergod*, is therefore a means by which one can come to recognize a divine aspect to the self. While otherness has routinely and naively been expressed in literature as a representation of evil that adulterates the purity of the self-same (Kearney 65), the works of the British Invasion writers demand an understanding of alterity as a necessary component of self-realization, and thereby as a route of numinous transcendence through a world disenchanted by the blunt atheistic empiricism of twentieth century modernism. For the empiricism of the post-Victorian modernists, such representations of deific sublimity were not only an undesirable waste of aesthetic effort but technically impossible to achieve. But the purpose of trying to represent the sublime is not simply to reproduce with fidelity for the reader the face of

god, far from it. It is to generate a relation of identification between the subject and the divine as a means of turning thought towards one's place in and relationship to a wider cosmos, where the threads of common experience and solidarity might be found. As Rancière argues: "sublime unrepresentability then confirms Hegel's identification between a moment of art, a moment of thought, and the spirit of a people" (Unrepresentable 136). The rhetorical endeavor to render the sublime unrepresentable only reinforces and underlines the crucial cultural work that its flawed and imperfect representation performs. Postmodernism's reluctance to endorse such acts of absolute closure reopened the door for tackling the unrepresentable sublime through art. As Rancière concludes: "The logic of the unrepresentable can only be sustained by a hyperbole that ends up destroying it" (138). Nothing then is truly unrepresentable. Representations may have more or less fidelity to the experience or phenomenon they are intended to represent (the quality of their simulation), but they remain representations nonetheless.

The misunderstanding of the interpretive function of figures of divine alterity within the comics of the British Invasion writers, and of comics more broadly, has led to a widespread misconception, sometimes fed by those British writers, that comics superheroes are a modern iteration of the divine figures of ancient myth and perform similar cultural work to the gods of the ancient Roman, Hellenic, Egyptian, Norse, and other cultures. While the gods of ancient cultures may have functioned in a similar way to superheroes in terms of representing a divine otherness in which the otherness of the self can be recognized, the parallels between how the two forms were understood are ultimately unknowable. What is certain is that tales of deities in pre-print civilizations were disseminated and propagated through strata of transmission that are functionally and structurally irreconcilable with the mass-media production of superhero literature. The supposed auratic properties of ancient narrative forms, prior to the advent of technologies of mechanical reproduction, tempted the British Invasion writers towards the rediscovery of a supposed lost mode of enchantment that fiction has long since been deprived of. Their various attempts to recover and rehabilitate that spiritual or numinous aspect of the encounter with fiction

reveal a largely unsuspected or unremarked-upon conservative aspect to their aesthetic and ethical projects, which I address in the next chapter.

The Other as a Stranger in Superhero Comics

For Kearney, representations of the other in literature can always be identified as monstrous others, divine others, or the other as a stranger (3). It is this third and final category that I turn to now, with the preliminary observation that it is by some distance the largest, most fluid, and most permeable of these categories. The other as stranger is the other that has taken hold most durably in the field of postcolonial and decolonial studies. It is the destabilizing recognition of otherness as an essential feature of quotidian human experience, unlike divine or monstrous otherness, and it thus has the most potential relevance to ordinary, extramural discourses. In some sense, the figure of the other as a stranger is the true form of otherness, the most immediately important, and the one with which we must all ultimately come to grips with in some way.

The moral significance of the presence of the stranger, and what that presence demands of us, is one of the issues that produces distinct divisions between the otherwise closely connected philosophies of Derrida and Levinas. Kearney analyses this division in the following terms: "For Levinas this relation to otherness establishes an infinite responsibility; for Derrida it establishes a summons to absolute hospitality" (67). Hospitality is the foundational moral pressure that the presence of the stranger creates for the subject according to Derrida. It is not quite the infinite responsibility to the other whose entanglement with the subject transcends death itself in Levinas, rather it is a theorization of responsibility that rests on the ultimate sovereignty of the self. The right to hospitality that the stranger-other is entitled to expect depends already upon a certain level of pre-existing injustice in relation: "[I]f one determines the other as stranger, one is already introducing the circles of conditionality that are family, nation, state, and citizenship" (Hostipitality 8). This is the origin of the summons to hospitality that the other engenders. For Derrida, any ethical relation of self to other must first account for the differentials of personal predicates between

subjects. This is not the elimination of difference, nor the infinite and absolute estrangement of the Levinasian other, but a limited, reasoned calculation of disparity that must inform one's attitude and approach to an incalculable and unlimited human stranger within whom the self is reflected, as their strangeness is reflected in the self. Derrida argues that the mandate to provide hospitality for the stranger therefore generates a two-fold responsibility: "This is the double law of hospitality: to calculate the risks, yes, but without closing the door on the incalculable, that is, on the future and the foreigner. It defines the unstable site of strategy and decision" (Principles 6). Without the presence of the stranger, sovereignty of the self is effectively meaningless, and without sovereignty of the self, the presence of the stranger demands no ethical response. As with Levinas, the meeting with the figure of the other as a stranger is the ground from which the self emerges. The choices that meeting imposes, and the programs of thought and action that are developed to rationalize and enact those choices, are, for Derrida, the questions and answers that open the self to ethical examination. In contrast, for Levinas, the sovereignty of the self must in some sense be surrendered in order to establish a justified ethical relation with the other that escapes the totalizing fields of war and politics: "In the laying aside by the self of its sovereignty of self, in its modality of detestable self, ethics signifies, but also probably the very spirituality of the soul and certainly the question of the meaning of being, that is to say, its call to justify itself" (Levinas 147-148). The sovereignty of the self, for Levinas, is something that gets in the way of the ethical relation to the other, and therefore, is an obstacle to recognition of the meaning of being itself.

While Derrida draws upon Levinas to arrive at this theorization of the other, Levinas himself sees this relationship with the other as a stranger in terms of the infinite. For this reason, it cannot be encompassed or fully described according to the terms of Husserlian or Heideggerian phenomenology:

> "Our relation with him [the other] certainly consists in wanting to understand him, but this relation exceeds the confines of understanding. Not only because, besides curiosity,

> knowledge of the other also demands sympathy or love, ways of being that are different from impassive contemplation, but also because, in our relation to the other, the latter does not affect us by means of a concept. The other is a being and counts as such." (Levinas 5)

This status of the other as a being that is separate and different from the self is of crucial importance to Levinas's critique of phenomenological thinking. The existence of the other is both the originary spark of all social relations and the fulcrum upon which they turn. The other stands therefore at the heart of all human understanding of the world. It is an inescapable figure whose effects must be accounted for in every attempt to investigate how we perceive and experience the world through consciousness. And yet, understanding of the essential nature of the Other itself evades the grasp of the conscious mind, no matter how we might try to approach it. In the moment of trying to analyse the essence of the Other, it slips away from simple observation to occupy a relational position to the perceiver:

> "The other is not first an object of understanding and then an interlocutor. The two relations are merged. In other words, addressing the other is inseparable from understanding the other . . . The point is to see the function of language not as subordinate to the consciousness we have of the presence of the other, or of his proximity, or of our community with him, but as a condition of that conscious realization." (6)

For Levinas, the other is not only the infinite, not only the stranger, not simply the unknown quantity of the living world, but every relation that is possible between human consciousnesses. Every encounter with another person is a meeting with the other, whether we recognize it as such or not, and every encounter with the other is, likewise, first and foremost an encounter with another person. The impossibility of non-relation between self and other is an inherent structural feature of the social phenomenon as Levinas describes it. The relation of self to other is not something that can

be easily encapsulated in terms of the truth of the other's being. This relationship has an essentially unknowable quality which eludes description or categorization. The face of the other is not a signifier of anything except itself, it is only what is signified and must stand without context or explanation. According to Levinas, this reveals the poverty of epistemological approaches that seek to pin down every experience with irreducible knowledge claims. The existence of the other takes on a spiritual, almost cosmic, significance. The only understanding of it available is through addressing it directly, through a conscious embrace of its relational nature. The other defies any kind of rationalist attempt to contain it. That which can be entirely contained by rationality is therefore, not the other. The other may be discussed and may enter into discussion, but its fundamental alien-ness cannot be conquered by discourse.

The other resists the domination of rational understanding wherein it may be defined, classified, explained and pinned to a board like a collector's butterfly. It does not struggle against this domination, it simply evades it entirely. The domain of rationality cannot encompass it. In the moment of recognition where we perceive the naked face of the other, the horizonal field in which it has been held collapses. The other exists everywhere beyond the horizon and nowhere within it – it comes to define the horizon of the self – and the misunderstanding that has hitherto been perceived as a deficient mode of understanding resolves into an understanding that admits to the impossibility of any understanding of the other outside of the subjective experience of the face-to-face relation, the position of discourse:

> "(W)e limit ourselves to the conception of a being, insignificant in itself, a silhouette on the luminous horizon, acquiring a meaning only by virtue of that presence on the horizon. The face signifies otherwise. In it, the infinite resistance of a being to our power is affirmed precisely in opposition to the will to murder that it defies, because, being completely naked – and the nakedness of the face is not a figure of speech – it means by itself. We cannot even say that the face is an opening; that would make it

> relative to a surrounding plenitude… I set the signifying of the face in opposition to understanding and meaning grasped on the basis of the horizon." (10)

The face-to-face relation with the other is both the condition of possibility of the social reality that defines the self and the condition of discourse by which the other may be engaged and addressed without ever coming close to being understood. But simply addressing the other is insufficient for Levinas, who wants to find an ethical articulation of this relation in the absence of a phenomenological, epistemological, or ontological description. He does this by developing the concept of responsibility for the other, but he asks us to understand the other in the broadest possible terms, by recognizing what the fear of the other actually represents:

> "Obviously that fear could be interpreted as fear for self, on the pretext that in fearing for the other I may be afraid of being in the same situation as the other. But that is not what fear for the other really is. The mother who fears for her child, or even, each of us who fears for a friend, is afraid for the other. (But every "other man" is a friend. Do you see what I mean?)" (117)

This final parenthetical reveals the scope of Levinas's true objective. He seeks not only to explain otherness as a relation between the self and the foreigner or alien, but that between the subject and their neighbour, their best friend, and their family. Otherness, for Levinas, is the name of the universal relation between individual subjects within the totalizing fields of culture and society.

Levinas's conceptualization of the social totality as an aggregate of relationships between individual subjects who all exist in a relation of other-ness to each other and to the whole is a radical departure from the grudging social matrix of Heidegger. Levinas sees these relations as being characterized by responsibility – a word he chooses carefully after discarding his first choice "love" as having been debased and degraded by inappropriate usage. The ethics of wildly diverse subjectivities interact with each other in unpredictable ways and it is from the violent interplay of forces in this unmappably complex web of interconnected others that economics emerges as an

originary injustice, deploying violence to preserve its freedom to operate with impunity. Justice, therefore, cannot be delivered or realized on an individual basis between the self and the other. Justice is a feature, or not, of the totalized social sphere: "I wanted to describe the relation of man to man. Justice does not constitute it; it is what makes justice possible. One renders justice to the totality" (35). Justice is not what enables this society of concretely interconnected individuals existing in relations of otherness to each other, rather, justice cannot exist without it. There is no justice available that is not justice delivered in reference to the othering totality of the social world, no matter how rotten and oppressive that totality may have become, or how alienated a person might be from it:

> "To be disengaged from the totality while at the same time accomplishing a work in it is not to stand against the totality, but for it – that is, in its service. To serve the totality is to fight for justice. The totality is constituted by violence and corruption. The work consists in introducing equality into a world turned over to the interplay and the mortal strife of freedoms. Justice can have no other object than economic equality." (36)

An almost perfectly neoliberal expression of the value of human life as primarily monetary seems a cold conclusion to reach, but Levinas insists that this may be the only worthwhile conception of justice available. This is ultimately the same idea that stands implicitly at the center of Marxist discourses of economics as underpinning the grand sweep of human history. "It is certainly quite shocking to see in the quantification of man one of the essential conditions of justice. But can we conceive of a justice without quantity and without reparation?" (38). Levinas argues that If justice must be measurable, quantifiable and demonstrable in order to be justified across the totality without provoking cycles of chaotic retribution or ever-degenerating leniency then this somewhat chilly calculus of economic justice may yet prove to yield a higher truth than any affective or spiritual ethics.

The responsibility that the presence of the other commands exceeds death, and in fact the death of the other ramifies that responsibility even as it unexpectedly establishes the self. As Davis summarizes it, Levinas's argument is that: "I am constituted by the death of the other in ways that I could never have anticipated, and which could not have made sense to me" (Davis 40). The formation of the subject that emerges from the death of the other as a stranger cannot be predicted or preemptively accounted for. Its effects are incomprehensible until they occur:

> "The death of the other man puts me in question, as if in that death that is invisible to the other who exposes himself to it, *I*, through my eventual indifference, became the accomplice; and as if, even before being doomed to it myself *I* had to answer for this death of the other, and not leave the other alone in his death-bound solitude." (Levinas 145-146)

Levinas insists that it is the self's response to the possible and eventually the actual death of the other that ultimately shapes the ethical nature of the subject's relation to otherness. The infinite solitude of death demands of each subject that they transcend the limits of their own subjectivity and meet the other face to face. "The relation with the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a proximity, preserving the excessiveness of the uncontainable, which grazes the surface; it is Desire, that is, precisely a thought thinking infinitely more than it thinks" (58). In the other's face we discover each time, as if for the first time, the condition of the possibility of the self. In the self-annihilation inherent to every moment of face-to-face contact with that other which exceeds our understanding, which exceeds the capacity of our formal language and systems of signification to contain and contextualize, we at last assume responsibility for our own finitude and in doing so, come closer to the Infinite, come closer to the experience of truth.

Levinas's theory of otherness as infinite and totalizing represents a somewhat more mystical and universal approach to otherness than Derrida is willing to take, so Derrida's focus remains squarely on the question of hospitality and the future that the arrival of the unlimited other heralds:

"Pure hospitality consists in welcoming whoever arrives before imposing any conditions on him, before knowing and asking anything at all" (Principles 7). Hospitality to the other means not limiting them through the imposition of stipulations or prerequisites or demands that the other explain themselves in terms that make sense to the subject. Hospitality is in allowing the other to be unabashedly other and still offering whatever aid or succor to them that sovereignty allows.

This question of hospitality to the unlimited other, and what that entails, is one that is repeatedly reflected in superhero comics that dare to present radically different, foreign, and even alien characters in ways that do not shunt them into the categories of the monstrous or divine other. Warren Ellis and John Cassaday's *Planetary* is a comic that is self-consciously fascinated by the idea of the strange, and the stranger, concealed within the social fabric of the everyday. *Planetary* deals with a central character who begins the story as a stranger who is not a stranger, and the first two pages of the first issue, in a scene where Elijah Snow meets Jakita Wagner in a desert diner, explores, consciously or not, some of the dynamics of theoretical otherness. Jakita, the representative of the Planetary organization, has travelled into the desert to find Elijah Snow and, the scene reveals, interview him for a job. The relationship between Wagner and Snow is one that is complicated in ways that will not be detailed until much later in the comic's run when it is revealed that Snow was in fact previously known to Wagner and her colleague The Drummer as an active member of the Planetary organization's field team. Wagner and Drummer are under a strict injunction not to reveal to the amnesiac Snow that they are familiar with him, and he does not recognize them upon meeting them. They are to be strangers to him, in every meaningful sense of the word.

When Wagner encounters Snow in the desert diner, his first words to her, after confirming his own identity, are to say: "Explain to me why I shouldn't kill you right now". Wagner responds: "Is that why you agreed to meet me, Mr. Snow? To kill me?" Snow replies, "Maybe" but does not move (*All Over the World* 2). The focus on the killing of the stranger in these first moments of the comics recalls the argument of Levinas, that the face of the stranger as the other represents both the

possibility of murder and the binding injunction against it: “there is, consequently, in the Face of the Other always the death of the Other and thus, in some way, an incitement to murder, the temptation to go to the extreme, to completely neglect the other – and at the same time (and this is the paradoxical thing) the Face is also the “Thou Shalt Not Kill” (Levinas 104). For Elijah Snow, isolated from his memories, engulfed in the solitude of the empty desert that surrounds him both figuratively and literally, this encounter with the stranger Jakita Wagner is immediately threatening. He feels the presence of the summons to murder that the face of the other instigates but at the same time he is stilled by it. His own identity as a misanthropic, paranoid, and alienated curmudgeon is put under scrutiny in the moment of meeting Wagner face to face and the encounter demands that he accept culpability for his own behaviour. As Levinas says, the face-to-face encounter with the other as a stranger represents, “a demand made of me from the depths of an absolute solitude; a demand addressed to me or an order issued, a putting in question of my presence and my responsibility” (130). While Snow endures his own desert loneliness, Wagner also approaches from a position of infinite solitude, as a stranger come to seek his help because they have no other option. Her approach is a question, beyond the request she makes of him, that places in query Snow’s presence in the world, and his responsibility to it. Snow is compelled to respond.

Planetary deals with otherness, and the death of the other as a stranger in several places throughout its four-volume, twenty-seven issue run. The second volume, *Planetary: The Fourth Man*, introduces through flashbacks the character of Ambrose Pierce. Pierce is a black man with physics-altering powers that can bend time and space, who was Snow’s immediate predecessor as the Planetary field team’s third member. He is shot and killed (seemingly) during the field team’s raid on an experimental facility from which a mission has been launched to bring back a fictional character from a fictional reality (*The Fourth Man* 66). Pierce represents a kind of othered version of Elijah Snow within the story. He plays the same role within the field team. He wears the same white suit and flowing white trench coat that Snow always wears. In terms of personality, he fills the same niche as Snow within the team as a cynical foil for Drummer’s childishness and a mediator of Jakita’s

explosive temper. Moments from his apparently inevitable death, Pierce's body vanishes in the signature shimmer of his reality-bending powers and his actual death remains unseen. The similarity of the name Ambrose Pierce to that of the nineteenth-century American satirist and writer of science fiction and supernatural stories, Ambrose Bierce, must be read as a deliberate allusion by the self-consciously referential and pulp-literary Ellis. Bierce was a veteran of the American Civil War and the exact circumstances of his own death remain a mystery, after he disappeared from the historical record in late 1913 while travelling with the Mexican Revolutionary army of Pancho Villa somewhere near Chihuahua, Mexico (Starrett 39).

The ultimate fate of *Planetary*'s Ambrose Pierce is not revealed until the final pages of the last issue of the story (*Spacetime Archaeology* 207-211) when he is returned, still grievously injured, into the hands of the Planetary organization, having shifted his dying body into a bubble of temporal stasis until his colleagues find a way to recover him safely. That Pierce's mysterious disappearance is resolved as the post-climactic closure of *Planetary*'s four-volume storyline, underlines his significance as an othered reflection of Elijah Snow's self. In this epilogue to the main story, set once the principal antagonists of the series, The Four, have been defeated, Elijah Snow is consumed by his responsibility to the missing Pierce. Snow experiences what Levinas calls: "Fear and responsibility for the death of the other person, even if the ultimate meaning of that responsibility for the death of the other person is responsibility before the inexorable, and at the last moment, the obligation not to leave the other alone in the face of death" (130-131). While Ambrose Pierce is known to the Planetary personnel, he is the "alter" face of Elijah Snow during Snow's long absence from the Planetary team, as described above. Elijah Snow's responsibility to Pierce is also his responsibility to himself.

Pierce's racialization is only referenced once, during the scene where he is shot and seemingly killed by the unnamed research head of Randall Dowling's experimental facility, who says after shooting him: "We're living in a science fiction movie. The black guy always dies in science

fiction movies" (*The Fourth Man* 66). The self-consciously metafictional dialogue of the killer scientist here builds on the story's subject matter of a recovery mission launched to a purpose-built fictive world in order to bring a fictional character back for study, but it is also a reflection of the deliberately metafictional universe in which *Planetary* takes place. Snow himself repeatedly references the two-dimensional nature of the protagonists' reality, and the theoretical space between separate realities in the *Planetary* universe is referred to by friends and foes of the Planetary organization alike as "the Bleed", the same name given by designers and publishers to the blank space around the margins of a page traditionally left clear in printing. The structure of the *Planetary* universe is shaped by the devices and design features of its print body on both the syntactic and rhetorical levels. The almost routine appearances of fictional characters drawn from the history of pulp fiction – such as Dracula, Doc Savage (Axel Brass), Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan (Lord Blackstock), James Bond (John Stone), Fu Manchu (Hark), The Lone Ranger (Bret Leather) and from the golden age of superhero comics, such as The Four (a twisted reimagining of the Fantastic Four as villains), the three superheroes murdered by them, who are surrogates for Superman, Wonder Woman, and Green Lantern, Captain Marvel (Jim Wilder), as well as the alternate reality Justice League who were fought and defeated by Brass and his allies in 1945 – are certainly signifying features of *Planetary*'s densely allusive pulp-literary intertextuality, but these appearances also serve to underline that the universe in which *Planetary* takes place (the Wildstorm universe, canonically) is a universe that is fundamentally grounded in the fictional worlds of adventure, romance, and horror that underpinned the sensationalist mass-market fictions of the twentieth century.

The excitement-driven adventure stories of the early and mid-twentieth century pulp magazines were often based on colonial tropes of civilized men set against the barbarity of savages, and established a culture of racist, sexist, white saviorism that persisted until it was neatly transplanted into the stories of superhero comics, as Wertham and Ong have argued. *Planetary*, as a metafictional rollercoaster tour of these pulp genres of fiction, usually seems to be aware of the

somewhat atavistic tendencies of the stories which it folds into its own but try as it might to maintain some critical distance from them, it often falls prey to similar problems of orientalism, white supremacy, and the valorization of colonialism. The white saviorism of the comic's final scenes may not be the most obvious example of this tendency to recapitulate the politics of the pulps (the history of Lord Blackstock in Opak-Re, and the accompanying origin story of Jakita Wagner must claim that dubious honour) but the romanticization of the Orientalist history and fictional tropes of the high-colonial era is an unavoidable and unfortunate presence throughout *Planetary*. The meeting with the other as a stranger nevertheless becomes a central figure in *Planetary*'s twenty-seven issue run, and the importance of the difficult, ambiguous, subject-forming nature of those strange encounters is almost the recurring motto of the comics: "It's a strange world. Let's keep it that way" (*All Around the World* 24). This motto, repeated in various forms by different characters a dozen times throughout the four volumes of *Planetary* echoes in simpler language Levinas's mystic wondering at the continuous emergence of strangeness in the world and its capacity to enrich and awaken human consciousness: "Is not the vivacity of life an excession, the rupture of the container by the uncontainable, form ceasing to be its own content, already offering itself as experience?" (Levinas 88).

3.2 Agency Embodied: Marginal Histories and Alterity in the Comics of the British Invasion

The human body is the site at which otherness is first identified and realized. Differences between bodies generate notions of alterity which are then rationalized and codified into epistemological classifications and thereby into normative cultural categories of ontology. The body is also the site within which otherness manifests as lived experience, a personalized physiological response to the processes of subjection that are imposed on the individual through their encounters with established cultural norms. Otherness is an affective condition of the body as much as it is a name for the estrangement between categories of subjects. As a visual, pictorial narrative form, comics is intimately concerned with the representation of bodies. The portrayal of the body of a character by an artist, and its interpretation by the reader, is one of the fundamental ways in which the details of a story are generated through graphic narratives. The bodies of the characters drawn by Jack Kirby, for example, redefined the way that superhero comics were illustrated, with his focus on capturing the energy and movement of these dynamic figures. Kukkonen argues that the reason that the body is such an important instrument of narrative is that it is primarily through the representations of bodies that readers are drawn into the world of the story:

> "[R]eaders empathize with the characters' emotions through simulation, which includes the appraisal and outline of potential responses. This embodied simulation can be understood as facilitated by the bodily echoes of mirror neurons and our bodily schemata. In other words, we do not only get a bodily echo of the movements of the movements of characters through time and space in the storyworld, but also of their emotional movement in the social fabric. The intentional and emotional causality that runs through human interactions, prompting us to ascribe intentions to others (through what is known as 'theory of mind') and leading us to connect emotions, intentions, and actions, gives rise to our perception of social causality." (Kukkonen 58)

While the physical aspects of these embodied simulations and the bodily echoes that generate them are of principal interest to Kukkonen (and perhaps also to Kirby), the latter point about social causality is of potentially much greater importance in terms of understanding how affective relations, including relations of otherness, are represented on the comics page.

Inside the experience of the "embodied simulation" of a character that a reader is running, the specific features and properties of that character's relative conditions of embodiment might more properly be described as being 'felt' rather than being 'seen' or 'understood' in a merely verbal, intellectualized way. The projection of the reader's embodiment into the character on the page reveals unexpected affective possibilities within the text. The character's relationality to other characters, to their environment, and to objects in the storyworld, are not simply brute topography but meaning-making relationships which are inherently informed and shaped by sociality, by human considerations. Such social relationships are affective in nature, which is to say that they form around desires, and the reader's construction of a character's desire (that is, what it is that character wants) in a graphic narrative is something which emerges primarily from the running of this embodied simulation that Kukkonen identifies. It is in this affective relationality between embodied character and storyworld environment that Kukkonen's embodied approach offers the most intriguing possibilities for understanding how graphic narrative constructs fluid, contingent layers of visual signification that root the character's bodily experience as central even while the imagery being presented may grow more abstracted from their presumed phenomenological perspective.

Ministry of Space is a self-consciously pulpy science-fictional alternate history that owes much of its ancestry to the likes of Boys Own Adventures. The story's break from conventional history comes in 1945 with the British military foiling the US military's Operation Paperclip, which historically saw German military rocket scientists being secretly relocated to America to work on the Apollo space program. In the alternate history of this book, the UK claimed those scientists instead, altering the development of not only the space race but the entire strategic balance of power in the

postwar world. The book is dedicated by Ellis to his father, who he says, “would have liked this” and for a British reader there is something very familiar about this unfamiliar world. A world where the British Empire’s postwar dismemberment was prevented, where Britannia rules the void, where the supposed glory days of British colonialism continued out into the solar system itself.

The story’s alternate history is bookended by short sections that deal with a character called Lucy, a young woman of colour who serves as a pilot in the Royal Space Force. We first encounter her through the glass of her cockpit as her space plane takes off from an idyllic scene of English pastoral bliss. Her back is ramrod straight and her beaming smile can’t hide a properly stiff upper lip. For the purposes of the embodied simulation, the signal is loud and clear. Lucy is proud and happy and competent, the very picture of British imperial capability. Officer material, as it were. And yet, the glass of her cockpit makes it hard to tell at first that she is in fact a woman of colour[33]. Her skin appears lighter beneath the albedo effect of the cockpit glass than it will be revealed to be later. The ability to run models of embodied simulation is constrained by the availability of evidence. There is no real graphic narrative form equivalent to the unreliable narrator of more canonical English literature. There is rarely any real question about whether the reality of what is shown in the panel might be on shaky epistemological ground. There is almost never any reason to doubt the focalizing gaze of the story in the same way that any more conventional literary narrator’s commentary might be subjected to a skeptical analysis. What the reader *sees* in graphic narrative is simply what is there, or at least what is being experienced. Captioned text or dialogue may mislead or undermine its own credibility, but the veridical fidelity of the visual and pictorial tends toward the unimpeachable.

After a rollercoaster ride of dash, ingenuity, and derring-do, *Ministry of Space* ends with two final revelatory panels[34]. Lucy is back on board the orbital Churchill station, being sent for by her

[33] Appendix, Fig. 3.5.
[34] Appendix, Fig. 3.6.

superiors. The door of what is presumably her dormitory is labelled “non-white women staff.” The whole substance of the comic’s story is blown apart by this final panel. The unavoidable realization dawns that this was not simply a story about the glorious achievements of the British empire, it was a story about individualized oppression and otherness. The representation of Lucy’s embodiment in this final panel is of particular interest. She is half-slouched, the posture of someone on the brink of collapsing in defeat. One hand trails behind her on the handle of the door, as if reluctant to leave the safety of her quarters. The other hand reaches up to tug her service cap back on, an unmistakable visual reference to the peasant tugging his forelock before the nobility. Her body, (and thus, the embodied simulation of the reader) exceeds the boundaries of the panel. She is disjointed from her own social environment, disconnected and out of place in her own story’s world. Crucially, this panel wraps together embodiment, affect, and the socio-political causes and effects of that affective embodiment into a single felt experience. If the reader is really simulating Lucy’s embodiment on an affective level, then this panel must fall upon them like a ton of bricks. Her slumped shoulders and bowed head generate the final affective state that the comic leaves us with, subverting the jolly and dramatic tone of colonial adventurism with the bald truth of gendered and racialized otherness upon which the British empire was built.

By taking advantage of our seemingly natural propensity to understand representations of space, time, and causality by modelling them from embodied perspectives, comics (and graphic narrative more generally) have the capacity to communicate affective conditions on an almost entirely non-verbal pre-conscious level. The affective condition of otherness, the general feeling of alterity if not its specific bodily detail, can be communicated in graphic narrative through these techniques of embodied representation. *Ministry of Space* saves this affective revelation for its final page, thus avoiding the work of exploring the possibility of a more detailed embodied simulation of racialized and gendered otherness. As both Levinas and Derrida suggest, such representations of otherness go beyond simple epistemological or ontological questions. They are ultimately representations of and questions about justice and injustice. The detailing of what constitutes

injustice, and how injustice manifests for an individual subject, are at the foundation of the idea of otherness as a discursive category. The depiction and representation of otherness, a specifically colonial version of gendered and racialized otherness, in *Ministry of Space* represents a twenty-first century continuation of the twentieth century preoccupation of the British Invasion writers, and perhaps Ellis in particular, with questions of political and social justice. The tradition of political agitation over social injustices shared by so many of the former *2000AD* writers takes on new form as those writers themselves begin to become aware of broader questions about what social justice means in a post-millennial world. Otherness, in particular, takes on a more pronounced and specific aspect for these writers as the cultural terrain of the twentieth century's debates about social justice is covered over with the advent of the new millennium, heralding a sharper focus on the specific predicates of the human beings upon which otherness most often hangs. The otherness of the disenfranchised, alienated, and dysfunctional white cis-heterosexual man recedes in social importance next to the more clearly apprehended injustices faced by women, queer and trans people, and racialized minorities.

Other works of British Invasion authors that explore the possibilities of representing the affective condition of otherness through embodiment do not always take aim at injustice in the same way. *The Boys* (2007), written by Garth Ennis and illustrated by Darick Robertson, takes an oppositional approach to the broader trend of increasingly careful representations of otherness. Imagined as a satire of superhero comics where the superheroes are the villains and "the Boys" are the heroes due to their opposition to the superheroes, *The Boys* revels in a juvenile political incorrectness that tries to have its satirical cake and eat it too. The line between satire and celebrating the thing that is being satirized is always a thin one, but *The Boys* in general seems more concerned in indulging itself in the amoral violence and debauchery it depicts than producing any meaningful critique of it. Homophobic, racial, and misogynistic slurs appear frequently in the book's dialogue, often in the mouths of sympathetic or co-protagonist characters. Representations of racialized characters lean heavily on reactionary and outdated racial stereotypes for dubious comic

effect, homosexual characters are sneeringly portrayed as priapic perverts (with two notable exceptions), and the frequent sexual degradation of female characters is more often rooted in titillating patriarchal self-indulgence than any attempt to highlight gendered injustices.

While *The Boys* does feature a female member of their team, she is known only as "the Female", and is routinely presented as a being of radically unsettling otherness despite her ostensible alignment with the protagonists. She is the smallest of The Boys' group of misfits, a feature of her physicality hyperbolically exaggerated by the poor fitting of the outsized black trenchcoat that serves as an unofficial uniform for the team. In her first appearance in the comic, the Female stands alone in a full length "shot" at the front door of the house of some gangsters who will shortly become her victims (*The Name of the Game* 33). She is small and slight, though her physiology is concealed by the enveloping black trenchcoat that reaches her ankles. Only her head, the tips of her fingers, and her black Doctor Martens boots are visible. The panel in which she appears shows the plain grey door of the house, bordered by a (non-diegetic) black that bleeds into the gutters of the page. The effect of the framing of this layout is to make the Female's figure seem even smaller and more isolated, suggesting, were it not for her trenchcoat, an unassuming, even helpless figure. Here, the embodied approach is used for ironic ends, as it will be quickly become clear that the Female is far from helpless. Indeed, as the comic progresses, it reveals that the Female is almost certainly the most dangerous of The Boys when it comes to her capacity for sudden and murderous violence.

While the Female is a representation of female strength and power it is notable that due to her small stature, she literally takes up less space on the page than any of the other Boys. Her power comes from the same place as the other Boys (and the "supes" they pursue), the experimental drug "Compound V" which confers great strength and sometimes other superpowers on those who take it. It is clear that the Female is a character with her own agency – she temporarily disappears from the group to pursue her own vigilante missions of vengeance – but this agency is blunted by the fact

that she cannot speak. The only unambiguously empowered and autonomous woman in the comic is also one who has no voice of her own, which undermines the idea that she represents a serious counterpoint to the many female characters who are abused, coerced, and otherwise degraded throughout the comic's run. Arguably, the Female's lack of a voice might make her a representation of a different kind of otherness, that of the differently-abled, though it emerges later in the story that her silence is a result of psychological trauma she endured as a child, which she later (partially) overcomes, rather than physical injury or disability. Other female characters with significant presence in the comic include the superhero members of The Seven, Starlight (whose civilian alter-ego is Annie January), who is coerced into sexual acts by the male members of The Seven; and Queen Maeve, a depressive alcoholic who betrays The Seven and is ultimately decapitated by Homelander; and the CIA director Susan L. Rayner, who provides classified information to the Boys through Butcher, whom she loathes while being in an ongoing sexual relationship with him in which he habitually degrades her. Of these, Annie (Starlight) is the closest that *The Boys* ever gets to a representation of a sympathetic female character with her own perspective and agency and even this is mainly limited to the context of her romantic relationship with protagonist Wee Hughie. The representations of women in *The Boys* tend generally towards one-dimensional caricatures of womanhood and there is never any real sense that the comic regards them as anything other than alien objects.

Alongside the many homophobic slurs thrown around as insults and hyperbolic caricatures of queer sexuality in the pages of *The Boys*, there is also a restrained portrayal of a gay male couple in *The Boys Volume Two: Get Some*. Paul Drake and his boyfriend Max are encountered by Butcher and Hughie in the course of their investigations into the death of Stephen Rubenstein. Paul is a handsome and charming barman at the Red Rooster gay bar where his older, balding boyfriend Max sits at the end of the bar reading newspapers (*Get Some* 32-36). The relationship between Paul and Max as it is portrayed in the comic does not seem to be a happy one. Max is openly jealous of Paul talking to younger and more attractive men and, it transpires, was responsible for sending

Rubenstein to meet with the superhero Swingwing, who is marketed by the Vought corporation as a gay superhero, and who ultimately murdered Rubenstein out of frustration. Swingwing is not actually gay, and complains of his homophobic repulsion at having to meet with and talk to queer groups as part of his corporate marketing. When Paul discovers Max's culpability in Rubenstein's death, he distances himself from Max. Near the end of the *Get Some* arc, Hughie meets with Paul on a bench in Central Park in New York to apprise him of the resolution of the case of Rubenstein's death. Max is visible lurking in the background and Paul's reaction is to say "Oh Christ, the fucking idiot's been following me everywhere!" (*Get Some* 86). The following page shows Hughie watching from a distance as the lovers reconcile with an awkward embrace.

The story of Paul and Max runs in parallel to the main storyline of *Get Some*, which deals with the figure of Tek-Knight (a loosely veiled parody of Batman) struggling with an overwhelming compulsion to penetrate people, objects, and animals, and his young sidekick Laddio (once again a loosely veiled parody of Batman's longtime sidekick Robin, the Boy Wonder). Tek-Knight, afraid he will lose his self-control and rape Laddio, sends his sidekick away on a tour of the various super-groups that exist in the world of *The Boys*. The representation of the comparatively normal relationship of Paul and Max notwithstanding, the story of *Get Some* is an inherently homophobic one that seeks to undermine and degrade the figure of Batman (through the thin allegory of Tek-Knight) by depicting him analogically as a rapacious homosexual man. The supposed comedy of the arc springs from the idea that the Batman figure is a sinister priapic pervert who cannot help but want to have sex with anything and everything, including a cat, a vehicle, his colleagues in the super-team Payback, and ultimately a hallucinated giant asteroid that threatens to collide with Earth. The awakening of this penetrative compulsion is sourced by Tek-Knight to a threesome he engaged in with Swingwing and their longtime rival The Talon (herself a stand-in for Catwoman). Tek-Knight's superhero career is ended with the revelation that his butler, who quit his service after some unspecified outrage, went to the press in revenge, resulting in the headline "Homo Hero" (*Get Some* 72). This outcome repeats a theme from *The Name of the Game*, in which the Teenage Kix superhero

Shout-Out is forced to publicly leave his super-team when it is revealed that he is gay. These are hardly sympathetic representations of the struggles of coming out and are more easily and intuitively read as ridiculing these characters for their homosexuality. Both are presented as morally deficient characters whose forcible outing in the media is simply a just consequence of their perversion.

The Boys, as a major work from a British Invasion author (Ennis is Northern Irish), shares in the enduring preoccupation of Moore and Ellis with the idea of the superhero as a fundamentally conservative and even fascistic figure. In a 2019 interview with the *LA Times* about the launch of the new television adaptation of *The Boys*, Ennis made his disdain for the superhero genre of comics unambiguous: "The notion that the medium I work in is dominated (and, sadly, defined) by such a stupid genre is not one that feeds my sense of idealism. They've ruined comics, so there's no reason they can't ruin film and TV as well"[35]. The iconoclastic intention of *The Boys*, to degrade the figure of the superhero in the popular imagination, ultimately ends up losing its satirical edge in a riot of self-indulgent reactionary stereotypes and hate speech. Its representations of women are degrading and one-dimensional, and when it attempts to represent queer sexuality as something normal and unremarkable it can only do so in the context of a storyline that figures queer sexuality constituted by rapists. Women and queer people are collateral damage in Ennis's personal campaign to denigrate the figure of the superhero, and in this *The Boys* reflects one of the persistent problems with the work of the British Invasion authors. With the sexual assault and crippling of Barbara Gordon in *The Killing Joke*, the gang rape of Janni Dakkar in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Century: 1910* (2009), the attempted rape of Sally Jupiter in *Watchmen,* and the repeated traumatization of Evie in *V for Vendetta* (1982), the comics works of Alan Moore have often hinged on the brutalization and objectification of women. While Moore has also authored many comics that might be seen as seeking to redress that imbalance by featuring powerful women characters who

[35] Phillips, Jevon. "Garth Ennis says superheroes ruined comics. With 'The Boys' he's fighting back." *LA Times*. July 26, 2019.

exercise their own agency without suffering the same kind of gendered violence such as *Promethea*, and *Lost Girls* (2006), these later works exist alongside the persistent presence of sexual violence in his earlier comics. Moore's reputation as an author of feminist comics literature will likely struggle to survive any serious analysis of the full catalogue of his works.

As with Moore, the earlier works of Warren Ellis, *Ministry of Space* notwithstanding, often betray a certain carelessness towards female characters that rarely seems to affect male characters in the same way. The "filthy assistants" of *Transmetropolitan's* Spider Jerusalem, Channon Yarrow and Yelena Rossini, are both presented as strong women characters (almost to the point of cliché at times) with their own agency. Even if the result of that agency is usually that they do what Jerusalem demands of them, they often insult, ridicule, and defy him in the process. Channon is a former stripper and journalism student who is hired by Mitchell Royce, Spider's editor, to work as his assistant following the transient riots of *Back on the Street* (1998). She later becomes Spider's bodyguard, displaying significant physical strength and martial prowess in this role. An early storyline sees Channon's boyfriend leaving her to join the "foglet" community, whom each live embodied in a swarm of free-floating nanobots, and she later becomes a bride of disgraced transient cult leader and sometime antagonist of Jerusalem, Fred Christ. In some ways, Channon appears as a strong, independent woman who is, physically at least, more capable than Spider Jerusalem. This depiction is undermined however by her perpetually subordinate role as Jerusalem's assistant and the apparent ease with which her self-respect is derailed by her boyfriend's departure, leading her to be seduced by the villainous Fred Christ. The end of *Transmetropolitan*'s storyline, which sees Spider retired and away from the city on a distant mountainside, shows Charrow and Yelena Rossini dutifully tending to him as domestic nurses. While the dialogue relates that Channon has secured a three-book deal of her own, this seems a thin veneer of success given her role at the end of the book. Yelena Rossini, Jerusalem's other assistant, comes from a very different class background from Yarrow, as the daughter of wealthy socialite and politician Oscar Rossini. Yelena is more confrontational and combative with Jerusalem than Channon is, and in one storyline this tension

reaches a climax when the two have sex with each other while intoxicated. Jerusalem's signature glasses, which contain cameras and an onboard computer, recognize the vigorous activity as a physical assault and record the event with photographs as potential evidence. The photographs are later recovered by Channon Yarrow from Spider's glasses and the encounter becomes a point of ridicule for Yelena throughout much of the rest of the comic's run. In the final mountainside scene in *One More Time* (2004), the art shows Yelena as being in the mid-stages of pregnancy, and although this is not referenced in the dialogue, the assumption is that the child is Spider's. Yelena herself has taken up Jerusalem's mantle as the iconoclastic crusading journalist by this time and the final panels featuring her show her returning to The City with Royce to take up Spider's former position as weekly columnist for *The Word*. Both of these women then are shown as strong, competent, intelligent individuals in their own right, but both of them are also seemingly under the spell of Spider Jerusalem and happy to serve him as glorified maids both throughout the main storylines of the comic and in his retirement, despite his routine verbal abuse of them. This situation reflects a common through-line in the gender politics of the British Invasion writers' works in general, where the power and agency of women is subordinated to that of the male protagonists or serves only as fodder for their motivations.

Of the other British Invasion writers, Grant Morrison's comics are notable for the less routine use of brutalization of women characters. While comics such as *The Invisibles* do feature scenes of women suffering trauma and loss, notably Ragged Robin, whose unstable psychological condition is presented as almost her defining character trait, those characters more often rise above the male characters with whom they associate. Ragged Robin becomes the leader of the Invisibles cell that Jack Frost belongs to, and her authority is unquestioned by the rest of the team. She ultimately uses her psychic powers to incapacitate the sinister Mister Quimper, one of the primary antagonists of the early storylines. Boy, the former NYPD officer who becomes Jack Frost's mentor and later lover is likewise a character whose agency tends to exceed the depiction of their trauma. She is responsible for obtaining the Hand of Glory, a magical artifact of enormous power, which

proves central to the later storylines of the comic. Ultimately, Boy decides to quit the Invisibles when she realizes that they can not help her to resolve her personal quest, the rescue of her brother Martin. Finally, in the core team of the Invisibles, there is Lord Fanny, a trans woman who is also a powerful sorcerer. Lord Fanny kills Mister Quimper after Ragged Robin has stripped away his defences, and she is an unusual figure in a 1990s comic as a superhero who is also openly, even flamboyantly, trans and queer from their first appearance. Lord Fanny is often at the center of the intelligence operation in *The Invisibles*, as someone who has access to eldritch ways of knowing. The information she supplies to the team is often crucial to the success of their operations. While there are problems with Lord Fanny's representation as a trans woman (her back-story shows her as a victim of gang-rape), and she would likely not be considered a particularly progressive representation of trans womanhood in 2021, she remains one of the earliest examples in a mainstream American superhero comic of a powerful and unapologetic trans character.

The comics works of Neil Gaiman, which is to say, *The Sandman*, are perhaps the only example of a work by a British Invasion writer who places women characters at the center of their own stories. While much of the series is concerned with the adventures of Dream, *The Sandman Volume Five: A Game of You* (1993), previously discussed in this thesis, makes the character of Barbie, the divorced and disillusioned New Yorker, the protagonist of her own dark fairy-tale for five full issues in which Dream and the other Endless hardly appear at all. Barbie's story is one of women (including a lesbian couple, a witch, and one trans woman) coming together to protect a woman from the psychic parasitism of patriarchal society and as such is almost unique among the works of the British Invasion. The treatment of Wanda Mann, the trans woman in this story, can be (and has been[36]) criticized for its carelessness in respecting Wanda's womanhood, on the grounds that her story is more focused on Barbie's kindness towards her as a pitiable misguided man than it is on

[36] Wolfe, Tasha. "Visual Representations: Trans Characters in Comics." *The Mary Sue*. Dec 4, 2014.

Wanda being a woman in her own right. Even in Gaiman's work there is a tendency to place women in peril as a way to dramatize the actions of the male characters.

In *The Sandman Volume Seven: Brief Lives* (1994), Dream's sister, Delirium of the Endless, drives the storyline with her desire to find her and Dream's missing brother, Destruction of the Endless. Delirium is a deeply troubled character, her consciousness seemingly eternally under the influence of something like psychedelic intoxicants, with a mutable physical appearance that shifts sometimes between successive panels. Delirium is a lost soul, and, despite her innate power as one of the Endless, a pitiable creature who needs Dream's help to accomplish her desires. While it is Delirium's agency that sends her and Dream on the quest to find Destruction, and she (like Lord Fanny in *The Invisibles*) seems to have access to a wealth of esoteric oracular knowledge, she barely exercises her personal autonomy in any of her appearances in the comic, outside of initiating the search for her brother. The worst-treated female character in *The Sandman* is the muse Calliope in *The Sandman Volume Three: Dream Country* (1991). Calliope is captured, enslaved for decades, and repeatedly raped by a writer called Erasmus Fry who feeds on her ability to provide inspiration. Fry eventually sells Calliope to another writer, Richard Madoc, who likewise keeps her imprisoned in order to benefit from her inspiring presence. Calliope's agency is traduced from the start and she requires the intervention of Dream to save her from Madoc's custody, which he accomplishes by overloading Madoc's mind with an overabundance of narrative ideas. With Madoc defeated and Calliope freed, she then uses her agency (the only time she is seen to do so) to ask Dream to undo the damage he has done to Madoc's mind. This stereotypically feminine merciful response to liberation from almost a century of sexual slavery undermines the horror of the trauma that Calliope has suffered and further weakens the otherwise relatively strong feminist politics of the Sandman series.

The embodiment of marginal characters in the comics works of the British Invasion writers remains a mixed bag of progressive and regressive, with representations of women in particular

more often veering into the latter. In the course of pursuing their principal artistic objective of abjecting the figure of the costumed superhero, the British Invasion writers routinely instrumentalize the bodies of women, racialized, and queer characters in brutal ways to make their point. Despite their iconoclastic and often self-consciously radical intentions, Moore, Morrison, Ellis, Ennis, and Gaiman, all at times make their points at the expense of representations of marginality, often in violent and degrading ways. While this phenomenon is by no means limited to the British Invasion writers within the comics medium[37], or indeed limited to the comics medium in general, it runs against the grain of the popular conception of the British Invasion as a cluster of comics writers who brought a newly politicized consciousness to American superhero comics writing. In a 1999 letter titled "Women in Refrigerators" and circulated widely across online comics spaces, Gail Simone asks whether the routine brutalization of female characters is a function of the predominantly male fanbase that comics are traditionally expected to have:

> "[I]t's possible that less thought might be given to the impact the death of a female character might have on the readership. Or, it's possible that there's rarely a fan outcry when a female is killed. Or, maybe since many major female characters were spin-offs of popular male heroes, it was felt that they had to go to keep the male heroes unique, and get rid of "baggage". Or maybe many of the male creators simply relate less to female characters. Or maybe it's a combination of these." (Simone)

There are likely no straightforward answers to any of Simone's questions, only the observation that female characters continue to suffer hideous, often sexual, violence as a means of demonstrating the superior moral rectitude and unimpeachable justification for further violent vengeance of the heroes who fail to protect them. Simone shared the "Women in Refrigerators" letter on numerous comics websites and forums and asked for comment from a number of industry professionals including writers and illustrators. Of the British Invasion writers, only one has their reply to Simone's

[37] Simone, Gail. "Women in Refrigerators." *Women in Refrigerators*. https://www.lby3.com/wir/

inquiry listed on the official WiR website, Warren Ellis: “I don't really know any of the characters so I don't really feel I can add anything” (Simone/Ellis). With the increased popularity of the darker, more adult style of superhero comics that the British Invasion was a part of creating, came a callousness towards any character who was not a white, heterosexual, cisgender man that many of its writers would not come to reckon with until decades later, if at all.

3.3 Home is Where the Haunt Is: Means of Deconstruction

Hauntology is the branch of Derridean critical theory that addresses the postmodern problem of plural truth values through the analogy of the specter. The name is a playful pun on 'ontology', of which hauntology is a homonym in the original French. Ontology is the knowledge of being, the knowledge of what 'is', and in contrast to it hauntology deploys the literary figure of the ghost as a destabilizing and paradoxical agent which is always already present in its absence. Specters are not real, and at the same time, are not wholly unreal. They occupy a liminal ontological space in which they both 'are' and 'are not' and for Derrida this ontologically destabilizing duality gives them a special place in deconstructive analysis. Identifying a ghostly third state of being (or non-being, or both) between presence and absence, hauntology defines a radical conceptual space which problematizes seemingly simple binaries and draws in political and philosophical arguments to any critical analysis of a text. The term hauntology was coined by Jacques Derrida as part of a 1993 series of lectures called *Specters of Marx* which were collected and published later that year as a book of the same name that located a multiplicity of specters at the heart of the interaction between literary texts and social reality. Derridean hauntology describes the compulsive power of the paradoxical spectral (non-)presence and the role of the ghost as an often invisible and always already liminal figure instrumental in shaping both cognitive experience and cultural interaction. *Specters of Marx* theorizes the figure of the specter as a means to explore, problematize, and re-examine established ideas about memory, temporality, and justice.

As the starting point for his discourse on hauntology, Derrida refers to the opening sentence of the foreword to Marx and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848): "A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of Communism" (Marx 1). Whereas Marx claimed that the ghost of communism waited in the wings, present even in its absence as the 'Powers of old Europe' united to exorcize it, Derrida nominates Marx himself, and his body of work, as the spectral, atemporal presence that would haunt all future relations between state and individual. Issued in part as a rebuttal to the total

victory of neoliberal capitalist ideology declared by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) (24), Derrida argues that the social and cultural relevance of Marxist theory remained strong, even as its concrete representation on the world political stage receded into ghostly obscurity:

> "At a time when a new world disorder attempts to install its neocapitalism and neoliberalism, no disavowal has managed to rid itself of all of Marx's ghosts. Hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony." (*Specters* 34)

As long as the hegemonic power of the West and the global North continues to suppress the ideology of Marxism, it confirms that the spectral presence of Marx's philosophy continues to trouble its supremacy. Derrida therefore ascribes a fundamentally political position to the ghost as an intangible representative of the manifest injustice of the contemporary world, and one which inextricably haunts all temporal power structures. This specter is "as powerful as it is unreal. A hallucination or simulacrum that is virtually more actual than what is so blithely called a living presence" (Derrida 32) and, once imagined, it can never be erased from the collective cultural consciousness. Hauntology supplants ontology as a means of existential analysis through its greater nuance and flexibility. The specter is an eternal, infinite spirit-with-a-body of possible liberation that defies any effort at permanent exorcism despite the implosion of every finite incarnation of its essential values. Haunting is Derrida's term for a presence that is not truly present, but neither is it truly absent. The specter occupies a liminal position that destabilizes the most fundamental ontological binary of being and not-being.

The concept of the Derridean specter is thus founded as a third term to the binary condition of being and not-being, and is thus, by extension, a spectral subverter of the integrity of all other binary systems. In this it can be seen as part of an intellectual tradition that includes the Anekantavada, a Jainist doctrine about the plural nature of truth, and the philosophical principle of

many-valued logic, which includes such intuitively challenging and paradoxical concepts as dialetheism (simultaneous truth and falsity) and paraconsistency (the simultaneous existence of multiple values of truth). While this position has been criticized as a fundamentally nihilistic one that heralds the death of truth and the notion that words therefore "refer to nothing at all" (Falck xxxvi), this condemnation represents a failure to grasp the implications of Derridean hauntology. Denying the decay of ontological certainty does not make the absence of such certainty any less certain. In common with Derrida's other deconstructionist scholarship, hauntology shows how established, rigid notions of mutually exclusive binary truth and falsity are less adaptable and ultimately less useful than a more nuanced dialectical appreciation of existential questions. Such is the force of the deconstructive argument about the figure of the ghost advanced by Derrida that it can be said that "the spectral is the sign of the displacement of ontology by... hauntology" (Prendergast 46). Hauntological epistemology supplants the merely empirical episteme of any traditionally ontological analysis by undermining the supposed antinomy between something that is and something that is not.

The specter is closely related to the concept of otherness as theorized by Derrida after Levinas. The cry for justice that is always the vocalization of the specter is a command, and similar in that to the demand for justice that is represented by the figure of the other as a stranger. But where the meeting with the figure of the other as a stranger happens in the external space of horizons and face-to-face encounters, the meeting with the specter represents an encounter with the other that is contained within the self:

> "[T]he spectre is also a figure of the other, of the strange and the stranger, of that which in me is other than myself and that which outside me is more than I can know. It is therefore the spectre which holds open the possibility of an unconditional encounter with otherness, of an undetermined, unanticipated event without which there would be

> no escape from the endless repetition of the same and no promise of emancipation and justice." (Davis 76)

The specter is the face of an absolute alterity that exists within each subject, and as such represents the condition of possibility for an encounter with that inner otherness. By making possible such an encounter with the otherness of the self, the figure of the specter forces open a door through which freedom from the pressures and constraints of an unjust society might be found. The justice made possible by the specter is not a legalistic understanding of order being upheld and enforced, but a justice built on the possibility of an infinitely deferred future where justice is realized: "a notion of justice that is irreducible to the law: justice as the undeconstructible, as democracy-to-come" (Choat 71). The idea of the democracy-to-come, which Derrida relates to the idea of the "messianic without messianism" (*Specters* 74), is an idea of a future radically altered by the presence of a democracy that is not tainted by the practicalities of modern politics, and a messianic, even eschatological transformation of the world that requires no intervention from any messiah.

Derrida identifies five key features of the figure of the hauntological specter: (1) indeterminacy; (2) atemporality; (3) multiplicity; (4) the concealment of its face (what he calls "the visor effect"); and (5) the spectral body. I analyze each of these in turn below.

As the epigraph for *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida uses a quote from *Hamlet* (1611), by William Shakespeare, to illustrate what he sees as the indeterminate and atemporal nature of the figure of the ghost in literature. Derrida sees the character of the ghost of Hamlet's father as emblematic of hauntological preoccupations, as Prendergast explains:

> "Hamlet is exemplary for Derrida, by way of two aspects, or two motifs of the play. They are, first, the 'figure' of the Ghost, and second, the notion of Disjointure, the image of a world out of joint: 'The time is out of joint, O cursed spite that ever I was set to put it right.'" (44)

This “disjointure” generates an implicit cognitive estrangement as well as an explicit temporal one and is, for Derrida, the primary signifier of hauntological consciousness operating within a text. The ambiguous being/non-being of the ghost is at odds with mundane ontological reality, yet it cannot be denied or meaningfully reconciled with, other than to accept its paradoxical presence/absence. The figure of the ghost of Hamlet’s father must be understood both to exist as the “real” supernatural presence of a revenant in Shakespeare’s play, and at the same time to exist as an “unreal” figment of the young Danish prince’s fevered imagination. The reconciliation of these mutually incompatible positions with each other is, for Derrida, essential to understanding the dramatic work done by the play. Hamlet is both delusional and perfectly lucid, driven to hallucination by grief and simultaneously blessed by unimpeded clarity of vision. The ghost of his father is a symptom of his psychological breakdown and at the same time it is the actual spirit of his murdered progenitor come to urge him to seek justice. To decide upon one or the other of these readings as the ‘correct’ one is, in Derrida’s hauntological reading of the play, to unforgivably elide the significance of the other reading, and therefore to miss something of crucial importance about the play’s play of signification. The best available reading of *Hamlet* is therefore one in which the mutually contradictory truths about the nature of the ghost are allowed to co-exist side by side, equally true, defying the ontological binary.

Ghosts are thus radically and essentially indeterminate. By straddling the ontological divide they insist on a kind of emblematic uncertainty which permanently destabilizes traditional ontological truth claims. In this sense, “hauntology . . . signifies the return of the repressed that haunts the pretense to conceptual discourse and exposes the ideological closure of definitions and concepts” (Masschelein 62). Where closure operates to prevent further discussion of ideas or negotiation of definitions, hauntological analysis reveals the ideological basis of such repressive actions for what it is. Hauntology rejects the possibility of interpretive closure as an epistemic principle.

The indeterminacy of the figure of the specter supports and builds upon Derrida's earlier deconstructionist arguments (trace, différance, the metaphysics of presence) about the ubiquity of false hypotheses in language, the continuously deferred nature of meaning, and the difficulty of concretizing temporality in any meaningful way. As Davis says, the figure of the ghost is, "inseparable from deconstruction" and, moreover, that it is the "deconstructive figure *par excellence . . . Spectre* thus becomes one of those special words that motor the work of deconstruction because they defy the logic of binary thought: difference, supplementarity, the undecidable, iterabilty, pharmakon, dissemination, trace, and so on." (75)**.** The indeterminacy of the specter also feeds into their "disjointure" (*Specters* 33) from time, their atemporality:

> "The question of the revenant neatly encapsulates deconstructive concerns about the impossibility of conceptually solidifying the past. Ghosts arrive from the past and appear in the present... The temporality to which the ghost is subject is therefore paradoxical, as at once they 'return' and make their apparitional debut. Derrida has been pleased to term this dual movement of return and inauguration a 'hauntology', a coinage that suggests a spectrally deferred non-origin within grounding metaphysical terms such as history and identity." (Parkin-Gounelas 133)

The atemporality of the specter, as a figure who both belongs to the present time (of haunting) and the past time (of its living experience), represents a rupture from the stable chronology of history but not an absolute departure from it. A ghost is not subject to the normal laws of time passing. Their apparitions might occur years apart, but for the ghost itself, no time at all has passed in the normal perceptual sense. Ghosts do not age, nor do their personalities grow as those of living people do. They are separated from normal human temporality at a fundamental level, existing only in fleeting moments to be witnessed by mortals. The figure of the ghost is not bound to any particular moment in time. Once its ambiguous existence has been acknowledged, it has the potential to be recognized at every moment in time; past, present or future. The ghost has the power to alter

history, reconfigure memory and redefine justice. It is a reminder of the promise of a better world and a constantly subversive challenge to received ontologies:

> The ghost that appears at a specific point and time does indeed embody the particular, but "at the same time" the ghost only appears by reappearing, by reiterating a past appearance. So the specter always transcends any particular time and place and can always reappear at other times and places. Time is out of joint. Thus the ghost escapes confinement to radical historicism and always expresses a broader universalism. (Chambers 160-161)

The significance of this disjointure from ordinary temporality is highlighted by Derrida's choice of *Hamlet* for the epigraph for *Spectres of Marx* and his extended discussion of the quotation throughout the book. As suggested above, the character of the ghost of Hamlet's father is emblematic of hauntological preoccupations by dint of its disjunction from quotidian reality, and the destabilization of a single primary reading of the text that it represents. The ambiguous presence/absence of the ghost is fundamentally at odds with, and disjointed from, mundane ontological reality, yet it cannot be denied or meaningfully reconciled, other than to accept its paradoxicality. Not only does the spectre inform our understanding of the past and present, it also shapes any construction of future conditions. "The future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production" (Fisher 16). For Fisher, Derrida's specters are a generative pseudo-presence, instigating the creation of new art and literature through their undecidability. From indeterminacy, springs creation.

The presence of a single ghost implicitly demands the presence of more, the existence of what Derrida calls a 'multiplicity' of specters. If we are to witness one single haunting, we may assume that the whole world is haunted. This plurality is of great importance to the hauntological vision: "Hauntology, like ontology, is not a unified phenomenon, but has, we might say, many

different shades (even Marx, Derrida agrees, has himself become more than one ghost)" (Jay 25). Each apparition of a ghost to a different subject is in effect a different ghost, its process of signification started anew. Derrida places such significance on this "*Plus d'un*" (*Specters* 2) property of spectral haunting that he identifies it as "our hypothesis, or rather our bias: *there is more than one of them, there must be more than one of them*" (*Specters* 14). This necessity of a heterogeneous numerical plenitude of ghosts reveals their inherently universal, as opposed to singular, quality. There is never just one ghost, the presence of the ghost is always already the presence of a multitude. This multitudinous quality of specters demands that hauntology adopt a pluralist approach in all things. The sighting of a singular ghost, according to Derrida, is a misapprehension of the essentially multiple nature of specters.

The "visor effect" (*Specters* 6) alludes to the Levinasian meeting with the other-as-stranger as requiring a face-to-face encounter. Derrida insists that the specter only makes itself known behind the shelter of a face-concealing visor. The specter looks upon the subject but the subject does not know who or what is looking at them. Recognition is not possible in the ordinary sense, though the subject may recognize the specter as a ghost. The visor of the Derridean specter suggests that no subject-forming encounter is possible in the meeting between the living subject and the ghost, as takes place in the Levinasian model of the face-to-face meeting with the other. The specter is not *an* Other, as such, but a different type of entity that meets the subject through a "spectral asymmetry" in which it can only be perceived or understood as "*someone other*" (*Specters* 6). As Davis says, "the phantom is the other within the self, inaccessible to introspection or analysis because the subject does not even know that it is there" (94). The specter lacks the interpellated (and interpellatable) individual identity of a discrete living subject. The subject meets with this inner otherness as through one-way glass that conceals its origin and nature. The injunction that the specter delivers, a cry for justice, is delivered from a position that lacks its own subjective autonomy. Even when, as in *Hamlet*, the specter's visor is raised, its identity remains in question. The visor is

part of an architecture of concealment, “an available resource and structure” (*Specters* 8), that affords protection for the identity of the ghost.

The body of the specter is what differentiates it from a transcendent being of pure spirit. The specter takes on a concrete form, a recognizably human body, in order to conduct its hauntings. Its body betrays its kinship with living humans and provides it with a form that can communicate or terrify. A ghost without a body is, in Derrida’s terms, a spirit, rather than a specter. The spirit lacks the specter’s problematic ontology, or indeed any ontology at all. The ghostly body is what allows the specter to appear and to be seen, to manifest as an experiential encounter to living subjects. The body confers on the specter an identity, but it is a body “without property” (*Specters* 51), and thus stands for the “phantomalization of property” (*Specters* 51), the making spectral (ontologically uncertain) of the relation between money (or more generally temporal wealth) and unique personal particularity.

As well as the problems it poses to ontological and existential knowledges, the figure of the Derridean specter, in its atemporality, its multiplicity, and its insoluble indeterminacy, represents a radical escape from the numbing ontological and epistemological certainties of neoliberal capitalism. While communism may have failed as a twentieth century political project, it suggests, the idea of Marxist economic justice can never truly be destroyed. To try to force it into non-existence only ensures an ongoing haunting, because to exorcise the ghost it must first be conjured and that conjuration reveals the exorcism as the “performative act of war or the impotent gesticulation” (*Specters* 60) that it is. The figure of the Derridean specter emerges in this way as an eternal witness to the asymmetrical and uneven distribution of justice. In problematizing the issue of justice in this way, Derrida effects something similar to what Jacques Rancière later described as a “redistribution of the sensible” (*Politics* 13), with the ghost taking the role of what Rancière would come to refer to as the supplement, “a third term that cannot be described as a part but as an activity of redistribution, an activity that takes the form of a neutralization” (Dimension 3). Rancière, however,

distances himself from Derrida with explicit reference to *Specters of Marx*, locating in Derrida's work an implied binary between "the normal, consensual application of the rule operating as machine or the law of unconditional justice" (Dimension 13), which Rancière sees as negating the possibility of negotiation. This rejection of the figure of the ghost as representing that which "rules out any symmetry" (Dimension 14) depends upon Rancière's incurable optimism in failing to account for the fluidity of the spectral third term. The desire to overcome the asymmetry which the specter represents is not in itself a sufficient reason to dispose of the specter entirely. Where no symmetry exists, the presence of symmetry cannot be a condition of discourse.

Derridean hauntology, and the figure of the specter around which it turns, is retrospectively made a feature of all literary production. Whether a text deals with questions of justice deferred, or the presence of ghosts, or whether it avoids these issues entirely, the function of haunting, as the words of the past given atemporal, indeterminate, multiplicitous, visored, embodiment in the present moment, pervades literature and therefore also pervades comics. In the comics of the British Invasion authors, the specter is a relatively common figure, particularly in the comics of Warren Ellis. A ghost appears in *Planetary Volume Two: The Fourth Man*, in the form of Allison, the radioactively spectral survivor of City Zero who has a half-life of fifty years. Allison is one of many, the victims of Randall Dowling's wicked scientific experiments conducted on American political dissidents during the early cold war. She is indeterminate, not precisely alive, but neither dead. She has a physical body and can be touched (*The Fourth Man* 35) but she does not age (34), placing her outside of normal temporality. Allison represents the voice of the dead crying out for justice, as a spectral witness to terrible crimes against uncounted helpless victims who dared to oppose the violent anti-communism of 1950s America and were disappeared into the experimental programs of City Zero. At the end of the storyline in which she appears, Allison vanishes into the air as her half-life expires, leaving only her clothing behind in a tumbled pile on the desert ground (45). Her final gift to the Planetary team is to point them towards the surviving archival records of City Zero, "trapped in machines, buried in abandoned books" (44) as a means of procuring some eventual

justice for the victims of Dowling. Her legacy will be the rediscovery of lost literature, an unearthing of secret histories. Allison therefore satisfies virtually all the conditions of Derrida's definition of the specter. Only her visible face, without a visor, sets her apart from the strictly hauntological figure of the ghost. Despite this single difference though, Allison clearly possesses what Montgomery has called the "hauntological spectrality", which is "the character of being most fitting to novelistic fiction in that its evocations are that already of a domain at once beyond yet immanent to the material realm" (Montgomery 371). Allison belongs to a world of the dead, a spiritual intermediary distinguished on the page by her faint atomic aura, who is nonetheless an otherwise ordinary (non-superheroic) woman living her marginal radioactive half-life in invisible isolation.

In Ellis's *Doktor Sleepless: Engines of Desire*, the protagonist is ultimately revealed to be a tulpa, an embodied being consciously constructed through the process of thought. As a tulpa, Doktor Sleepless is not exactly a ghost, but the free and present remnant of the absent and imprisoned John Reinhardt (*Sleepless* 47-50). Reinhardt himself is a self-styled revolutionary leader and technological innovator who conceived of and made possible the various technologically mediated marginal subcultures of the city of Heavenside. The continued presence of his tulpa, the Doktor, in the city is itself a kind of haunting, made more so by the somewhat sinister aspect of his tulpa's personality. The arrival of the tulpa is also the return of Reinhardt, seemingly from the dead. This is underlined by Jon's ex-girlfriend Sing when she hears the first of the Doktor Sleepless radio broadcasts: "That's John on the radio. John's back. I thought… Hell, I thought he was dead by now" (*Sleepless* 30). It is not made clear in *Engines* whether the sinister aspect of Sleepless is an accurate reflection of the real Reinhardt or some inherent property of the tulpa, as it appears to have been in the historical example given of Alexandra David-Neel's tulpa, but the figure of the tulpa itself provokes further parallels with the specter as the figure of the other in the self. As Davis says, "[t]here is in Derrida's account no separation between my relation to myself and my relation to the other, because the other is always already part of, prior to, and in excess of the subject" (143). The tulpa, named Doktor Sleepless, is an estranged other to John Reinhardt that emerges from his own

selfhood. The relation between the two, though it is never shown in the diegesis of the comic's story, is that of mirror images who are connected through their opposition to each other, and each other's goals.

Reinhardt, and to some extent his tulpa, are also the subjects of their own haunting. Reinhardt's parents died in mysteriously horrific circumstances hinted at throughout the book. It is revealed near the end of *Engines of Desire* that they were eaten alive by some monstrous Cthulhu-esque entity from another dimension, their gruesome deaths witnessed by their young child John Reinhardt. It is the second-hand trauma of this inherited memory that haunts Doktor Sleepless and is behind the insomnia that has prevented him from finding peace. *Doktor Sleepless* is not a ghost story then, but it is a comic containing markedly clear hauntological activity through its play on the secret histories of each character. As Davis says: "Derrida associates respect for the other's secret with an ethics and politics of singularity, and he assigns to literature a privileged role in the preservation of secrecy . . . it is in the nature of the literary text to constitute a singular instance which both calls for and resists further elucidation" (109). The play of binary figures within the story, from Reinhardt and his tulpa, to the Doktor's nurse and the helpless Sing, sometimes opposed, sometimes complementary, generates an dynamic that might initially be read as either dialectical or deconstructive. Every principal character is haunted in some way by their own secret history of injustice and trauma. Every character is engaged in the work of mourning – not only of their dead, but a potential future lost through the malice and incompetence of those in power. The tulpa, Sleepless, is dedicated to what he calls "immanentizing the eschaton" – an expression lifted from *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (1975) of Robert Anton Wilson – understood to mean 'bringing about the end of the world'. In this his goals seem diametrically opposed to those of Reinhardt himself, who strove to make the world a better place through his intervention. The Sleepless tulpa thus represents a kind of dark millennial messianism, a totalizing mission to undo and break both the established powers of Heavenside and of his world more broadly.

The “messianic without messianism” (*Specters* 74) which the Derridean specter represents is a force that can change the world without requiring the worship of a single fallible human figure as its leader. It is “a structural messianism, a messianism without religion” that exists as an “emancipatory promise” (74), rather than a concrete institution or movement. For Derrida, “the universal, quasi-transcendental structure that I call messianicity without messianism is not bound up with any particular moment of (political or general) history or culture” (Sons 254). The transformative power needed to procure general justice cannot be rooted in a specific person or temporal moment. It is not a part of the world, even the future of the world, so much as it is a part of the “democracy-to-come”, the promise of a more just society that may never be realized. The justice that the specter inaugurates is an “absolute rift in the foreseeable concatenation of historical time” (*Negotiations* 95). In its messiah-less messianicity, the figure of the specter is the herald of a break from the long accumulation of historical certainties, and the harbinger of an eschatological reckoning with the foundational social injustices of the haunted world. As the next chapter will explore in more detail, messianism and messianic power thus stand at the center of the potential for social and political change. The figure of the specter persists in its atemporal troubling of the boundaries between self and other, especially where it has not been made welcome at the epistemological feast.

Chapter Four: Theoretical Materializations and Material Aesthetics

4.1 From Aura to Numen: Comics and Magic

4.2 Shoring the Fragments: The Legacy of the British Invasion

4.3 Liminal Matter: Comics as Objects

As our blood labours to beget Spirits,

as like souls as it can,

Because such fingers need to knit

That subtile knot, which makes us man.

--Donne, John. "The Extasie"

4.1 From Aura to Numen: Comics and Magic

Among the British Invasion writers, both Alan Moore and Grant Morrison have leaned heavily on the idea that their comics works go beyond simply mass-market commercial entertainment, and even to some extent beyond even the category of what is commonly understood as literature, to become narrative objects that grant the reader a glimpse into eternal and absolute truths, and which perform magical functions upon culture in general. Moore's *Promethea*, as previously described, presents a mysticized view of gender as something eternal and immutable, and which fundamentally shapes the perspectives and experience of human beings in biologically essentialist ways. As such, *Promethea* represents something akin to a manifesto for Moore's spiritual beliefs and as Hanegraaff argues: "It is a work with thoroughly didactic intent, a crash course in occult philosophy as Moore understands it" (Hanegraaf 236). This didacticism manifests as a central philosophical tenet which is strangely at odds with Moore's gender absolutism: "The narrative is

based consistently on one single Master Thesis: *There is no difference between fiction and reality*" (239). While *Promethea* presents itself as an emancipatory esotericist manifesto that subverts the ontological binary of reality and fiction, the cosmic scheme of being that it lays out is nevertheless undergirded by a thoroughly binaristic understanding of essentialized gender as representing one the one hand, maleness, as symbolized by the serpent, and on the other, femaleness, as symbolized by the moon. This fundamentally regressive understanding of gender is all the more jarring given the words of Promethea herself, breaking the comic's fourth wall to address the reader directly in *Promethea*'s penultimate episode:

> "Yes, Promethea's a fiction. Nobody ever claimed otherwise. I never lied. I'm at least an honest fiction. A true fiction. A fiction that can enter your dreams, possess her creators, talk through them to you. I'm an idea. But I'm a real idea. I'm the idea of the human imagination . . . which, when you think about it, is the only thing we can really be certain isn't imaginary." (*Promethea* 31)

In the enchanted world as envisaged by Alan Moore, of which *Promethea* "should be considered his chief theoretical statement" (Hanegraff 240), there is no meaningful distinction between fiction and reality. All the conditions of ontology are fungible and negotiable, except the condition of binary gender, which is tied to some underlying cosmic truth. This undeniably political position disguised as aesthetic expression, while it may feed into the image of Moore as a postmodern mystic with access to occult knowledge of the universe, runs directly counter to *Promethea*'s self-conscious positioning as a work of enchanted feminist emancipation. Crucially, it is the very need to retain this claim of access to some fundamental and essential truth of the human condition, so as to support the idea that the work reveals some hidden esoteric actuality, which ultimately fatally undermines *Promethea*'s central didactic thesis about the infinite permeability of the boundary between truth and fiction. This strange inclination to present otherwise conservative and unremarkable political or

philosophical arguments as reflections of mystical occult knowledge – to enchant them – is a feature of Moore's work that is also shared by Grant Morrison.

Grant Morrison has written and spoken in several places about their own practice of chaos magic, and I will not enter into a close analysis of those claims here. However, in the context of this discussion it is worth looking at their discourse around the idea of magical sigils and "hypersigils", especially as they pertain to *The Invisibles*:

> The hypersigil is a sigil extended through the fourth dimension. My own comic book series *The Invisibles* was a six-year long sigil in the form of an occult adventure story which consumed and recreated my life during the period of its composition and execution. The hypersigil is an immensely powerful and sometimes dangerous method for actually altering reality in accordance with intent. Results can be remarkable and shocking." (Pop Magic! 20)

Morrison argues for a belief in the power of sigils, drawn two-dimensional symbols expressing a magically-empowered intent or purpose that acts upon reality, and extends that idea into their neologism of the hypersigil. The hypersigil in this context is similarly a magically-charged symbol intended to alter reality, but one whose construction is protracted through a longer period of time. Thus, the six year run of *The Invisibles* is presented by Morrison as the construction of such a reality-altering magical symbol, transcending its more readily apparent existence as a serialized mass-market comic book. As with Moore, the inclination to make the claim of an occult or esoteric nature for their comics works serves to lend these books a sense of mystic purpose. While Moore's *Promethea* lays out a vision of the world in the form of an esoteric epistemic manifesto encoded as a superhero comic, *The Invisibles* purports to be the actual material component of a massive occult magical working. The idea that there is an enchantment at play in the writing and reading of each of these works, of the blurring of the border between fantasy and reality, is one of the core organizing principles of these two central British Invasion authors. Regardless of whether one wishes to

entertain the stated occultist beliefs of the writers, the question persists of how such claims of enchantment affect the interpretation of these key works of the British Invasion. What, in short, are the signifying functions and effects of comics written as a form of magical practice?

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935) describes and analyzes the presence of 'the aura' as an aspect of traditional artwork that he saw disappearing with the advent of modern technological processes of manufacture and duplication in the early twentieth century. Benjamin's aura has been the focus of much study in the humanities, and it remains a contested object of interpretation. Hansen argues that Benjamin's conception of the aura is "associated with the singular status of the artwork, its authority, authenticity, and unattainability, epitomized by the idea of a beautiful semblance" (Hansen 336). In this sense, the aura is a product of a given artwork's uniqueness, its status as a singular item of unimpeachable provenance, whose availability is strictly limited by that uniqueness. The function of beautiful semblance that Hansen identifies as the epitome of the auratic artwork reveals the aura as the crux of a reflexively conservative conception of pre-industrial art. As such, the aura is incompatible with, and even fundamentally opposed to, the industrial technological processes of manufacture and reproduction of art which Benjamin observed gaining prominence as the primary means of art's expression and distribution. This understanding has led some scholars and artists to understand Benjamin's purpose as wishing to see the aura restored to the work of art in the industrial age, but this is a misunderstanding of his argument: "Wherever aura or, rather, the simulation of auratic effects does appear on the side of the technological media . . . it assumes an acutely negative valence, which turns the etiology of aura's decline into a call for its demolition" (Hansen 336). While, in the Mechanical Reproduction essay at least, Benjamin does appear to mourn the decline of truly auratic art in the jaws of modernity, he is profoundly suspicious of the attempts by industrial media to reproduce the effects of aura through its own processes of production. As Hansen points out, the adoption of an auratic mode in industrially produced media is a source of deep disquiet for Benjamin

and ultimately becomes the justification for disposing of the aura entirely as an aesthetic property of art.

Benjamin's aura is a bi-valent term, with its contraposition hinging on the difference between the experience of the work of art in the premodern era and in the modern era. For Benjamin, not only the experience of art but the experience of life itself was fundamentally dissimilar between these eras:

> "[I]n pre-modern times, experience presented a connectedness and durability which implied a relation to memory and community. The term used by Benjamin to designate this experience is *Erfahrung* . . . Modern experience, for which Benjamin uses the term *Erlebnis*, is instead broken, immediate, limited, and disconnected from memory and community." (Salzani 129)

These two different conceptions of experience and the radically different cognitive states that they signify, are at the foundation of Benjamin's ambivalent position with regard to the possibility of auratic artwork. In the premodern era, where experience emerged as a product of the interaction of memory and community to construct durable and interconnected understanding, the aura played a crucial role in connecting a given artwork to the material circumstances of its own history in relation to that of the experiencer. For Benjamin, this process was akin to a kind of religious or spiritual magic in its value as a means by which connectedness, which is to say community, might be discovered between people who participated in the appreciative cult of a specific artwork. In the modern era, where experience is fractured from historical continuity, focused only on the present moment, and thus restricted to an individual's own personalized understanding, the aura has a much more sinister capacity to generate the semblance of a connection between the individual and the circumstances of exhibition of the artwork that is not grounded in any authentic material history or community of mutual interest. Simmel connects this fragmentation of experience from history and the overloading of the human sensorium to the emergence in the modern era of the metropolitan

subject: “The psychological basis of the metropolitan individuality consists in the *intensification of nervous stimulation* which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli” (Simmel 409-410) (emphasis in original). While Simmel may yet be proven right that modern urban subjectivity produces overwhelming sensory intensities, these over-stimulations alone are not sufficient to account for the decay of the aura as understood by Benjamin.

Benjamin notes two opposed means by which works of art are appreciated by their audiences: “[W]ith one, the accent is on the cult value; with the other, on the exhibition value of the work” (Reproduction 224). The cult value of an artwork is that of a ritual object that is available only to members of a community, where access to that art object is a part of the community identity. Such an art object may remain obscure forever, as long as the cult has access to it, and its obscurity does not diminish its status as a venerated ritual object – or as an artwork - for its appreciative cult. In opposition to this cult value, the exhibition value of an artwork emerges from the size and breadth of its appreciative audience, as well as the artwork’s potential to be exhibited, whether in the original or through reproduction. Exhibition value is measured in the spectacular popularity of an artwork across a mass-culture, rather than in its ritual significance to the microcosm of the appreciative cult. The connections between the cult value of an artwork and the premodern experience of art, versus the exhibition value of an artwork and the modern experience of art, are thereby made clear. Where premodern art served, almost in secret, as a motor of *Erfahrung* to form communities of memory and experience grounded in community as part of a continuous historical temporality, modern art serves as a spectacle for mass-consumption that elides the specific unifying valences of commonly held experience in favour of generating popularity with the widest possible audience. As such, the typical modern artwork is both a consequence and a function of *Erlebnis*, driving the sense of its own detachment from the material conditions and temporal continuity of its own modern time: “The eternal Sunday of *Erlebnis* excludes history, tradition, memory, and thus also any sense of *future*: it entails a lack of memory and simultaneously a lack of consequences” (Salzani 134). This disjointed temporality of *Erlebnis*, relative to the continuous historicity of

Erfahrung is closely related to Benjamin's conception of the aura and its role in the experiential encounter with works of art. The perception of the aura is grounded in a historical understanding of an artwork's provenance and creation. The aura is not, in the loosely spiritualist sense, a miasma of signifying magical energy that radiates from some intrinsic essence of an artwork, but rather the informed apprehension of the circumstances of that artwork's origin and the perceiver's perception of their own relationship to it in that context. *Erfahrung* is therefore a condition of perceiving an artwork's aura, and *Erlebnis* makes such perception impossible. It is the advent of the contemporary cognitive state of *Erlebnis*, produced by a rapid-paced, constantly changing mass-media environment that elides history and reviles memory, that marks the disappearance of the aura from the work of art, rather than any diminishing of the essence of a given work. While these two terms of Benjamin's do not appear in the "Mechanical Reproduction" essay, they provide crucial broader context for resolving the question of how the aura is supposed to operate. While many writers and artists after Benjamin have assumed that this essay bemoans the passing of the aura with the modern age, Benjamin never suggests that the aura itself ought to be the object of mourning. It is not the fading of the aura that matters as much as the growing inability to perceive any aura at all. It is the misguided and uncomprehending attempt in modern mass-media to replace the affective power of the missing aura with the spectacle of mysticism and myth that represents a truly threatening direction for art, especially in the hands of fascistic, nationalistic ideologues. As Benjamin suggests at the end of the essay, while such figures are engaged in translating the political into mere aesthetics while the world burns, it is the duty of those who understand the danger of such a movement to resist by relentlessly re-translating the aesthetic in terms of the political (Reproduction 242).

The disenchantment of the work of art in the modern age has produced manifold reactions attempting to recapture the sense of wonder and cosmic relationship that Benjamin finds in the aura. From the heroic fantasies and futuristic fairytales of speculative fiction to the disquieting and disturbing narratives of horror, fiction writers have sought to restore some sense of the weird and numinous to the experiential encounter with literary art in the age of mass reproduction. In

superhero comics, this tendency, to recreate a kind of synthetic auratic presence to art through the adoption of the spectacular tropes of myth and mysticism, reached its twentieth century apotheosis through the works, and the authorial personae, of the British Invasion writers, although the figuring of political questions and issues in aesthetic terms was already underway long before, as Wertham and Ong's analyses show. As referenced above, Moore and Morrison in particular are the most obviously guilty of obfuscating their creative processes behind a cloak of supposed magic. Their reputed wizardly rivalry has sometimes lent the British Invasion more broadly the sense of some mystical contest for the soul of graphic narrative[38]. Much putatively serious comics scholarship has treated this imagined magical war with uncritical reverence for these eccentric creators rather than identifying it as the self-important brand-building exercise that would more parsimoniously explain it. Scholarly attention devoted to Morrison's claims of crafting "hypersigils", and Moore's embrace of the tired canards of the ritual magicians and occultists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, occludes the much more concrete and compelling aesthetic features of their respective works and tends to overlook the thematic implications of the stories they tell.

In the modern absence of the aura, the work of the British Invasion writers, with Moore and Morrison leading the way, emerges as a project to restore a sense of the *numen* to the superhero narrative. The *numen*, from which is derived the English word numinous, represents in Latin: "Godhead, divinity, deity, divine majesty" and "the divine will, the will or power of the gods, divine sway" (Lewis 618). This definition points to a meaning that is distinct from a personified deity as such and refers more closely to the expression or representation of divine will or power. The discussion of the representations of the divine other in the previous chapter indicate the extent to which meditations on the character and nature of divine power permeate the comics stories of the British invasion writers. I argue that this preoccupation with the numinous, as the thematic subject matter and often the framing paratext, for stories about gaudily costumed crimefighters, represents a naive

[38] See *The Last War in Albion, Volume One: The Early Work of Alan Moore and Grant Morrison*, by Elizabeth Sandifer, for the most developed analysis of this kind.

and often misguided attempt to force an ersatz sense of enchantment, an auratic component in an age ill-equipped to perceive auras, on to popular graphic narrative literatures. While the idea of superhero comics as revitalized modern versions of the heroic narratives of ancient myths and legends is often presented as a resurgence of the lost childlike wonder and innocence of the premodern era, I argue that it is instead merely the aestheticization of the political under the auspices of spectacular entertainment, and therefore the neutralization of the power of art as a radically unsettling political force that caused Benjamin such concern.

The return of the aura post-Benjamin has been an explicit objective of artists working in numerous fields who have taken the aura to signify some essential and transcendent quality of an artwork rather than the affective epiphany that stems from the apprehension of one's historical and social relationship to that artwork as part of the experiential encounter with it. André Malraux, for example, understands the objective of his own photographic work as being to restore auratic presence to the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction: "[F]or André Malraux the issue is not some general 'decline of the aura' in art but, rather, a matter of using photography to *return the aura* to all of men's other creations" (Didi-Huberman 17). As with other artists who have tried to grapple with Benjamin's definition of the aura, this project fails to account for the decline of the appreciative consciousness of art that is a condition of perceiving the aura; the collective cognitive transition from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*. Important to address further here is the popular misconception that Benjamin regarded the aura as something straightforwardly positive and its loss as something unambiguously worth grieving. In the context of the *Erfahrung* from which it springs, the aura is itself a figure of a pre-modern traditionalism that "perpetuates the authority of a tradition that hinders popular participation" (Salzani 138). While Benjamin notes that the passing of the aura marks the end of a certain kind of experiential encounter with art, he also observes that the culture of traditions from which these experiential encounters emerged is ultimately incompatible with a modern world in which the appreciation of art is opened to mass participation. According to this understanding, the aura is a regressive, even atavistic, force that harks back to bygone modes of

alienated relation to artistic production. As Hansen says: “the ominous aspect of aura belongs to the realm of the daemonic, in particular the phenomenon of self-alienating encounters with an other, older self” (342). To the audiences of modernity, the aura is a figure of otherness connected to the seemingly sinister pre-rational mores of a world without reason. It is precisely this disquieting sense of the aura as some magical phenomenon of pre-rationality that the esoteric claims of Moore and Morrison about their works aims to conjure.

Lest it be thought that Benjamin’s position is therefore straightforwardly ‘anti-auratic’, it is important to consider his meditation on the aura in another essay, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), in which the concept of the aura is more closely articulated with reference to the notion of *Erfahrung*. Here Benjamin describes the aura poetically as the “breath of prehistory” (Motifs 185), the felt but intangible presence of traditions of artistic production and appreciation that stretch back into the invisible ancient past. More prosaically, he defines aura as “the associations which . . . tend to cluster around the object of a perception” (186), the connotations and meanings which adhere to any object of perception in the human mind, on the borders between transcendental apperception and the interpretative work of semiosis. These passing descriptions aside, Benjamin then explores in more explicit detail how he understands the operation of the auratic experiential encounter:

> “[L]ooking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our gaze will be returned by the object of our gaze. Where this expectation is met (which in the case of thought processes, can apply equally to the look of the eye of the mind and to a glance pure and simple), there is an experience of the aura to its fullest extent . . . Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. *To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return*”. (Motifs 188) (emphasis added)

For Benjamin, the aura is the signifier of the artwork as its own autonomous subject, capable of perceiving the perceiving subject as its own object of perception. This is the artwork as a mediating presence in relation to the self, a social rather than private relationship, not a passive and inanimate object to be viewed as a butterfly pinned to a board but a living, playful, fungible entity with its own teleology that is at least partly independent of both author and audience. In perceiving the aura of a work of art, the viewer is implicitly accepting the returning gaze of that work and allowing their own subjectivity to be mediated through it. As Isobel Armstrong suggests, the experience of the encounter with the work of art through this epistemic play of shifting subjectivities has much in common with the experience of the encounter with the other:

> "Play and the epistemic passion which drives it are forms of mediation, with the world, with the culture to which play is a response. By mediation, I mean, briefly, the work on the world done by thought and feeling as self and other is defined and negotiated . . . reworks the commonly accepted understanding of mediation by removing self from the centre of this process. If we refuse to seal the artwork off into an aesthetic terrain, and regard the *artwork*, not the 'I' who supposedly made it, as a form of mediation, a transitive, interactive form, new possibilities emerge." (Armstrong 59) (emphasis in original)

Armstrong's conclusion, that the work of aesthetic creation must be accorded its own subjectivity distinct from its author in order to be fully apprehended, lands close to Benjamin's own argument that the aura only emerges through the recognition of the subject position of the artwork as a perceiving and mediating agent in its own right. The aura is one way in which the distinction between the perceiving subject and the perceived object is muddied through the experiential encounter with art. Hansen argues that it is: "a medium that envelops and physically connects—and thus blurs the boundaries between—subject and object, suggesting a sensory, embodied mode of perception . . . this mode of perception involves surrender to

the object as other" (Hansen 351). The embodied aspect of the auratic mode of perception, the physiological relationship established as subjective experience between the work of art and the individual who encounters it, is both profoundly radical in the possibilities it opens for thought and action, and deeply conservative in its reinscription of an ossified dynamic of structural power that belonged to material histories of dispossession and social hierarchy.

For Benjamin then, the aura was neither wholly and purely the signature aesthetic feature of a brighter past receding into obscurity in the face of soulless modernity nor was it just the fading fingerprint of an oppressive regime that privileged access to art and its appreciation as the reserve of the elite. The aura is neither of these things and yet, in part, it draws upon both. As Hansen says, Benjamin's aura is "the nexus of memory and futurity, the capacity to both remember and imagine a different kind of existence, [and] is key to his effort of tracking at once the decline and the transformative possibilities of experience in modernity" (Hansen 350). The aura for Benjamin is one index, perhaps the most important index, of the changing nature of the experiential encounter with art as *Erfahrung* gives way to *Erlebnis* in the public consciousness. The disappearance of the aura, and of the cognitive state that makes the aura visible, is the disappearance of our recognition of the other in the work of art, and of the work of art as the other.

When twentieth and twenty-first century comics writers surround themselves and their work with the trappings of auratic art, they are engaged not in the restoration of former numinous glories to a disenchanted world, but simply the ramming of square pegs into round holes in service to the development of their personal mystique. The arrogation of the properties of myth to the industrially produced matter of the entertainment industry has been spectacularly successful in convincing readers that the strange divinity of the other can be reproduced through the attribution of fantastical and supernatural powers to a panoply of ostensibly freakish fictional characters. These empty exercises in magical thinking, which have spurred their own thematic successors in the works of contemporaries as disparate as Jonathan Hickman (*East Meets West*, 2013-2019) and Simon

Spurrier (*Disenchanted*, 2013-2015), feed into a self-aggrandizing, and deeply unserious, notion of industrially produced comics published by massive entertainment conglomerates and their subsidiaries as representative of alternative or minority perspectives that are disruptive or somehow adversarial to mainstream media morality. Such publications represent a kind of extreme aestheticization of the political, where political otherness is assumed through the adoption of the aesthetic dressings of pseudo-shamanistic thought without espousing any concrete critique of or commitment to tackling actually-existing conditions. The rival wizards and magicians of the British Invasion have become the literary precursors, and to a lesser extent the figureheads, for a new era of indulgent self-importance in the *Erlebnis*-driven sphere of the mass media. Their importance as prophets or visionaries of a new kind of fantasy storytelling has been translated, often by themselves, as a kind of spiritual authority independent of science, reason, expertise, or such exhausted mundanities as peer-review. In this way they represent the literary apotheosis of the threat to society first sighted by Wertham and Ong in the superhero genre. "*Fiat ars, pereat mundus*" (Reproduction 242) might just as fittingly be the motto of the British Invasion writers, publicly roleplaying as mystic sages to capitalize on their prestige while the epistemic consensus of the English-speaking world breaks down into the self-destructive denial of reality under pressure from climate change, social inequality, and pandemic disease.

The creation of comics works that aim to provoke a sense of cosmic awe at an encounter with some otherworldly, supernatural essence is a preoccupation common to the core British Invasion authors. Many of their works feature moments of the sublime, the grotesque, and the viscerally brutal in quick succession. These attempts to grapple with the numinous through the sensationalizing of the supernatural end up as forced and empty exercises in cod-spiritualism and self-mythologizing in the absence of an auratic apprehension that might have given them the gravity of history and the continuity of community knowledge. Instead, these works participate in the cognitive dissolution of *Erlebnis*, in which the fragments of older practices and ways of knowing are severed from their roots and mashed together in a hodge-podge of styles and influences that bear

little relation to anything that preceded them. The transition from the stately aura of *Erfahrung* to the beguiling numen of *Erlebnis* has been, in a broad sense, the journey of art in the twentieth century and it is fully realized in concrete terms in the works and the personae of the British Invasion writers. The transformation of the cognitive experience of the subject in the everyday world of modernity is starkly highlighted by the aesthetic shift away from experience rooted in historical continuity and interpersonal dependence through polyvocal communities, and towards experience that is mediated through a single authorial voice presenting a slurry of disconnected and bewildering fragments of myth and vicarious sensation. The British Invasion writers, with their self-appointed status as mystics and magicians, their endlessly inventive formal innovations, and a collective body of work that dubiously presents comics as the vehicle for a re-enchantment that offers escape from the crushing mundanity of modernity, represent a strikingly clear example of how the mourning of the aura rather than the consciousness associated with its perception, has produced art that depends upon the refiguring of the political as merely aesthetic. This transformation, built around the idea of representing the otherness at the centre of the subject's experience as the sole source of authentic sensation and knowledge, has, by co-opting otherness to its own sensational ends, contributed to a kind of colonization of the notion of otherness as otherness by distinctly unmarginalized subjectivities. Through this process, a product of late modernity's disconnection from socio-material histories and the consequent desire of creators of art to register their own social alienation from the mainstream, emerges the aesthetic posture of self-styled otherness as a condition of subjectivity under the constraints of *Erlebnis*. This posture, mediated through the anti-establishment, anti-mainstream rhetorics of magic, conspiracy theory, spiritualism, mythology, and supposed political radicalism, can be recognized as one of the signature subject positions of the British Invasion writers.

4.2 Shoring the Fragments: The Legacy of the British Invasion

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you.

--Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land*

As with any corpus of comics works, the works of the British Invasion are a collection of fragments. Pieces of images and snippets of text that even in their original, contiguous forms draw their meaning-making power from the artfulness of their discontinuities. Eliot's lament in the final lines of *The Waste Land* points to fragments as playing a supporting, bolstering role against the dissolution of the alienated subject in the cultures of modernity. This service, of shoring up the rubble of a historically situated singular selfhood against the erosive, decentering forces of emergent polyvalent voices and perspectives, is a solipsistic and inevitably doomed endeavor. While the comics works of Moore, Morrison, Gaiman, Ellis, Ennis, and Millar have shaped the contemporary landscape of mainstream US superhero stories across multiple media in fundamental ways, they remain products of an era and a comics culture that celebrated the creative perspective of white, male writers above all others. In this sense, setting aside the often-disruptive formal innovations they introduced to the comics mainstream and the broad generic shifts that were prompted by their major works, their collective legacy as a group bears a distinct historical resonance to the collective legacy of the modernist writers of the early twentieth century. These are white, male authors working between the US and the UK, who together created a new style of literature within the field of comics. Their creative energy as individuals and the lasting aesthetic impact of the formal and stylistic innovations they introduced on mainstream comics are undeniably substantial. While they may have helped to lay the groundwork for a later generation of more diverse mainstream comics writers writing from more radical perspectives, the body of works produced by the British Invasion group remain in many ways stultifyingly conservative and one-dimensional.

In this sense, of a perpetuation of the structure of the US/UK modernisms of the early twentieth century, the British Invasion authors, despite their often postmodernist preoccupations, underline the impossibility of postmodernism's escape from modernism. Even the self-consciously, ostentatiously postmodern authorial stylings of Grant Morrison remain gestures of commitment to aesthetic possibility rather than the enacted explosion of master-narratives demanded by Lyotard. Rather than marking the diverse flowering of comics storytelling into a riotous cacophony of perspectives and voices, the works of the British Invasion only compound the "catastrophic fragmentation" (Burgard 67) of modernity, in which the historical continuities of tradition and community that made possible consensus on the meaning of art are shattered and their pieces expediently reassembled as chimeric artifacts of a new mythology. The British Invasion works, as described in previous chapters, share in common with the works of the US/UK modernists an unresolved fascination with the dissonant complexities of the Baroque, their bombast and hyperbole binding them to a shallow and self-imposed alterity that fails to escape their own canonical centrality to their fields. The drive to know and to represent the chaotic, paradoxical, soporific reality of modernity, to disavow innocence and recover a sense of essential auratic enchantment from the jaws of the countervailing pressures of soulless empiricism and woolly New Age spiritualism, propels both the early modernists and the British Invasion writers. The poststructuralist destabilization of the value of such a project as a project in its own right, which might be a significant indicator of postmodern activity, is if anything less evident in the British Invasion works than it was in the modernist movement of the early twentieth century. Instead, the works of the British Invasion writers must be seen as an attempt to assert a new aesthetic (and therefore political) order in mainstream superhero comics. It is an order that upholds many of the politically conservative principles of the early modernists, disguised by a riotous and restlessly generative aesthetic anarchy that renders political problems as questions of artistic perspective.

The subject matter of heroic and supernatural fantasy and science-fiction stories is intimately connected to the modernist movement in another sense. The Thomas Carnacki "Occult

Detective" stories of William Hope Hodgson as collected in *Carnacki, The Ghost-Finder* (1913), which are liberally borrowed from by both Alan Moore (*League of Extraordinary Gentlemen)* and Warren Ellis (*Gravel*), are a clear example of a writer at the cusp of the late-Victorian and early Modernist eras wrestling with the rationalizing modernist impulse to classify and hierarchize while still preserving some sense of an enchanted, numinous, haunted world. Writing against the grain of the Victorian ghost story, Hodgson allowed for the possibility in his stories that ghosts could actually exist as spiritual entities detached from their material bodies. While they were occasionally figments of a feverish or guilt-strained imagination, they could also exist as autonomous supernatural entities in their own right. More firmly among the writers of the Modernist movement is Hope Mirrlees, whose *Lud-In-The-Mist* (1926) is immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the SFF genre as a work of fantasy. *Lud-In-The-Mist* deals with the fictional eponymous town, a bastion of cool empirical rationalism, whose social coherence is under threat from the proximity of the Faerie realm and the consequent leaking of magical and fantastical elements into their social fabric. In order to ameliorate this threat to the city, its mayor must set aside his preconceptions, break with tradition, and engage with the seemingly perilous reality of an enchanted world that defies rationalist efforts to contain and suppress it.

Hodgson, like Howard Philips Lovecraft, is usually excluded from even broad categorizations of literary modernism in the early twentieth century, although both writers were deeply concerned, in their different ways, with the alienation and estrangement of modernity. Their classification as authors of crudely sensationalist pulp horror fiction, a distinctly modernist act of hierarchized dismissal, tends to elide that the major works of both writers are broadly contemporaneous with those of the more broadly accepted serious literary giants of the Modernist movement as well as sharing many of their core themes. Mirrlees is a different case however, and more difficult to entirely exclude from the established category of US/UK Modernist writers due to her psychogeographical long poem, *Paris: A Poem* (1920), whose publication by the Hogarth Press, run by Virginia Woolf and her husband, places Mirrlees squarely among the central community of

literary modernism in the early twentieth century. While the cognitively-estranging narratives of heroism, magic, and spirituality associated with the genre of fantasy are routinely disavowed by scholarship as serious modernist (or indeed literary) concerns, they nonetheless remain, most obviously through Mirrlees, an inescapable presence at the heart of the modernist movement. The enduring connection of the British Invasion writers to the modernists of the early twentieth century and their literary contemporaries working in the proscribed fields of pulp fantasy and horror fiction, is reflected in this ongoing fascination with tales of supernatural peril, of alien worlds that exist alongside and sometimes within our own, and of the complex negotiations between the certainties of empiricism and the destabilizing truths of an unknowable human world.

The nineties Vertigo comics works, as perhaps the exemplary body of work of the early British Invasion writers, can be seen retrospectively as an effort to make mainstream comics storytelling re-cohere around a baroque vision of a world in which consciousness is always inadequate to the problem of parsing reality, moral and ethical distinctions between actions are always unreliable, selfhood is the only complete ground from which perspective can emerge, and the authenticity of any experience is contingent upon recognizing its artificiality. If, as Singal suggests (22) postmodernism reflected a dissatisfaction with Modernism's binding aesthetic and philosophical strictures, and Modernism in turn represented a rejection of simplistic and suffocating Victorian attitudes in favour of long-proscribed baroque complexities, and those Victorian attitudes were in their turn a reaction against the self-indulgent wallowing of the Romantics, who were reacting against the spartan solar certainties of neoclassicism, which rejected the godless muddle of the original Baroque, and so on, then the entire history of European literary production is reduced to the oscillating reaction between certainty and uncertainty. Such a reductive analysis is itself overly simplistic, and a product of the need to sort internally diverse historical eras of literary production into neat epochal trends. The British Invasion works similarly defy easy categorization in this sense. They are both hostile to the received certainties of their age and inescapably grounded in them.

They participate in the intellectual game-playing of naïve postmodernism while at the same time rejecting the possibility that such intellectual games can bear any meaningful fruit.

The British Invasion works, despite their innovative formal and stylistic energy, represent a peculiar form of aesthetic inertia. They are locked into the performance of a countercultural political radicalism belonging to the twentieth century which, in the twenty first century is neither countercultural nor politically radical. They undermine the terms in which they set out their own critiques of superheroes as fundamentally conservative icons, because they are unwilling to relinquish the idea that these figures remain icons of some mythic substrate of narrative consciousness that hold liberatory potential for readers, even if they never articulate how that liberation might be achieved, or what it might mean in practice. Actual political radicalism, revolutionary ideas, even concrete critique of specific existing political problems are all but absent from the works of the British Invasion writers. The allegories they offer of broken cultures inhabited by alienated antiheroes who face an existential struggle to maintain their integrity are readable as comforting fables from virtually any political perspective, including the Thatcherism that the British Invasion authors are usually supposed to be so hostile to. In place of specific and concrete critique of actual social and political formations, there is a generalized feeling that resistance to and discontent with the structures of power are the natural state of the human condition. In this sense, the works of the British Invasion writers follow in the footsteps of the early twentieth century modernists. They overtly revile the social and comics industry conditions that brought them to prominence, without offering any vision of a positive alternative to those conditions that does not depend on magical intervention. Instead, they fall back into a self-important nihilism in which not only, as Jameson says, “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,” but in which imagining the end of the world is preferable to imagining a future that escapes the prevailing social conditions of production.

When Alain Badiou discusses the conditions necessary for meaningful social change, he argues that: “It is not from need or interest – or from the correlate of interest, privileged knowledge – that originates the political capture of a fragment of the real, but from the occurrence of collectivizable thought, and from it alone” (Badiou 63). This idea of collectivizable thought, of notions of the relations between individuals, and between individuals and society, that can be shared by the generalized collective of people, is the prerequisite for any project that would attempt to establish itself as a political project with meaningful purchase on public discourse. In this sense, the works of the British Invasion writers, as ostensibly political commentaries on society, fail to generate any collectivizable, actionable thought. They remain fantasies of power and hazard that are inescapably grounded in the individual context. They lack the political vision and rhetorical articulation to rise above the level of children’s literature, despite ostensibly being aimed at a mature audience. This is in contrast to the historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century modernist movement, and even those of the later postmodernist movement, who were more nakedly political and oppositional to their contemporaneous present: “The avant-gardes activated formal ruptures in the present and at the same time produced – in the form of manifestos and declarations – the rhetorical envelop for that activation. They produced the envelopment of a real present in a fictive future” (Badiou 139). The works of the British Invasion writers instead revel in fictive histories that envelop a mysticized and fantastical present, perpetuating the *Erlebnis* condition identified by Benjamin of disconnection from the community-held continuities of interpretation and understanding that allowed people to more easily make sense of their place in the world of pre-modernity. Again according to Badiou, only the fabrication of the present can “rally people to the politics of emancipation, or to a contemporary art” (140), but the present fabricated by *Watchmen*, *The Sandman*, *Planetary*, *The Invisibles*, or *The Boys* is a present founded upon self-styled myths that owe more to cod-spiritualism and conspiracy theories than any traceable connection to the material circumstances of social history. Even where the comics of the British Invasion writers enter a self-reflexive, mutually analytical mode, as in *Pax Americana*, *All-Star*

Superman, or *Planetary*, their dawning apprehension of the weaknesses of the mainstream superhero comic as a form of radical political discourse is undermined by the unconcealed desire to rehabilitate the possibility that superhero comics can still ultimately serve in such an emancipatory capacity if they were only done with sufficient insight into the human condition. This notion that if only the artistry was better, if only its aesthetic qualities were of a superior calibre, then the stifling structural relations that govern the production of that art would cease to be a meaningful lens through which to examine it, is a self-indulgent and naïve position. The downstream cultural effects of presenting industrial entertainment as equivalent to ancient mythology in its power to describe and explain the human world are not trivial or meaningless. They eat at the foundations of the narrative, textual, and graphic worlds upon which interpersonal communication rests. They reduce the deep complexity and strange ambiguities of myth to the tangible, sensational properties of contest, sex, and death. They collapse the many diverse historical traditions of story and narrative into a single stream of interchangeable, wholly fungible, ultimately indistinguishable figures that all bear approximately the same significatory charge: 'A few unique people are simply better, stronger, more capable of interacting with the world, and the rest are hapless victims of their own weakness and incompetence who must be guarded against, rescued, or destroyed.'

Aimed at mature audiences, the superhero comics of the British Invasion writers stage appalling traumas to underline the resilience of their heroes or justify those heroes' moral ambiguities amid ubiquitous sacrificial violence. They employ many of the conventional tropes of the horror genre to shock and revolt the audience with the darkness of an indifferent universe, and they offer candy-coated visions of empowered individuals liberated by their possession of superpowers from a world in which ordinary humanity is routinely imagined as weak, sullen, and hateful. Such fragmented fables can only configure a resistance to villainy and domination that is entirely divorced from collective action, or the lurid figures at their respective narrative centres fade into indulgent mediocrity. The futures that they envision are not imaginings of a freedom to come, but of a perpetually ongoing immiseration in the dissolving acid of modernity's fractured and disconnected

modes of experience. To cast these futures as science-fictional warnings intended as cautionary tales is to dignify them with an assumption of prescience that they have never demonstrated. Rather, their formulation of an infinity of various apocalypses is revealed in its endless repetition as a limit on the imaginative horizon of the British Invasion writers, and perhaps on superhero comics more broadly. While redemption may be earned by the individual through individual acts of heroism, or even through the formation of groups of special affinity and interest, it can never be allowed to be mundane and general. Redemption, that most singular identifying characteristic of heroic narratives from the Bible through *Beowulf* to Batman, can never be mediated for the ordinary unheroic person in a superhero comic except through their sacrificial death. Replete as they are with textual specters, the comics of the British Invasion are also haunted by the absence of the ordinary multitudes at which their viscerally kinetic, formally acrobatic, and self-righteously iconoclastic anti-heroics are aimed.

All of this is not to say, however, that the comics works of the British Invasion writers represent a one-dimensionally regressive movement, or that comics in general are not capable of offering forward-looking and optimistic visions of society. A degree of caution is always necessary in the attribution of canonical status to writers, and the more so where those writers come from backgrounds of relative privilege, so that the focus on those writers and their works does not become totalizing and made to stand in for the field in general. As previously mentioned, writers such as Kelly-Sue DeConnick, Jonathan Hickman, Ales Kot, and Saladin Ahmed have moved into the industry spaces carved out and then vacated by the British Invasion writers as purveyors of complex, literary, heroic graphic fictions aimed at mature audiences. DeConnick's work on *Bitch Planet* and *Pretty Deadly* would have fit neatly into Murray's categorization of the waves of the British Invasion as comics that revel in "irreverence, extreme violence, and profanity" (Murray 42) while still offering sophisticated "postmodern deconstructions of the nature of comics storytelling and sequential art" (Murray 41). Hickman's writing in the dystopian and apocalyptic alternate history *East Of West* (2013-2019), has much in common with the Vertigo comics of the early Invasion, with its

deployment of mythic characters such as the Four Horsemen (with Death as the protagonist of the story), its story of a cosmic war, and its ultimately fatalistic philosophical premise that the forces that divide humanity are greater than the forces that bind us together. Ales Kot's writing on *Material* (2015) and *The Surface* (2015) is filled with the kind of densely allusive and politically conscious stories that characterized the work of the Invasion writers, even to the point of including numerous footnotes that direct the reader towards background reading that will expand on their understandings of the references at play. More explicitly, Kot's work with artist Riley Rossmo on *Wild Children* (2012) is explicitly a narrative response to the issue of *Hellblazer* written by Warren Ellis that was held back from publication by DC in the wake of the Columbine school shootings. *Wild Children* takes an almost surrealist angle towards the issue of school shootings to highlight the awful absurdity of their continued occurrence. While Saladin Ahmed's prolific and influential superhero work reflects an optimism about, and comfort with, the genre that is missing from most of the British Invasion writers, his writing on *Abbott* (2018) expresses a haunting blend of cosmic dread, vibrant urban setting, and sharp socio-political commentary that resonates very closely with the Vertigo and later works of the British Invasion writers in general.

The British Invasion writers must also be seen in the light of their comics contemporaries of equivalent prominence, such as Frank Miller, whose own comics, like *300* (1998), and *Sin City* (1991-2000) have promoted much more pronouncedly hypermasculine, xenophobic, and objectivist libertarian sentiments with little or none of the satirical or ironic perspective found in *Watchmen* or *Transmetropolitan*. Likewise, the comics works of other major US superhero comics contemporaries such as Chris Claremont, Rob Liefeld, Jim Lee, Mark Waid, Jeph Loeb, Jim Starlin, Mike Mignola, and Todd Macfarlane often presented a more obviously traditionalist vision of the figure of the superhero untroubled by the morally ambiguous tones of grey found in the British Invasion works, and leaning into the portrayal of more conventional relationships. Set next to the works of Miller in particular, and their US contemporaries in general, the works of British Invasion writers represented a more transgressive and politically radical vision of the superhero genre than the mainstream

superhero comics of their era. That they now appear with the benefit of hindsight as the product of a singularly male and white perspective obfuscates the unusually progressive positioning of such stories in the US superhero comics culture of the 1980s and 1990s. The personal foibles of a group of writers who have often failed to escape from the consequences of their inflated public personae notwithstanding, the major works of the British Invasion continue to stand out as mold-breaking works of graphic narrative art that helped lay the foundations for the diversification of the superhero genre, both in terms of characters and creators, that has been obvious since the turn of the twenty-first century.

The non-comics works of the British Invasion writers are worth briefly considering here. Neil Gaiman's prolific output of fantasy novels has been the most notably influential oeuvre in this category, with the publication of ten novels since 1996, many of them finding both critical and popular acclaim, and *American Gods* (2001) winning a raft of literary awards. Gaiman's work has also extended into writing for film and television, beyond the adaptation of several of his works and at this time of writing a high-profile television adaptation of *The Sandman* is being prepared for release by the streaming platform Netflix after decades stuck in development difficulties. Gaiman is not alone in having moved beyond graphic narrative into more conventional literature. Alan Moore has published numerous novels and dozens of short stories throughout his career, often alongside his more famous comics works. The most substantial of these is *Jerusalem* (2016) a 1,266-page novelistic exegesis of English literary cultures playing with similar techniques of parallel narratorial focalization as used in *Watchmen*. Warren Ellis has written a pair of novels, *Crooked Little Vein* (2007) and *Gun Machine* (2007) which revel in the same sorts of pulp histories that have informed so much of Ellis's comics work. Grant Morrison has published a small number of short stories and plays, although their major non-graphic narrative work has been the non-fiction book about the history of the figure of the superhero in comics, *Supergods* (2011). As for Mark Millar and Garth Ennis, while both have seen successful television and film adaptations of their comics works, neither has yet been tempted into reaching for the more traditionally literary credibility associated with publishing

their stories in textual narrative form. Taken together, these examples of the British Invasion authors' works outside the medium of comics are hard to categorize neatly. With the exception of Gaiman, whose literary fiction has emerged with a coherent subject matter and style of its own that is presaged by his comics work on *The Sandman*, the British Invasion authors' non-comics writing appears as a scattering of literary fragments that orbit their more substantial graphic narrative works at a significant cultural distance. This loose collection of fragments nonetheless provides a crucial context for understanding the literary ambitions of the British Invasion writers, their place in the tradition of English literature, and their enduring impact on mainstream US superhero comics.

4.3 Liminal Matter: Comics as Objects

The physical form of comics affect the way that readers encounter, experience and understand them. The properties of a comic's material body – the paper it is printed on, the cover it is given, the ink that is used - change the way that the reading encounter unfolds, without the reader even necessarily realizing that this is happening. I suggest there are borders within the field of comics that the umbrella term of 'comics studies' tends to obscure. One of these borders is in the conceptual boundary between what we might call a comic, and what we might call a graphic novel. It is worth thinking through why this distinction exists at all, and more particularly, what sort of work it might be doing in changing the way that we read a comic, or a graphic novel.

The existence of the graphic novel as a category of comics publication was a key factor in making possible the critical and commercial success of the works of the British Invasion writers. I argue that the function of the graphic novel in granting a more recognizably literary prestige to graphic narratives was a precondition of the critical recognition given to early British Invasion texts such as *Watchmen* and *The Sandman*. While both of these examples began life as serially published single issues which were popular in their own right, it was their collection into graphic novel formats, in *Watchmen*'s case as a single volume and in *The Sandman*'s case as a series of ten trade paperback collections each with its own defined arc within the larger story, that propelled them into canonical posterity. One of the functions of the graphic novel form, as revealed by this process, is to consolidate the stories published in the more ephemeral floppy singles as enduring artifacts of serious literature rather than disposable mass-market pulp.

The 'graphic novel' has become a recognizable term of art within the publishing industry and more broadly among the reading public, as, in the simplest terms, "an extended comic book, written by adults for adults" (Tabachnik 3). This loose definition, which identifies graphic novels as simply longer comic books aimed at a more mature market has some appeal, but the overwhelming majority of comics are written by adults, and while many (especially superhero) comics are intended

for younger audiences of children or teenagers, this has not prevented them accumulating large adult readerships. As soon as a more critical eye is turned upon the term 'graphic novel' and the kinds of publications it refers to, the coherence of the category begins to break down. In the simplest linguistic interpretation of the term, a graphic novel might be imagined to be analogous to a novel that tells its story pictorially. The model of the traditional novel suggests a discrete, self-contained narrative publication with a beginning, middle and end, the product of a singular creator's artistic vision. As Paul Gravett points out: "The term novel can make people expect the sort of format, serious intent, and weighty heft of traditional literature, as if a graphic novel must be the visual equivalent of 'an extended fictional work'" (Gravett 8). The simple conflation of 'graphic novel' and 'novel' immediately presents problems to anyone familiar with the field. One of the incoherent internal borders in comics studies, between the comic book and the graphic novel, begins to reveal itself in that description. Technically, any comic that was published as single issues, or otherwise as a part-work, and then later gathered together into a larger volume is accurately referred to as a "collection" rather than a graphic novel. To adhere to the letter of this technical definition means that some of the most famous and readily identifiable graphic novels – comic books that have done more than any others to break down the academic resistance to comics studies, books like *Maus* (1980-1991), or *Watchmen* (1986-1987) – are not technically graphic novels at all. They are collections. Christina Meyer points out that there is historical precedent for regarding serialized works as novels: "[G]raphic novels follow a logic of serial storytelling and serial publication similar to the serialized novels of the nineteenth century, which prior to book publication were printed serially in periodicals, newspapers, and magazines" (Meyer 273). The literary status of the novels of Charles Dickens, which emerged from just such a material background, is rarely or never questioned in the way that the literary status of collected part-works of graphic narrative often is. The novel is held up by those who love literature as the highest, most rarefied, form of art. The result of a single creator's private toil that can only be encountered in private contemplation. Having gained sufficient purchase in the public imagination that comics such as *Fun Home* (2006) and *Persepolis* (2000) are

regarded uncontroversially as “graphic novels” with all the implied literary prestige that the term offers, it would seem wholly counter-productive for the field of comics studies to abandon the term ‘graphic novel’ on a technicality.

Charles Hatfield has suggested that: “[A] graphic novel can be almost anything: a novel, a collection of interrelated or thematically similar stories, a memoir, a travelogue or journal, a history, a series of vignettes or lyrical observations, an episode from a larger work” (Hatfield 5). In this version of the graphic novel, the internal sequential coherence of its narrative content (as a novel) is made less relevant, and its novelistic qualities are assumed to rest upon the fact of its publication as a singular book, on some notion of the gravity of its subject matter, or on the artistic or literary qualities of the graphic narratives it contains. Stephen Tabachnik argues that a graphic novel is a graphic narrative that “treats important content in a serious artistic way” (Tabachnik 3), but no such condition of seriousness or artistry is placed upon the category of novel itself. Many books have been and continue to be considered novels without their seriousness or their literary value ever coming under scrutiny. The word novel suggests merely a certain singular self-contained completeness about a specific book, even if it is a part of a trilogy or other series. A novel, in common parlance, is generally understood as a book of fiction that presents a single complete narrative (or an installment of such). Were critics to reserve the term novel only for books whose quality meets some arbitrarily defined standard, as some scholars seem to suggest should be the case for the term graphic novel, then the term novel would apply to a vanishingly small fraction of the total number of published books of fiction.

A categorical tension therefore begins to become clear between the ‘comic book’ and the ‘graphic novel’. Either the differences between the two are primarily differences of content, in terms of the perceived quality of the work, or they are primarily differences of gross materiality in the circumstances of a given publication. Part of what is at stake in this distinction is the emergence of the idea that comic books and graphic novels represent different genres within the world of comics

publishing, with the distinct generic conventions that such categorisation entails. This somewhat strange perspective ignores that many graphic novels began their existence in print as comic books, and does not hold up under serious analysis. As Meyer says: "I do not consider graphic novels to be a genre but rather as *forms* of comics storytelling just as comic books are not a particular genre in the comics medium but rather constitute forms of storytelling printed in a specific format and delivered through a specific carrier medium" (Meyer 273). The graphic novel is identified by Meyer here as merely one "specific carrier medium" for graphic narrative. One form of comics storytelling related to but distinct from the traditional 'floppy' comic book form. An under-explored aspect of this definition is the extent to which the carrier medium for a graphic narrative, the specific material considerations of its publication, alter the valences of the reading encounter with a particular book.

If *Maus* and *Watchmen* are the kind of comic books that comics scholars wish to call graphic novels – and it seems most comics scholars agree that they are – then comics scholarship needs to develop a coherent way of categorizing what specific formal features constitute a graphic novel as opposed to a comic book. I argue that the materiality of a specific publication does more to cement its categorization as a graphic novel than the specific circumstances of its initial publishing run or even the perceived quality of its contents. Put simply, one of the ways that comics are distinguished from graphic novels, is that graphic novels are bigger. As well as being of larger physical size than floppy single issues, they often have hardback covers, or at least covers made from some robust cardstock, and in some cases, these covers might be cloth-bound, embossed, die-cut or otherwise ornamented in ways that are difficult to reproduce in the cheap paper cover of a typical monthly single issue. Graphic novels are more substantial than comic books, print records rather than print ephemera. Internally, the pages of a graphic novel are printed on a higher quality, more durable paperstock than is used for single issues. As a result of this greater heft, graphic novels require a binding that is stronger than the saddle-stitch binding common to single issues, often using the Perfect binding style, similar to modern book-bindings. The inks used for printing typical graphic

novels are also of higher quality than those used in typical monthly comics, holding more cleanly to the page to avoid smudging or fading of colours.

Although they might at first seem superficial or cosmetic, the impact of these material changes on the way that readers read, understand, and judge the stories these books present ought not to be underestimated. Marshall McLuhan's claim that "[t]he Medium is the Message" (McLuhan 1) is a somewhat totalizing expression of a similar argument, but the extent to which the specifics of a media object's form shape our experience of our encounter with it require a granular, nuanced analysis. In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Bruno Latour lays out "Actor-Network Theory" as a way to understand and describe the often-invisible work that is being done by every component of every material object to reconstruct and reinscribe the social conditions of their production. Actor-Network Theory, or ANT, is a complex, thorough and multi-faceted theorization of the life of objects, and I will not explore its full implications in great depth or detail here. However, Latour offers us two very useful terms in this context, that of the "intermediary" and the "mediator". An intermediary in this sense is difference-neutral, that is, as a medium for the transmission of a message it makes no significant difference to the way that we understand or interact with the material object in question. In Latour's words, the intermediary purports to "transport meaning without transformation" (*RTS* 39). A mediator, on the other hand, is a difference-multiplier that has the potential to greatly change the way that we encounter that object in unpredictable and often unquantifiable ways. These distinctions provide important technical vocabulary for understanding the significating work done by what Meyer calls the "specific carrier medium" of a given graphic narrative.

To illustrate his point, Latour points to the way in which a silk bedsheet and a nylon bedsheet might be considered functionally identical (when approached as intermediaries) but only if the meaning ascribed to the material substrate of which they are formed is ignored (*RTS* 42). When we examine the fabric from which the two bedsheets are made as difference-making 'mediators' instead of difference-eliding 'intermediaries', we can see a whole host of primarily ideological class

distinctions coming into play. Crucially for Latour, the two bedsheets are not merely reflections of some underlying social order, they actively participate in the ongoing construction and reproduction of that order. They make use of an existing material semiotics that is by no means essential to those materials but is always provisional and contingent, and in constant need of reinscription lest it lose its distinguishing force. In every act of invoking and deploying those ideological material valences, the class distinctions they describe are written anew into the social order. With that in mind we might turn back to the increasingly fraught border between the comic and the graphic novel. Let us provisionally adopt the critical position that all of those material differences between comic and graphic novels listed earlier in this section (such as size, paper-stock, ink quality, binding style and so on) are "mediators" rather than "intermediaries". Each of them has a multiplying effect that changes the way we encounter the text those publications present. Acting in concert with each other, these numerous multiplications have the potential to radically change the kinds of readings that we make of these objects. The more expensive and substantial production techniques used for graphic novels are signifying cues that prime the reader to have a literary encounter with the publication's story. So, the shift from the loosely saddle-stitched and stapled cover of a flimsy single-issue comic to the hard-backed, Perfect-bound construction of a graphic novel is far from being cosmetic or superficial, or irrelevant to the reading encounter. Rather, it is an ideologically driven material mediation of the text that draws upon historical distinctions within print culture to broadcast a very powerful signal: that of prestige.

These material differences indicate to the reader that this book is important, and therefore a worthwhile object of serious humanistic study, and not simply some disposable pop-cultural ephemeron to be discarded and pulped. This implicit claim comes at a conceptual cost. When certain publications are highlighted as particularly worthy of study, other publications of the same general category are thereby implicitly devalued. I argue that the credibility of comics studies, and of comics as a general category, is damaged by using the term graphic novel to distinguish a few books as somehow special. The term 'graphic novel', because of the class-distinguishing conventions of print

materiality that it relies upon for meaning, has done more to devalue and denigrate the broader term of "comics" as a field of humanist inquiry than any amount of snobbery from high-minded elite humanities scholars who regard pop-culture works as beneath their notice.

One of the most recognizable signature features of comics as a medium for text is the "comic book font" – that all caps lettering with varying boldness of stroke developed by Artie Simek and Bob Rosen and in which, until relatively recently, virtually all comics presented their written components. The specific form of that font emerges from the material specificities of mid-twentieth century comics as pulp ephemera. These early comic book publications, which include most of the first appearances of many of the most iconic superhero comics characters, used the cheapest available paperstock and ink, making them prone to blotting and pooling effects that made lower-case, serif fonts much less reliably legible. As the quality of inks and paperstock have improved and become more readily available, and as comics have come to be regarded as more serious literary objects worthy of greater investment in the means of their production, the practical necessity of using the classic comic book font has receded. Many comics now use much more sophisticated lettering styles for their speech balloons, for example *Injection* (2015-2017) by Warren Ellis, and *SVK* (2011), also by Ellis, which uses "invisible" UV reflective ink to conceal hidden dialogue and captions on its pages[39]. Yet the comic book font remains overwhelmingly the most popular typeface used within mainstream, and especially superhero, comics. It is a skeuomorphic signifier of material conditions that no longer strictly apply, but which have shaped the comics medium since its inception. Even in the pages of modern high-production-value graphic novels, the classic comic book font is preserved as a formal feature that identifies a text's literary genealogy as belonging to the tradition of superhero comics.

Material analysis is never intended to close off this discussion of the formal variation of graphic narrative publications. There remain unaccounted-for differences between, for example, a

[39] Appendix, Fig. 4.1.

trade paperback and a graphic novel. Even when a specific trade paperback is physically larger than a specific graphic novel, it is more clearly and correctly categorized as "a collection" than the single discrete story that we tend to assume when we hear the words "graphic novel". As well as the material considerations which define the border between comics and graphic novels, there are also textual considerations that must be evaluated. It is important to note that these considerations don't ostensibly (or at least should not) relate to any perceived notion of literary "quality", despite the literary status that has often come to be associated with the term graphic novel. As noted above, there are uncountably many books which are quite properly called novels that have no pretensions to the quality of literariness at all. This categorical definition – where "novel" signifies a specific medium of publication that emerged from particular historical material circumstances – has not prevented the term "graphic novel" from accreting the notion that the works it describes do indeed exhibit some superior quality of literary storytelling. *Watchmen*, in particular, is routinely cited by astonished first-time comic reviewers and excitable fans as one of the first mainstream comics to exhibit a truly literary sensibility in the depth and intricacy of its composition. As alluded to above, *Watchmen* is technically a "collection" of single issues, so if comics scholars want to talk about it as a graphic novel, they need a definition of the term that accounts for such collections, and that definition is going to require at least some engagement with what the text itself is doing, and why such texts belong in their own category. As a means of moving towards such a definition, I argue that the textual considerations of this border between comics and graphic novels center around what we might call the 'self-containedness' of the story being told.

Planetary, is an example that might help to shed some light on this discussion. Or at least, to illuminate some of the problems with it. Is *Planetary* a comic, a graphic novel, a collection of twenty-seven single issues, or a set of four trade paperbacks? On some level it is each of these things, depending on the contexts in which it is encountered and discussed. Trade paperback is an industry term for a discrete collected publication, and so perhaps less useful to us as literature scholars. It would be hard to term any of the individual trade paperbacks that constitute *Planetary* as a graphic

novel in its own right – taken alone they would struggle to generate any of that sense of "self-contained-ness". But put them together, as in for example the *Absolute Planetary* (2008) omnibus collection, and they are chapters of a pair of large hardback books with a combined weight of over four kilograms that tells a story as richly textured, as densely allusive, as complex, ironic, self-reflective, and literary as any more traditional work of literary skill. *Planetary* is a story with a very clear beginning, middle and end, a complete narrative arc. If one is a fan of the Fantastic Four, Dracula, Tarzan, Doc Savage, the Sherlock Holmes canon, Kaiju movies, or Hong Kong crime thrillers then familiarity with those works and the conventions of the pulp genres they spring from is going to enhance the experience of reading *Planetary*, but it is not necessary to have read any of them to understand and enjoy the story. *Planetary* nods to these works as a homage to the pulp-literary sea that it swims in, but its own story is completely self-contained. If the four volumes are taken together as a single work then, *Planetary* is certainly the kind of comic that qualifies for the description of graphic novels as works of great literary art in comics form. It is that act of treating it as a single work – of binding those four trade paperbacks, those twenty-seven single issues, into a single irreducible whole which is the most important factor in its identification as a graphic novel.

The spatio-topical system that Thierry Groensteen theorizes in *The System of Comics* remains the most comprehensive and powerful tool that comics scholars have access to in order to describe the unique way that comics pages create meaning in the mind of the reader. Groensteen describes how the aggregate effect of the many different categorizable elements that construct sequences of panels produce complex significations which emerge from combinant juxtapositions threaded through them. He describes how the elements of the comics page weave together to create interdependent signifying assemblages:

> "[*T*]*angling* of the internal relations of the panel (notably those of the three major components: the image, the story and the frame . . . reference, composition, lighting, color qualities of the line, and the writing does the same) *then the relations that weave*

> *themselves between the panels*, and the mode(s) of articulation of these complex units . . . I will try, as much as possible, not to dissociate these multistage units, but to separately analyze their different levels of interaction." (Groensteen 27) (italicized emphasis mine)

My emphasis points to the specific points in which strictly physical material considerations enter the spatio-topical system. Though arguably the spatio-topical system is an entirely materialist approach to understanding signification in comics, given its preoccupation with dimensions, page positions, and visible features of the text, this is a level of materiality distinct from the consideration of the specific material substrate of a given book and how that substrate interacts with the text presented. Further complication of signifying features is produced through the "tangling" of textual, spatial, and strictly material elements of the page. The material substrate of the book is especially evident in what might otherwise be thought of as peripheral signifying elements: Gutters, margins, paperstock, ink and bindings. These material cues prime the reader to approach the contents of the book in certain ways, and they are as inseparable from the comic's meaning-making power as the specifics of image and text that comics scholars are more accustomed to bringing their close reading skills to bear upon.

The analysis of the signifying effect of comics' materiality draws forth further questions: Can a graphic novel be read as such on a display screen? As Gardner points out: "the contemporary graphic novel came of age in the late 1980s and 1990s in America at precisely the same time as the rise of the personal computer" (802). The emergence of the mass-market popular information medium of the internet raised the value of a literacy that incorporates both textual and graphic components and may have contributed to the corresponding emergence of the graphic novel as a recognized prestige category of comics publication. Given that supposed kinship between electronically mediated information and the presentational techniques of graphic narrative, do electronic comics publications still qualify as graphic novels when their material body, their carrier

medium, is changed from paper to silicon and plastic? A typical (non-graphic) novel digitized in EPUB or PDF format faces many of the same questions about how the shift to electronic materiality changes the experience of the reading encounter, but there are some considerations in this context that are unique to the comics form. Colours necessarily look very different on the screen (and between screens with different settings) than they appear on the printed page, and the sheen of deep glossy inks are lost in the muted blacks of an illuminated electronic display. Beyond the unavoidable material alterations to colour and pagination, what is the significatory impact of digitization on the reading encounter with comics? For Latour, such material shifts are always mediating rather than intermediary, and must necessarily change the quality and nature of the encounter with the text.

Aaron Kashtan has done some preliminary work on this subject, and in a post on the Comics Forum site from 2013, called "Digital Comics and Material Richness" he suggests that comics might have a special role to play in heightening readers' awareness and sensitivity to material considerations. Kashtan argues that: "Comics help us understand the ways in which reading, whether in print or on a digital platform, is always a materially and physically situated process" (Kashtan). The "always" is important. No reader can experience comics outside of a material situation. The act of reading, whether on paper or screen, is always an embodied act that happens under specific material circumstances. Whether digital comics are read on a laptop or tablet, or even on a cellphone, an encounter is still taking place with a material object that has its own material specificities which shape the reader's experience of that text. The devices used to read comics are "mediators" in the Latourian sense – though it is hard to articulate in general terms what their particular mediating effects on the reader's encounter with the text might be. Kashtan goes on to offer the following critique of digital comics:

> "[T]o the extent that material richness can be generalized as a perception shared by multiple readers, I think it can be said that comics for the Kindle do not tend to offer a

> materially rich reading experience, in that there is typically nothing to distinguish the experience of reading one comic from that of reading another comic." (Kashtan)

This observation that electronically mediated comics flatten the experience of comics reading may seem intuitively true, but one of the side effects of the industry-wide shift to digital is that creators are beginning to pay more attention to the material affordances offered by the physical bodies of printed comics. In this, they are following in the footsteps of some avant-garde novelists and even more traditional book authors who have already faced the same kind of problems. Mark Z Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) is a book that positively revels in its status as a print object. This is a novel that has proved impossible for electronic publishers to digitize effectively without losing a huge part of the signifying power of its variable typography and pagination. The material, and indeed typographical considerations that make reading this book such an unusual experience are lost as soon as publishers try to fit them into existing code formats for e-books. Even whole-page PDF scans of *House of Leaves* lose the sense of material continuity that exists between the pages of this hefty, oversized book. The rotated orientations of text blocks that require the reader to turn *House of Leaves* around in their hands as they read, trying to determine which if any of the perpendicular narratives is primary, underscore a physicality to the experience of reading the novel which electronic versions fail to reproduce. As Kashtan suggests, the same rule of the physicality of the reading experience holds true for comics, as a graphic narrative medium whose reading encounters are shaped by a publication's pictorial and material properties.

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010) is another book which is impossible to digitize without losing the material properties that make it distinct as a work of literary art. Foer's book is a form of erasure text, based on Bruno Schulz's collection of short stories *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934), but using holes cut into the pages as an erasure technique rather than blank spaces. *Tree of Codes* thus plays within its own physical structure, forming provisional sentences whose words are

often strung across several pages, sometimes dozens of pages apart from each other[40]. These sentences can be read intermingled with each other, their structure changing continuously as the reader makes their way through the book. Like *House of Leaves, Tree of Codes* is a book that insists on the physical immediacy of its reading encounter. No attempt to digitize it can capture the complexity generated by the interleaving of multiple pages into individual sentences. Physical holes cut into the pages, and the momentary glimpses of words printed on pages beneath, can not be reproduced by any of the electronic publication formats currently available. One recent example of this kind of defiant materiality in comics is in the emergence of physical comics made without ink, or indeed any kind of printing process. *Under* (2015) by Ola Lysgaard, is recognizably a comic in most of the ways that a textless comic might be expected to look, but with the distinction that the signifying images of its narrative are formed by the careful excision of parts of each page to form cut-out images rather than ones printed with ink. This print artifact (I call it that even though there is not any meaningful printing process involved) performs many of the same signifying tricks as *Tree of Codes*. Signification is created across multiple pages at once, using a layered, compositing effect. Like *Tree of Codes*, any digitization of *Under* would necessarily lose something of the interplay of these multiple levels of signifying images. *Under* remains an outlier as a comic, and while cut-paper comics do exist more broadly, they tend to be self-published novelty or limited-edition collectors' items rather than being designed for mass-market commercial sale. They are, like *Tree of Codes*, something closer to art objects than books which serve as a delivery vehicle for literature intended for the public at large. They are not graphic novels in the sense that term has come to be used, either in the academy or in the publishing industry.

The problem of establishing the boundaries of the term graphic novel remains. The idea of the graphic novel as simply a bigger comic appears to be the only definition that survives critical scrutiny and suggests axiomatically that in fact all comics are merely smaller graphic novels. Meyer

[40] Appendix, Fig. 4.2.

offers another possible approach to defining graphic novels as literary objects distinct from comics, when she calls them:

> "heterogenous forms of visual-verbal storytelling in the comics medium with a (not necessarily sequentially, coherently arranged) mise-en-page and a (not necessarily cohesive) plot structure, published either digitally or in glossy print-form, and made of more than the 32 interior pages of comic books" (275)

This heavily qualified definition has the virtue of being specific about identifying the boundary between the comic book form and the graphic novel form. Thirty-two pages is the point at which a graphic narrative stops being a comic book and becomes a graphic novel. A thirty-three-page story in traditional written text would barely qualify as a novella and would more likely fall into the category of the short story, but Meyer's definition is generous enough to cover a short-run limited series like Morrison and Quitely's *We3* (2004). Meyer notes the importance of a glossy production to the definition of a print graphic novel but elides the mediating differences of digital publication. This makes an intuitive kind of sense, in that there is a persistent reluctance to say that a given graphic narrative is a graphic novel when in print form but some other kind of literary object when in digital form, but it runs counter to the idea that a graphic novel is simply a big comic. In this conceptualization, a graphic novel is merely a continuous graphic narrative utterance of a greater length than a standard comic book. Its materiality is not a relevant factor in determining its status as a novelistic work of literary art. This implies the possibility of layers of carrier media. If the graphic novel is a kind of carrier medium for graphic narrative, then that carrier medium must be further subdivided between the digitally remediated form of that graphic narrative and its (presumably original) print mediation. Presumably it is possible under this conceptualization for a graphic novel to be published entirely electronically and never actually see any kind of print incarnation. I argue that such a graphic narrative could not be considered a graphic novel as such, primarily because it would never produce the kind of reading encounter with which the term novel is associated. The Warren

Ellis and Paul Duffield comic *Freakangels*, originally published online by Avatar press between 2008 and 2011 in weekly installments of six pages, might have represented such a purely digital graphic novel had it not been collected and published physically in six trade paperbacks. *Freakangels* won the 2010 British Fantasy Award for "Best Comic/Graphic Novel", and in terms of the 864-page length of its continuous story, it is certainly substantial enough to qualify as a graphic novel in Meyer's terms. The question remains of whether the initial core readership of *Freakangels*, those fans who went to Avatar's "Whitechapel" website every week to read the latest six-page installment of the story, were reading a graphic novel or a long-form serialized webcomic with a single continuous narrative, and if in fact there is any meaningful distinction to be made between those two categories.

Of equally complicated interest are Meyer's qualifying descriptions of the contents of a graphic novel. The arrangements of the contents of its pages are "not necessarily sequentially, coherently arranged". This seems a contortion borne of trying to generate as inclusive a category as possible, but it does not reflect actual graphic narratives as such. There is always a sequence, possibly even numerous different sequences, in which the panels of a given page can be read. This is even the case when dealing with, for example, inset panels that show details of a moment that play out simultaneously in the story's chronology. In spatio-topical terms, their sequence emerges from their relative position on the page and in relation to the assumed default mode of reading. The default sequence in Western comics of reading left to right and top to bottom can be played with by writers, as in *Pax Americana*'s central 32-panel grid, but even in that case a sequentiality to the panels is still readable. While the reader may approach those pages in the customary order, starting at the top left corner and making their way to the bottom right of the grid, that sequence quickly reveals a non-linear chronology unfolding in the panels' sequence. Three separate timelines intersect on the page (which shows a single physical location from a single perspective through the aggregated gridded gestalt of its 32 individual panels) and parsing their meaning requires first reading through the entire page before returning to the start to disentangle the intertwined

timelines. What these two pages play upon and make clear about the function of sequence in graphic narrative (and to some extent the whole comic is a meditation on the function of sequence in graphic narrative) is that sequence is an artifact of the reading encounter and not an inherent property of the paneling of any particular comics page. This discussion of *Pax Americana* in the context of graphic novels may be judged irrelevant however, as its length is only that of a standard 32-page comic book, potentially ruling it out under Meyer's definition despite the distinctly literary character of its art and writing.

Similarly, Meyer's qualification that the arrangement of panels in a graphic novel is not necessarily coherent seems intuitively fair but starts to show signs of strain when it meets critical scrutiny. I argue that the arrangement of panels, and of images within panels, always affords a coherent reading, whether that coherence conforms to some standardized notion of how a graphic narrative should proceed or not. As with the question of sequence, coherence emerges as an outcome of the reading encounter with a graphic narrative. The reader forms a coherent cognitive appreciation of how the various images and textual elements of the page interact with each other. Sergio Toppi's *Sharaz-De: Tales from the Arabian Nights* (2013), offers a particularly apposite example of a kind of unpanelled and ungridded graphic novel, the coherence of whose compositions of images emerges from the reader's experience rather than being encoded somewhere in the structure of the pages. Toppi's collected work draws on the European comics tradition of comic albums as enduring graphic narrative artforms rather than the American tradition of superhero floppies as commodified industrial ephemera, and while the coherence of his compositions may sometimes be difficult to parse for a reader used to the American comics style, they are nonetheless legible as complete and coherent sequences.

Despite the best efforts of comics scholars to arrive at a single definition, the graphic novel remains a contested term that has more relevance to publishing industry marketing than to comics scholarship. To base the label 'graphic novel' on the perceived literary quality of a comics work is to

depart from the common conception of the novel and is anyway a wholly subjective measure. To base the label on the length of a given work is to exclude comics works of shorter length but greater artistic and literary quality. To base the label on the material properties of a publication, that is the physical dimensions and the substantial qualities of its production including binding, cover, and the quality of its ink and paperstock, excludes digital versions of the same graphic narrative text. To base the label on the sequentiality or internal coherence of a story's contents is to construct tautological categories that can never really be shown not to apply. Perhaps the only consistently useful parameter of the graphic novel's condition is its self-containedness. Like a novel, a graphic novel is a single complete narrative contained in a single publication. The floppy single issues that make up a collection's component parts are therefore not parts of a graphic novel until they are incorporated into a single publication. A graphic novel is thus sometimes a kind of becoming when it is a retrospective revaluation of a serialized comics work that takes on the character of a complete and self-contained work only after its initial publication run in monthly installments is complete. Other graphic novels produced and published as whole literary artifacts of graphic narrative in the first instance, such as *Fun Home*, require no such retrospective revision. In this sense a graphic novel may still be a part of a series of graphic novels, as a novel may be part of a series of novels, where each of the component parts of that series is capable of standing alone as a complete and self-contained narrative in its own right.

Such a definition places the popular collections of trade paperbacks of long-running series in a precarious borderline position. Each of the two volumes of Ellis's *Absolute Planetary*, for example, depends on the other for its completion and therefore cannot be said to be self-contained. With Ellis's longer-form comics work, like *Transmetropolitan*, there is also simply too much of it for it to be meaningfully considered as a graphic novel. Its component parts are too interdependent on each other to stand alone as meaningful single and self-contained stories. Moore's *Absolute Promethea* (2009, 2010, 2011) encounters a similar problem as a long-running comic condensed into three large hardback volumes that are codependent in terms of their self-containedness. Gaiman's *The*

Sandman is likewise too long to be fit into a single publication that is not hopelessly unwieldy, although its component volumes do function more independently and therefore might have a stronger claim to being considered graphic novels in their own right. Morrison's *All-Star Superman: Absolute Edition* (2011) is a graphic novel in this sense, as are their collected comics like *We3*, the *Animal Man Omnibus* (2013), *The Filth* (2004), and *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery* (2012), but much of Morrison's longer form work, including *The Invisibles* (collected in eight trade paperbacks) is too long to be considered as a single graphic novel. A more apposite term for long running comic books later collected into high production-value "Absolute"-style archival quality publications, such as those created by Vertigo for the British Invasion authors as discussed above, might be 'graphic sagas'. Such lengthy graphic narratives may have more in common in terms of their style and substance with the sprawling narrative utterances recorded in the late-medieval prose and poetic eddas of Icelandic and Scandinavian history than they do with the discrete modern form of the novel. To call such works graphic novels is to confuse and elide the distinctive features of the category of the novel. Works such as Bechdel's *Fun Home* or Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006) fit much more comfortably into the category of graphic novel than the collected editions of *Promethea*, *Transmetropolitan*, or *The Invisibles*, which are a different category of narrative utterance entirely.

While the term 'graphic saga' may not have as much appeal to the marketing departments of comics industry publishing houses as the term 'graphic novel', and while it may yet be argued that such works have no more familial resemblance to the Icelandic sagas than they do to the novel form, it is nonetheless clear that 'graphic novel' is an insufficiently exact or rigorous term for the purposes of serious literary scholarship of graphic narrative. As long as the use of the term 'graphic novel' persists in comics scholarship, it will continue to elide the sometimes enormous structural and categorical differences between diverse styles and forms of graphic narrative production.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

From this dissertation's analysis of the position and influence of the writers of the British Invasion of American comics emerges a number of key conclusions. Some of these conclusions are based in historicity, which is to say in the temporal context in which the British Invasion works were written and published relative to the broader history of mainstream US superhero comics. Other of these conclusions come out of an analytical perspective that accounts for the influence of fields as diverse as cyberpunk, the Baroque, high Modernism, and post-structuralist thought on the British Invasion writers. This final section will briefly summarize the main conclusions of each chapter in turn.

In chapter one, I have described in some detail the historically specific circumstances of the British Invasion of American comics, taking Chris Murray's "Signals from Airstrip One" as a starting point from which to consider the impact produced by the staggered arrival of half a dozen British comics authors in American comics during the 1980s and 1990s. This period, from which the term British Invasion emerges, saw a fundamental shift in the relationship between the comics author and the comics publisher which has endured since. Following the slow decay of the publisher-led "bullpen" production system and the increasing importance of individual comics authors through the speculative comics boom of this era, DC's Vertigo imprint, led by Karen Berger, spearheaded a new kind of author-led comics production with the arrival in the pages of US comics of Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, and Neil Gaiman. This innovation in the processes of comics production was one of the key features that made the British Invasion possible and contributed to the significance of its legacy in the industry. In addition, the cultivation of a more mature, adult audience for comics with darker themes and more serious subject matter was a crucial part of both the early success of Vertigo comics and of the originality of the British Invasion works.

Spatio-topical innovations represent another key part of the British Invasion's legacy. While spatio-topical contortions and hyperboles have long been a part of graphic narrative, the British

Invasion writers brought these techniques into the mainstream of US superhero comics. From Grant Morrison's twisting of the readable space of pages across gutters and into margins, to Alan Moore's clever manipulations of the nine panel grid, and the decompressed comics style inaugurated by Warren Ellis, the restless visual creativity of the British Invasion writers took techniques that had previously been occasional, or even marginal, elements of comics publishing and made them central features of graphic narratives featuring some of the most recognizable figures in the US superhero comics mainstream.

The chronological proximity of the British Invasion to the nascent cyberpunk movement in American literary science-fiction saw a cross-pollination of cyberpunk themes, figures, and ideas into the works of the British Invasion writers. Drawing on cyberpunk's own generic links to the aesthetics of film noir, with its doomed protagonists and icy femme fatales tangling in a hostile world of indifferent institutions and predatory authorities, the British Invasion works presented hard-boiled heroes whose own morality was often at odds with acceptable social norms of behaviour. This originary influence of cyberpunk on the British Invasion authors stems in part from their common experience as writers at *2000AD* in the 1980s, where ongoing episodic stories like Judge Dredd, Rogue Trooper, ABC Warriors, and Strontium Dog played heavily on similar themes of near-future post-apocalyptic dystopianism. These are narratives that question the role of the hero as a figure of justice, instead suggesting that they are a figure of law dedicated to the perpetuation of the status quo at all costs. The figure of the cyborg, as a boundary-busting figure of transgressive liberation theorized by Donna Haraway, becomes a figure of central interest to the British Invasion writers (and in particular to Warren Ellis) through their exploration of cyberpunk themes. Through this figure of the cyborg, the importance of the human (and the superhuman) body as the site at which fundamental political questions are asked, enacted, and resolved becomes a signature preoccupation of the British Invasion works.

Alongside these more literary influences, the radical political restlessness of much of the early work of the British Invasion writers emerges from a period in Britain where Thatcherism was tearing apart the post-war social fabric of the UK and replacing it with the unhindered acceleration of ideological capitalism. Warren Ellis's work, *Lazarus Churchyard*, represents a coming together of many of these influences into a single, relatively short, work. The protagonist's superpower of indestructability is understood as a curse of everlasting life from which he cannot escape. Another Ellis work, *Transmetropolitan*, takes a much longer form view of the science-fictional human condition and the political valences of the body within a hyperbolized futuristic urban setting.

Chapter one closes with a re-evaluation of the comics criticism of Fredric Wertham and Walter J. Ong in the mid-twentieth century, and the relation of the figure of the superhero to the superman of fascist ideologies. The understanding of the superhero as a defender of conservative values and one opposed to any kind of meaningful social change, an understanding which pervades the comics of the British Invasion writers, draws (at times paradoxically) on the criticisms given by Wertham and Ong. While Wertham's critiques of superheroic individuality were founded on a fundamentally conservative desire to defend traditional values of masculinity, family, and social cohesion, they unavoidably highlighted the racialized elements of early superhero stories that routinely cast racialized others as villains to be conquered by the uniformly white-faced hero. While modern mainstream superhero comics have worked hard to diversify their protagonists in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and abled-ness, Wertham's core critique remains salient. Superhero narratives enable fascist politics by constructing a view of society that requires the violent intervention of strongmen to save a weak and docile populace from the machinations of evil. Despite the subversion of the figure of the superhero that has been a signature feature of the works of the British Invasion authors, Wertham's argument has ultimately proved difficult to overcome. Even in the scathing analysis of *Watchmen*, with its flawed and broken, sometimes ridiculous, pseudo-superheroes delivering state-sponsored death and destruction on the enemies of America, the figure of the superhero itself is never placed beyond recuperation. The sentimental attachment

to these hyperbolic images of masculine patriotism and martial valour in the American imagination is capable of rehabilitating the most rotten and corrupt among them. While the figure of the superhero survived the British Invasion intact, it was not unsullied, and the effect of the Vertigo-catalyzed turn towards more mature and literary superhero stories coupled with the British Invasion writers' general hostility to the figure of the all-American hero produced a generational shift that introduced a new moral complexity and sharper political awareness into mass-market graphic narrative.

Chapter two analyses the connections between the British Invasion writers and the transatlantic literary exchange of the high modernist period almost a century earlier. The echo of the Unreal City of Eliot's *The Waste Land* in "The City" of Ellis's *Transmetropolitan*, revolves around the modernist idea of the city as a space of alienation in which human lives and experiences are fragmented by the pressures of modernity. The centrality of the city as a site of both oppression and liberation is explicitly explored in Morrison's *The Invisibles*, which presents urban space as the terrain in which the spiritual journey towards an awakening to manifest inequality must take place. *The Invisibles*' use of the city as the catalyzing location of a political and spiritual coming-to-consciousness resonates closely with the modernist writing of James Joyce, particularly in the short stories of *Dubliners*. The dense intertextuality of these modernist and British Invasion texts signals the fundamentally intertextual nature of urban fabric, where overlapping narratives of history and culture borrow from each other across space and time to construct a kind of gestalt city in each instance, formed from ideas of what a city can and should be. More broadly, intertextuality is identified as a signature feature of both modernist literature and the works of the British Invasion writers. While sometimes haphazard in focus and intention, the prolific intertextuality evident in works from *Watchmen*, *The Sandman*, *The Invisibles*, and *Planetary*, provides perhaps the clearest single demonstration of the growing literary turn in superhero comics described by Chris Murray as being produced by the advent of the British Invasion.

Chapter two continues with an analysis of the thematic and stylistic influences of baroque art and literature on the British Invasion works. Tracing this lineage through the unadmitted and unresolved presence of the Baroque in English literature more generally, I argue that the proximity of the British Invasion writers to the generalized projects of US/UK modernism, which were in themselves partially formed in reaction to the subversion of the Baroque into the "metaphysical" strain in English literature, necessitates a consideration of the Baroque as a fundamental point of inflection for the works of the British Invasion writers. The position of baroque literature as part of a broad aesthetic movement that participated in the dramatization of European colonization while simultaneously presenting a proto-postmodernist ethic of pluralist liberation gives it a particularly sharp relevance to the works of the British Invasion writers who likewise have one foot in the colonial disposition of canonical English literature even as they adopt the stylistic and thematic techniques of more innovative and emancipatory literatures. The logic of the Baroque, as a logic of complexity, excess, dissonance, multiplicity, and abstraction, finds its primary popular expression at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first in the comics of the British Invasion writers. Beyond these stylistic and technical features of baroque art the more strictly philosophical heart of the Baroque, as a moral and epistemic perspective which reckons with the emergence of a world without a centre, finds new life in the millennial anxieties of the British Invasion works. The disenchantment of the medieval world occasioned by the rise of atheistic rationalism was the engine of the original Baroque's hypertrophic heterogeneous art. In the same way, rejection of the progress of that same process of demystification through industrial information media in the twentieth century produced the sometimes regressive mysticism of the British Invasion writers. The negation of objective, rational authority that is at the heart of *Watchmen*, *Transmetropolitan*, *The Invisibles*, and *The Sandman*, and the filling of that epistemic void with competing plural subjectivities, of which none are perfect or unchallengeable, is an echoing of both the early Baroque episteme and the epistemic struggles of the early twentieth century US/UK modernist writers as they wrestled on their own terms with the absence (or at least, concealed

presence) of the Baroque tradition in canonical English literature. This baroque epistemological uncertainty also shapes the broader project of postmodernism in unexpected ways, particularly with poststructuralist ideas about deconstruction. The intellectual traditions that gave rise to the post-structural theorists of the late twentieth century emerged from a continental philosophy that originated from the dissonant complexities of the European Baroque. The rival empirical bent of British philosophy during the period explains much of the hostility towards Baroque aesthetics found in English literature and literary criticism since.

The imagist movement propelled into prominence by the advocacy of Ezra Pound aimed to define a hard distinction between the functions of the image and the symbol. This distinction is not as clear as Pound's insistence suggests, and *Watchmen*'s repeated use of the smiley-face highlights the ways in which images and symbols have overlapping and interdependent properties. The critical fascination with *Watchmen* among comics scholars, in which this dissertation also partakes, must be recognized as having inflated its aesthetic and technical quality relative to the works of other comics creators. In large part, *Watchmen* owes much of this critical adulation to the ongoing perception that it represents an expression of postmodern aesthetics and politics in mainstream graphic narrative. I argue in chapter two that this perception mistakes *Watchmen*'s baroque influences for postmodern ones. The notion of deconstruction routinely applied by comics scholars to *Watchmen* does not accord with the ideas of deconstruction as presented by Jacques Derrida and developed by theorists such as Peggy Kamuf. Deconstruction is not simply the act of presenting a text (or textual object, such as the figure of the superhero) assumed to mean one thing and showing that it means another, or that it has the opposite meaning. Derridean deconstruction, as understood by Kamuf, is about the co-existence of multiple incompatible meanings within a single text. While *Watchmen* can be read in different ways to generate different readings of its putative message, this in itself is not indicative of a deconstructive presence within the text. More accurately, *Watchmen*, with its binary oppositions of morality and epistemology, ought to be seen as dialectical rather than deconstructive. The dialectical tradition traces its origins in literature at least as far back as Ancient Greece and the

Socratic dialogues recorded by Plato. Dialectical oppositions were a signature feature of baroque art and literature, lending themselves to the dissonance that is at the heart of that aesthetic (we might consider Don Quixote and Sancho Panza as being among the seminal figures of baroque dialecticism). These dualistic Baroque dialectics bear much closer resemblance to the dialectical figures presented in *Watchmen* than do the tripartite post-Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

Another feature of baroque literature that emerges in the comics works of the British Invasion writers is the technique of narrative braiding. This interweaving of narration from different, often entirely independent, subject positions towards a single thematic purpose appears in the works of the US/UK modernists, such as Virginia Woolf, but has even earlier origins in the writing of the Baroque era, such as *One Thousand and One Nights*. The misapprehension of Moore's work more generally as somehow postmodern in its politics and philosophy is corrected towards the end of chapter two, where his engagement with questions of gender in the comic *Promethea* reveal a regressively essentialist conception of the subject which is much closer in its epistemic position to baroque absolutes than to the relativity of postmodernism. By contrast to Moore, the comics works of Grant Morrison exhibit a much more consistently postmodern and self-consciously avant garde sensibility. In particular, *Pax Americana*, as Morrison's parsimonious riposte to the bloated reputation of *Watchmen*, demonstrates a nearer affinity with postmodern ideas, especially as they pertain to bricolage and narrative genealogy. Formally ambitious, with its own tangible elements of baroque complexity and dissonance, *Pax* nevertheless represents a more explicitly postmodern fragmentation of subjectivity than *Watchmen* allows for. Its series of open-ended reversals and collapsing oppositions reveal a more deconstructive than strictly dialectic bent.

Chapter three turns towards the figure of the other, as theorized primarily by Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, and its representations in the comics works of the British Invasion authors. Analyzing the figure of the monstrous other in literature, chapter three argues that the

destabilizing "ontological liminality" (Cohen 6) of this figure works as a warning about the incoherence of strict epistemic categories of self and other, good and evil, hero and villain. Analyzing the figure of The Joker in Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*, I argue that this character represents a luridly monstrous otherness that is founded in diametric opposition to the troubled subject-selfhood of his nemesis, Batman. Through a close reading of the panelling and layout of *The Killing Joke*, I conclude that the very polarity of the opposition between Batman and The Joker underlines and reinforces a kind of kinship and fundamental similarity between them. In its collapse of the binary opposition between the two rivals, *The Killing Joke* hints at a deconstructive understanding of the nature of heroism and villainy, and of the relationship between self and other.

Chapter three then turns in more detail to the differential theorizations of otherness by Derrida and Levinas, drawing out some of the contradictions and incompatibilities between the ideas of these two theorists in their considerations of the other as a stranger. I argue that for Levinas, the recognition of the relationship of the self to the other is first and foremost a "condition for consciousness" (Levinas 11), the encounter with an absolute infinity that is prerequired for the instantiation of one's own interiority through the transformation of an absolute relation to a relative one. For Derrida, the conditions of the encounter with the other are more flexible, and the relation to the other prerequires the existence of a self-conscious subject with its own interiority. I conclude that from the tension between these two theoretical perspectives emerges an understanding of the encounter with the other-as-stranger that remains ambiguous and polyvalent, always transformative but swinging between antagonism and reconciliation. I further conclude that the impossibility of a face-to-face encounter with otherness (as mandated by Levinas) through the mediating structure of the comics page renders comics themselves as ultimately useless instruments in the attempt to construct social realities with the power to define the self. I argue that Levinas's reduction of the idea of justice to purely material terms anticipates post-Marxian arguments about the relative importance of material equity over representation in colonial contexts. I conclude that the prevailing importance of the hospitality that is commanded by the presence of the other-as-stranger, according

to Derrida's scheme of otherness and as reflected in the opening pages of Ellis's *Planetary*, becomes a central theme of that comic's overarching narrative, returned to again and again throughout its run.

The figure of the divine other is used in many of the superhero works of the British Invasion authors, and chapter three analyses the representations of this kind of figure as it appears in Ellis's *Supergod* to formulate a critical understanding of how the figure of the divine other creates meaning in the comic of the Invasion authors. Using the Levinasian understanding of the divine other as the "idea of the infinite in us" (Levinas 219), I argue that British Invasion works from *Watchmen* and *Promethea*, to *Supergod* and *The Invisibles*, deploy the figure of the divine other as a way to try to recapture an essence of enchantment and an aspect of the numinous in the heroic fantasies they recount. I conclude that this turn towards a supposed auratic or enchanted mode of experience with superhero stories reveals a largely unremarked-upon conservatism in the comics works of the British Invasion authors.

Chapter three then turns to the "Embodied Approach" of Karin Kukkonen to analyse how the graphic representation of the physical bodies of characters in comics has the potential to create signification in ways that are unique to the comics form. Applying this framework first to Ellis's *Ministry of Space* and then to Ennis's *The Boys*, I argue that while the alterity of the marginalized other can be subverted by the embodied approach, rendering them as indistinguishable from the self-same of the reader, the same techniques of graphic embodiment of otherness can also result in much more extreme and ultimately oppressive caricatures of alterity. I conclude that while the latter approach is self-evidently regressive and antithetical to contemporary understandings of relationships of alterity, the former approach carries the risk of eliding the specific valences of marginalized identities in the name of the same types of all-encompassing progressive understandings, well-intentioned but founded upon a bedrock of privilege from which meaningful engagement with questions of subordinated alterity becomes impossible. Analyzing the characters

of *Transmetropolitan*'s Fred Christ and *The Sandman*'s Wanda Mann in the light of Gail Simone's *Women In Refrigerators*, I conclude that the efforts of the British Invasion authors to represent alterity all too often involve the instrumentalization of marginalized identities to generate pathos as the victims of violent and humiliating degradation.

Finally, chapter three addresses the deconstructive presence of the Derridean spectre as a figure of post-Marxian critical analysis, and specifically its role in understanding Ellis's *Doktor Sleepless* as a fundamentally deconstructive text. While chapter one challenged the routine attribution of the term deconstructive to Moore's *Watchmen*, I argue here that *Doktor Sleepless* represents the closest that any of the British Invasion authors' comics works have come to presenting a truly deconstructionist story in the terms of Derrida, where competing, and largely incompatible, interpretations of the text's meaning must be read alongside each other in order to gain a full understanding of its complex significatory contortions. I conclude that the structure of "the messianic without messianism" (*Specters* 74) that stands at the heart of Derridean deconstruction's "democracy-to-come" represents the fullest expression of the radical potential of figures of otherness captured in any of the British Invasion comics works.

Chapter four expands upon the analysis of the numinous aspect of the works of the British Invasion authors by reference to the theoretical work of Walter Benjamin. I argue that Benjamin's theorization of the categories of experience that he terms *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* form a crucial analytical basis for understanding the difference between the pre-modern and modern modes of consciousness that lead to the decline of the auratic perception of art. I conclude that the failure to recognize the consequences of this distinction between modes of experience has led to a disconnect between the radical intentions of the British Invasion authors' employment of the numinous in an attempt to effect a re-enchantment of their literature of heroic fantasy. I argue that not only is a return to the auratic encounter with the work of art impossible in an age characterized by its discontinuity with historical traditions of interpretation and appreciation, neither is such a regressive

movement desirable. I conclude that the preoccupation of many of the British Invasion writers with presenting themselves as mystics with epistemic access to a higher plane of truth regarding the figure of the comics superhero has ultimately been damaging for the comics form's potential to engage with actually existing radical politics. Far from being an avant-garde spearhead of innovative writers, I argue that the Invasion writers' tendency to indulge in mystifying mythological discourses makes them an obstacle to progressive popular discourse at best, and an actively regressive presence in the field at worst.

Chapter four continues by returning to chapter two's analysis of the role of early Modernism in shaping the structure and progress of the British Invasion. Using the works of Hope Mirrlees and William Hope Hodgson as reference points, I argue that the Invasion's fascination with the infringement of the supernatural and the alien into the world of the mundane represents a thematic continuity with modernist authors seeking to undermine the empirical certainties of their own era. I conclude that while the works of the British Invasion authors dabble in both modern and postmodern aesthetic styles, they fail to express any clearly identifiable aesthetic or political philosophy beyond a reflexive twentieth century counterculturalism. I argue that while the British Invasion authors may have emerged as writers in opposition to the Thatcherism of 1980s Britain, they have remained stuck in a conception of political and aesthetic radicalism that belongs to that era and is no longer recognizable as either disruptive or progressive. Using Alain Badiou's *The Century* as a theoretical basis, I argue that the works of the British Invasion authors' focus on individualized thought, action, and liberation represent a failure to recognize that radical political or aesthetic ideas must be collectivizable to gain any purchase on civil society. I conclude that the fantastical representations of individualized struggle and triumph that are so central to the superheroic narrative make such narratives inherently unworkable as instruments of meaningfully progressive mass-politicization. Instead they only recapitulate, as warned of by Ong and Wertham, the idea that the masses of humanity are not worth consideration and only a few unique and special heroes have the power and the vision to instigate change for the better (and yet, mysteriously

choose not to). As a qualification to this conclusion, I argue that it remains important to consider the works of the British Invasion authors as artifacts of the period from which they emerged in mainstream comics publishing. In this context, the British invasion authors were markedly more radical, both politically and aesthetically, than their US contemporaries, and while the benefit of critical hindsight reveals the regressive character of many of their works, the British Invasion itself should still be seen to represent a radical rupture with the almost uniformly hidebound and conservative atmosphere of pre-invasion mainstream US superhero comics.

Finally, chapter four analyses the materiality of the comics form with respect to the signifying power of the medium. I argue that the term “graphic novel”, whose general use as a category of comics publication emerged alongside the British Invasion, is primarily a marketing term whose descriptive force in critical comics scholarship is confined to the notion of a large, expensively produced, comic. I argue that ideas of literary quality, self-containedness, or internal narrative complexity are never applied to bound the category of more traditional prose novels and should not be applied this way to comics works in the course of serious scholarship. Considering the many different material permutations with which comics judged to belong to the category of graphic novels are published, compared to those comics which fail to be included in this category, I conclude that the graphic novel as a publishing industry term of art refers primarily to comics upon which the publisher aims to confer some veneer of prestige that sets it apart from comics published in more traditionally ephemeral formats. With reference to the theoretical work of Bruno Latour, I argue that the material distinctions between the publications referred to as comics and the publications referred to as graphic novels, are primarily the expression of ideological distinctions intended to delineate a classist divide between the supposed consumers of such works. I conclude that even in the shift towards digital comics distribution, these ideological distinctions between comics and graphic novels remain operative, and are primarily based upon the length and volume of the comic in question, and secondarily upon the literary prestige which its publisher wishes to impute to it.

Ultimately then, this dissertation offers a new perspective on the seminally important and influential works of the British Invasion authors. Analysing the complex interactions between their internal political and aesthetic valences and their external relations to the field of mainstream superhero comics more broadly, I have argued that while these texts remain of signal importance in understanding the aesthetic and thematic shifts of superhero comics in the lead up to and wake of the millennium, they are regularly accorded, due to their putative radicalism, a privileged position of unassailable canonicity within comics scholarship that has the effect of crowding out more authentically radical writers and works in more urgent need of consideration and interpretation. A large part of this effect is due to what I have characterized, after Wertham, Ong, and latterly Badiou, as the fundamentally regressive nature of the figure of the superhero as an agent dedicated to perpetuating a politically and socially moribund status quo. Despite their important innovative contributions to the comics form and their restlessly disruptive energies, and even despite their collective disdain for the superhero as a narrative figure, the British Invasion writers have struggled to escape the essentially conservative and libertarian gravity of the individualized crime-fighting vigilante.

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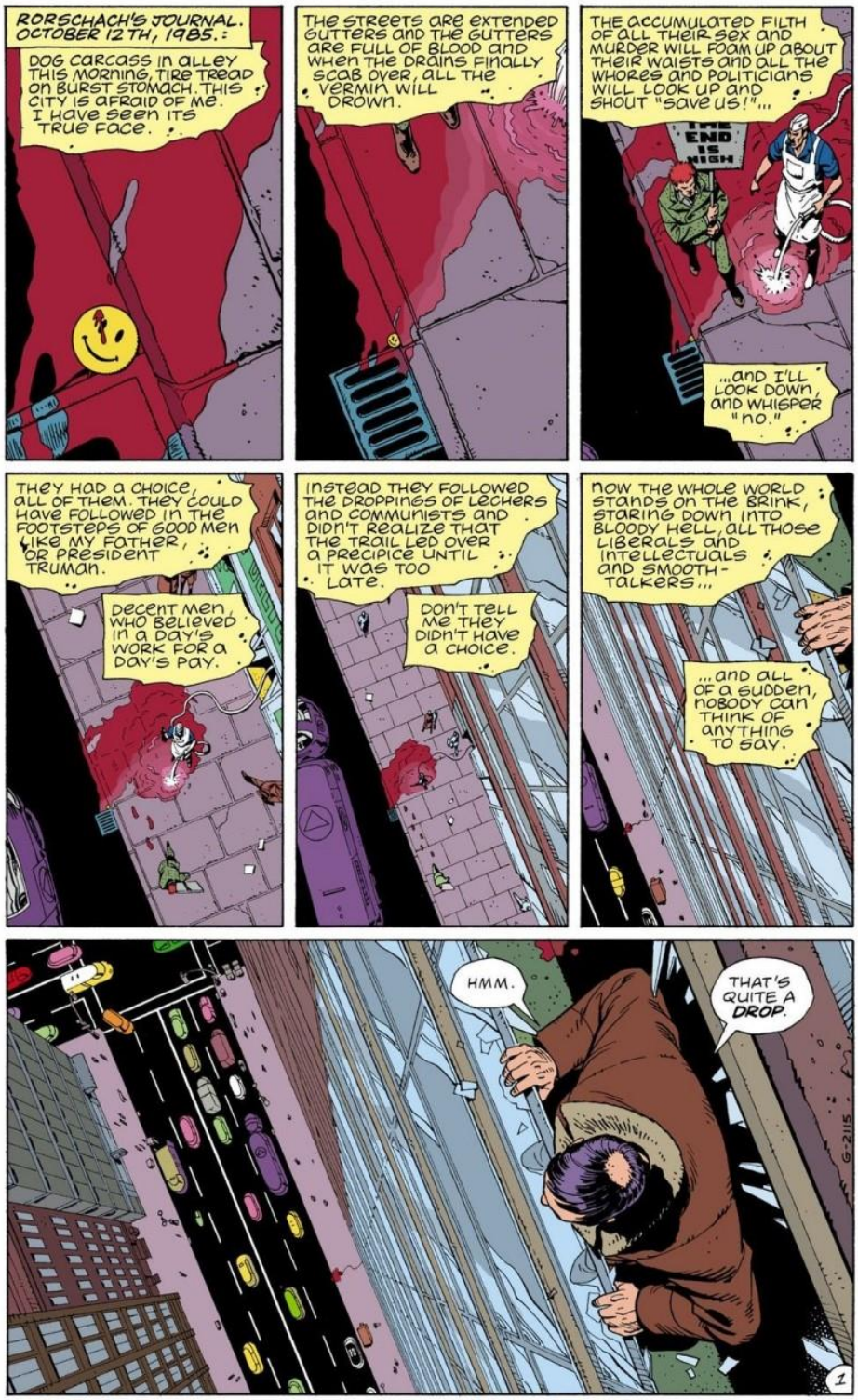
Appendix

Fig 1.1. *Watchmen*, page 1. The slow cinematic zoom out that begins the story (18).



© DC, 1987.

Fig 1.2. *Desolation Jones*, fight scene with inset panels (19). © Wildstorm, 2006.

Fig 1.3. *Desolation Jones*, negative space and inset panels (19). © Wildstorm, 2006.

Fig 1.4. *Fell: Feral City*, panelling shift in grid shape to signify sudden tension. (19, 22)

© Image, 2005.

Fig. 1.5. *Watchmen*, sex scene on the Owlship showing the 'heartbeat' of the panelling. (23)

© DC, 1987.

Fig 1.6. *Pax Americana*, the 'seizure' caused by Algorithm 8 and its resolution, described in panel structure (24). © DC, 2014.

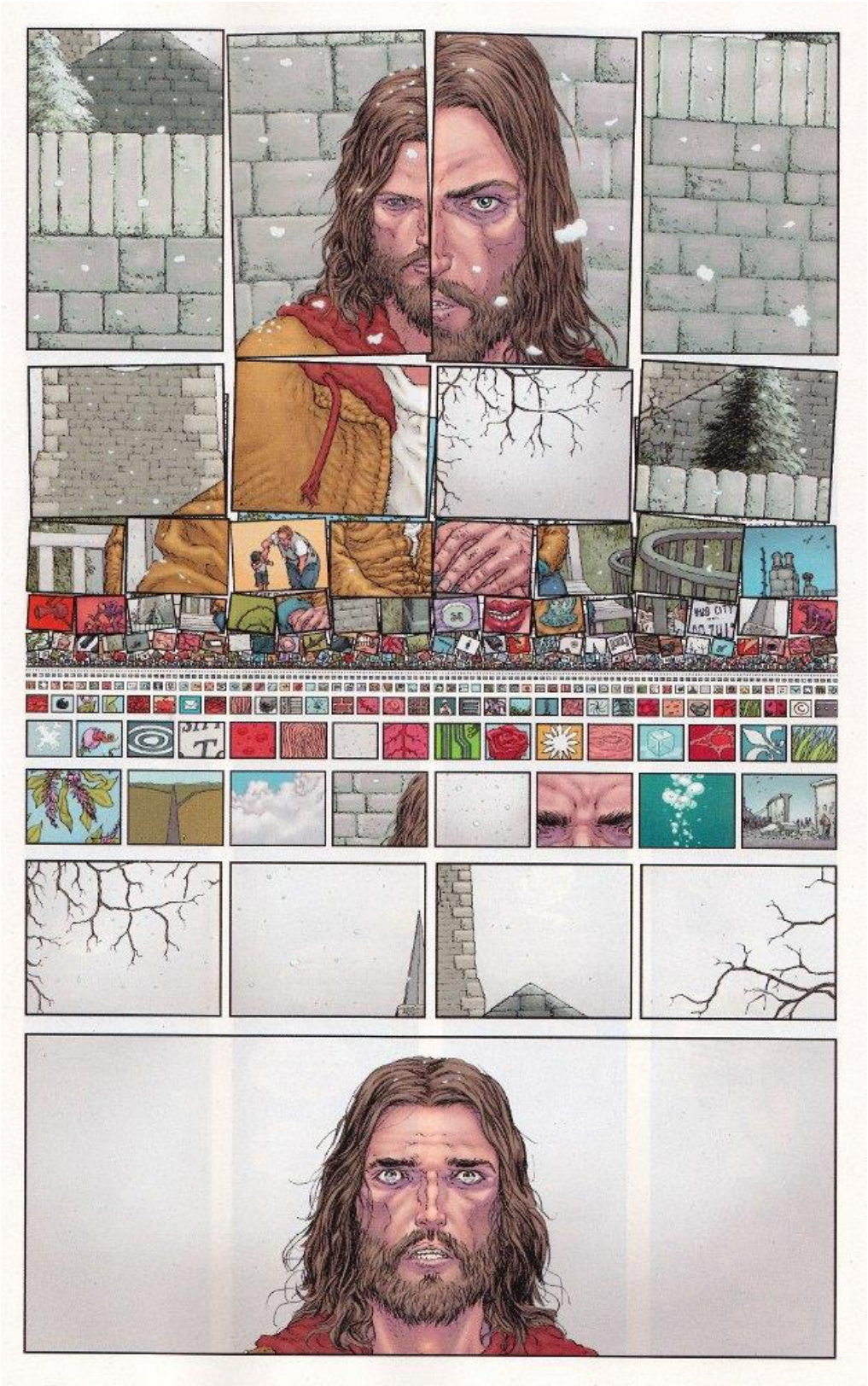


Fig. 1.7. *Pax Americana*, The Question's murder investigation. Three interwoven timelines inhabit one space (26). © DC, 2014.

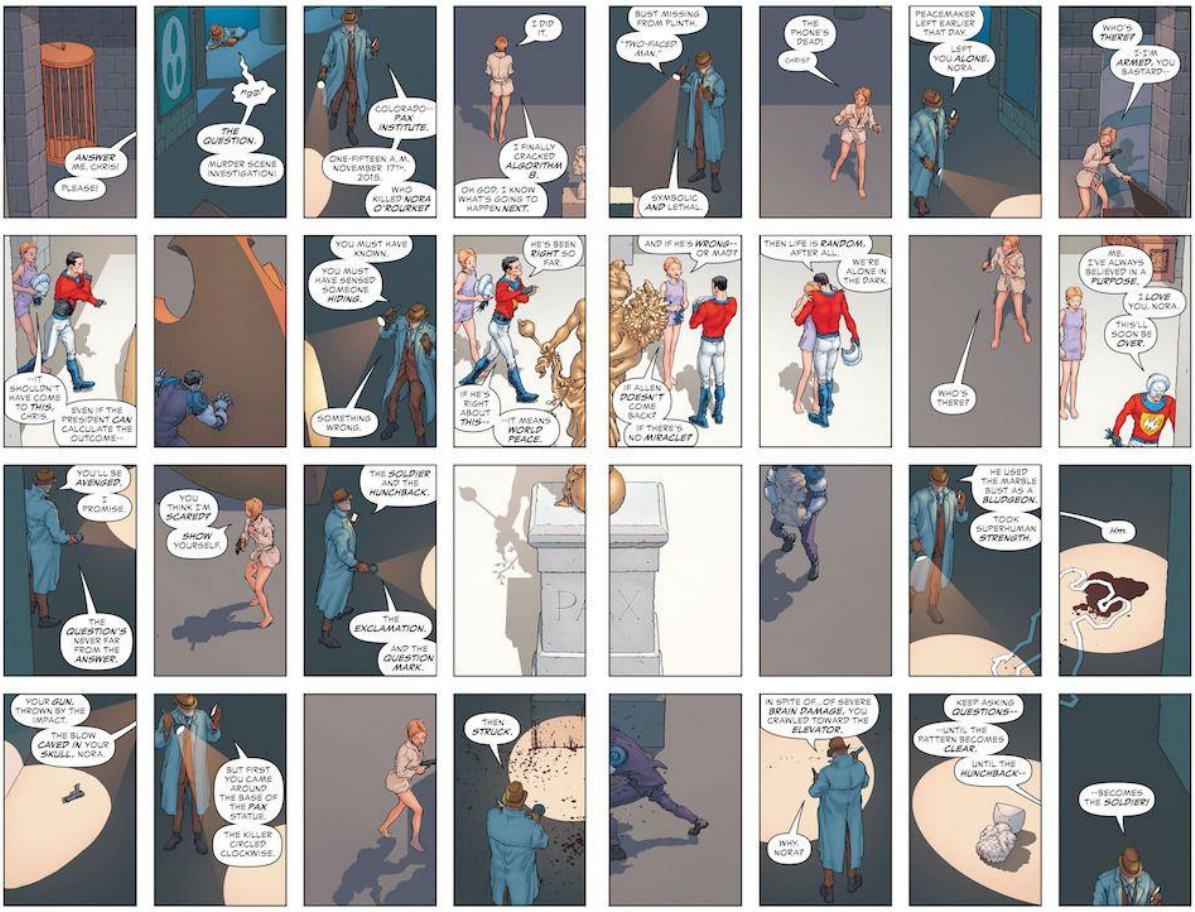
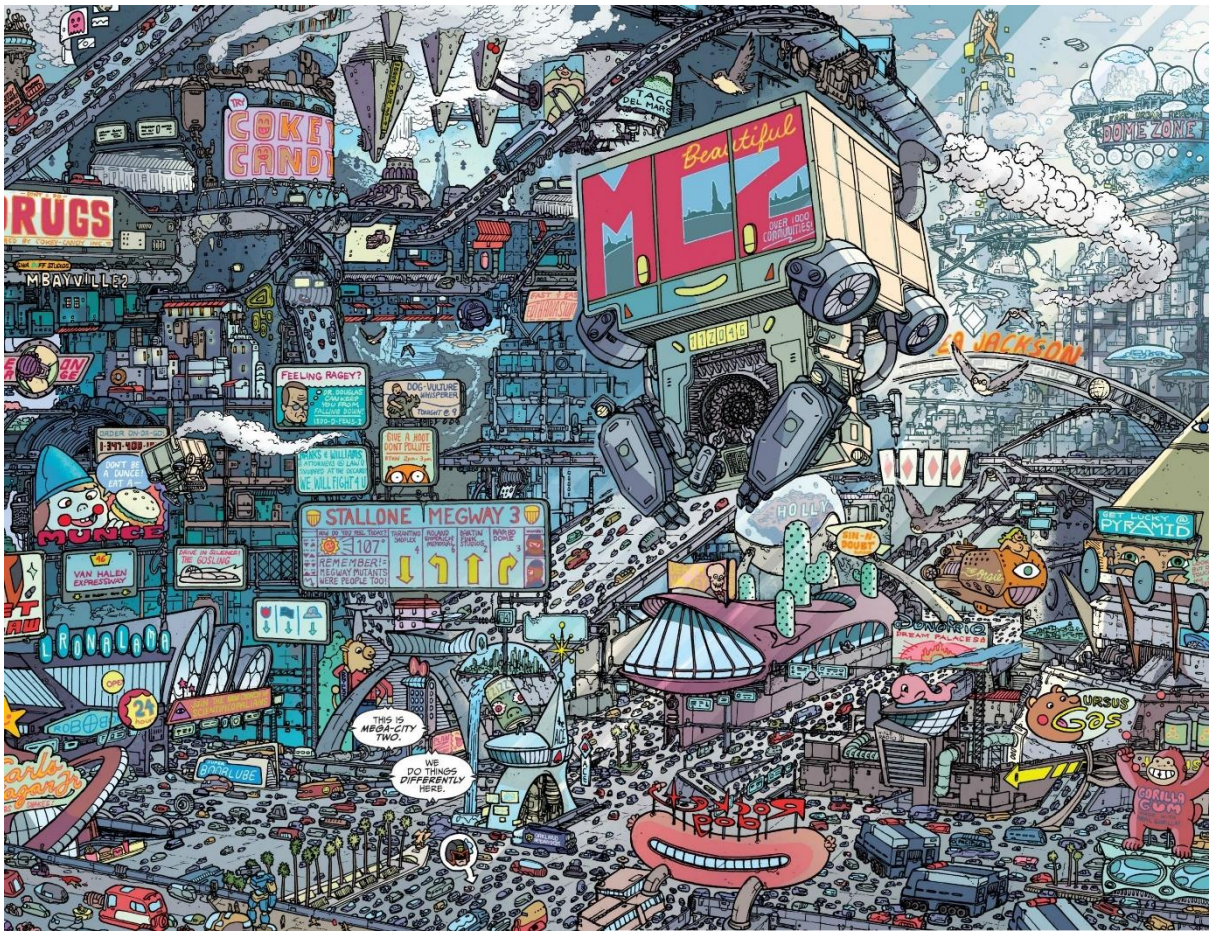


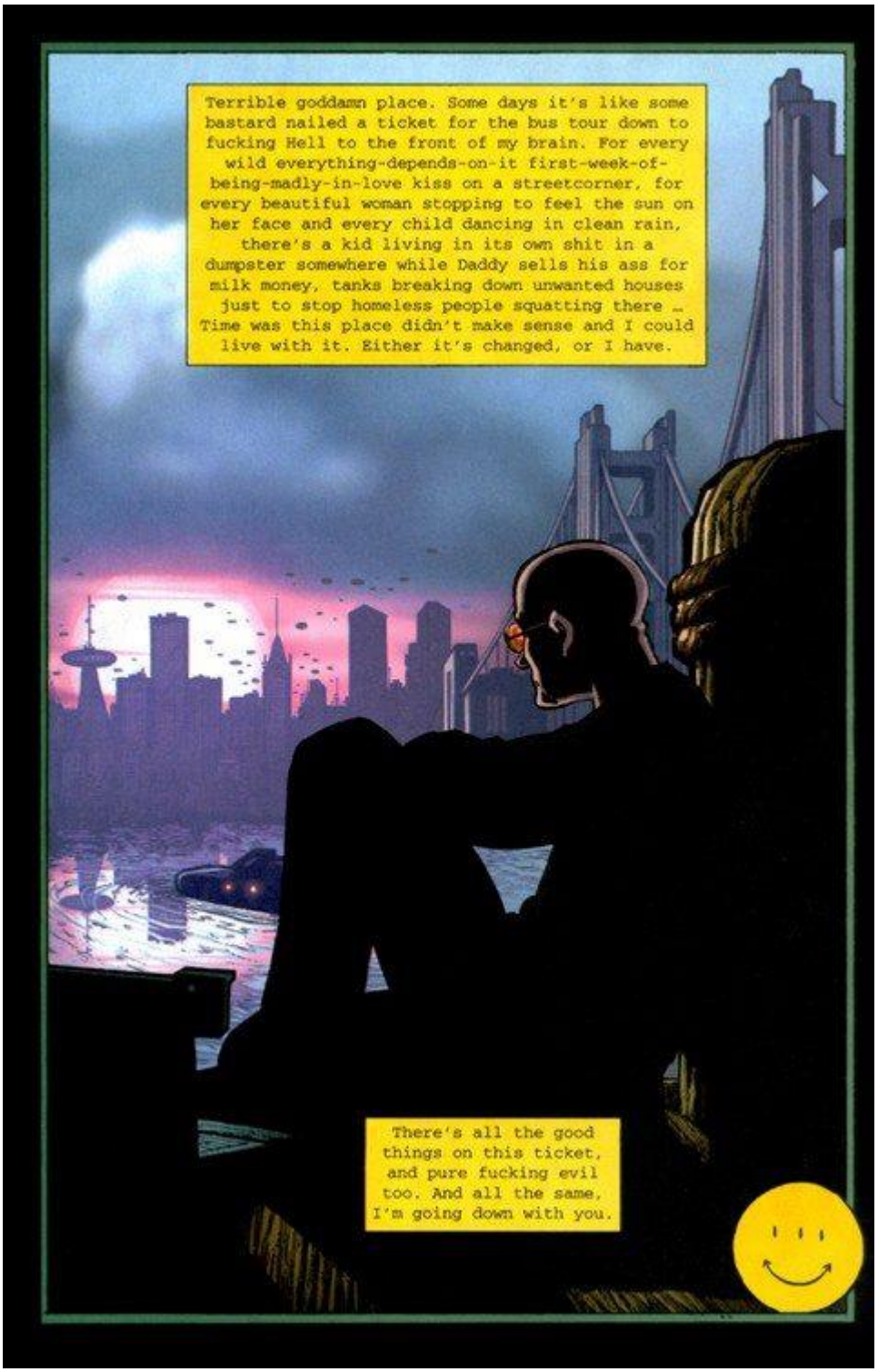
Fig 1.8. *Understanding Comics*, McCloud's theorization of 'closure' (29). © William Morrow, 1994.

Fig 1.9. *Transmetropolitan*, 'The City' rendered in its overwhelming baroque complexity (43).



© Vertigo, 1999.

Fig 2.1. *Transmetropolitan*, Spider Jerusalem's paradoxical dependence on The City (79).



© Vertigo, 2002.

Fig 2.2. Alan Moore's script for the first panel of the first page of *Watchmen* (121).

ALAN MOORE

WATCHMEN ISSUE 1.

"AT MIDNIGHT, ALL THE AGENTS .." (26 PAGES)

PAGE 1.

(PANEL) 1.

ALRIGHT. I'M PYSCHED UP, I'VE GOT BLOOD UP TO MY ELBOWS, VEINS IN MY TEETH AND MY HELMET AND KNEEPADS SECURELY FASTENED. LET'S GET OUT THERE AND MAKE TROUBLE! THIS FIRST PAGE IS A SERIES OF VERTICAL JUMPS THAT TAKE US UP IN A STRAIGHT PROGRESSION FROM A MINUTE AND MICROSCOPIC DETAILED VIEW OF THE GUTTERS OF NEW YORK UP TO A PANORAMIC SHOT LOOKING DOWN UPON THE ROOFTOPS OF THIS FAMILIAR AND YET CURIOUSLY ALTERED CITYSCAPE. IN THIS FIRST PANEL WE ARE LOOKING STRAIGHT DOWN AT A DRAIN OPENING IN A PERFECTLY ORDINARY GUTTER. TO THE RIGHT OF THE PICTURE THE ACTUAL OUTER WALL OF THE CURB DROPS DOWN AWAY FROM US LIKE A MINIATURE CLIFF. OVER MORE TOWARDS THE LEFT, DOWN AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PICTURE, WE CAN SEE THE OLD AND WORN METAL OF THE DRAIN COVER WITH SOLID DARKNESS VISIBLE BETWEEN ITS SLATS. UP AT THE TOP OF THE PICTURE WE CAN JUST SEE THE DIRTY GUTTER RUNNING DOWN TOWARDS THE MOUTH OF THE DRAIN AT THE BOTTOM. THERE ARE ONLY TWO ELEMENTS THAT SEPARATE THIS IMAGE FROM A STANDARD EVERDAY CLOSE-UP OF A DRAIN, AND THE FIRST OF THESE IS THE UNUSUAL AMOUNT OF BLOOD WHICH IS GUSHING DOWN THE AFOREMENTIONED APERTURE IN THE FIRST PICTURE. LIQUID FINGERS OF BLOOD, THICK AND BRILLIANT SCARLET, DRIBBLE DOWN THE WALL OF THE CURB OVER TO THE RIGHT.. GARISH STREAKS OF BRILLIANT RED AGAINST THE MUTED CONCRETE-GRAY OF THE STONE THAT THEY TRICKLE DOWN ACROSS. THE GUTTER IS SIMILARLY FULL OF BLOOD, GURGLING HAPPILY TOWARDS THE DRAIN WHERE IT SPILLS OUT OVER THE METAL DRAIN COVERING AND DRIPS DOWN AS TINY GLINTING BEADS INTO THE DARKNESS BENEATH. THE SECOND ITEM OF REMARK IS A 1" DIAMETER SMILEY BADGE, COLORED A VIVID SUNSHINE YELLOW AS IT LAYS THERE IN THE GUTTER SMILING UP AT US AGAINST A BACKGROUND OF LURID BLOOD RED. IT HAS SOMEHOW LODGED IN THE GUTTER SO THAT IT WON'T GO DOWN THE DRAIN, AND SIMPLY REMAINS STUCK THERE, STARING UP AT US WITH ITS JARRINGLY INANE EXPRESSION. A SMALL SPLASH OF CRIMSON STAINS THE FRONT OF THE BADGE. A SINGLE TINY SPATTER ACROSS ONE BLACK CARTOON EYE OF THE FACE ON THE BADGE. THAT'S BASICALLY THE WHOLE OPENING IMAGE, UNLESS YOU WANT TO STICK A CANDY WRAPPER THAT'S ABOUT TO FLOAT DOWN THE DRAIN, IN WHICH CASE WE HAVE A PACKET OF MELTDOWNS, WHICH ARE LIKE TREETS (ENGLISH) OR M&M's (AMERICAN) ONLY WITH LITTLE BRIGHTLY COLORED ATOMIC SYMBOLS ON THE WRAPPING. ONLY INCLUDE CANDY WRAPPING IF IT DOESN'T DETRACT FROM THE SIMPLICITY OF THE IMAGE WITH THE GUTTER, THE BLOOD AND THE BADGE, THOUGH, BECAUSE THIS IMAGE IS PRETTY IMPORTANT. IT GIVES US THE BLOOD SPATTERED SMILEY-BADGE, WHICH IS A PRETTY WORKABLE SYMBOL OF THE MYSTERY OF THE COMEDIAN'S MURDER WHICH RUNS THROUGH THE ENTIRE SERIES, AND IT ALSO GIVES US A FAINT SUBLIMINAL PREDICTION OF THE ENDING WITH IT'S IMAGE OF THE GUTTERS OF NEW YORK AWASH WITH BLOOD. ANYWAY, SEE WHAT YOU THINK AND LEAVE OUT THINGS LIKE THE SWEET WRAPPER IF YOU THINK THEY'RE EVEN SLIGHTLY DISTRACTING. WE'LL HAVE PLENTY OF TIME TO GET ALL OUR CUTE BRAND NAMES IN LATER ON IN THE SERIES. THE ACTUAL TEXT UPON THIS FIRST PAGE IS ALL TAKEN FROM RORSCHACH'S JOURNAL, WHICH WILL BE A MORE-OR-LESS CONTINUING FEATURE OF THE NARRATIVE THROUGHOUT THE SERIES. I MENTION THIS IN CASE YOU THINK IT MIGHT BE NICE TO VISUALLY DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN RORSCHACH'S JOURNAL AND ANY OTHER CAPTION BOXES THAT MIGHT OCCUR BY GIVING IT A SPECIFIC COLOR A SPECIFIC SHAPE OR LETTERING STYLE OR SOMETHING. I SUPPOSE IT'D BE NICE IF WE COULD ACTUALLY GET OVER SOME OF THE CHARACTER OF RORSCHACH HIMSELF BY THE WAY HIS JOURNAL IS WRITTEN, ALTHOUGH I SUPPOSE A SUITABLY WARPED-LOOKING STYLE OF HAND WRITING MIGHT BE OFF-PUTTINGLY DIFFICULT TO READ OR TIME CONSUMING AND DIFFICULT TO MAINTAIN. MAYBE YOU COULD SUGGEST A SORT OF SCRUFFINESS WITHOUT GETTING TOO ELABORATE, THOUGH. PERHAPS A MORE RAGGED EDGE OR A FAINT SPATTERING OF MESSY INK BLOTS IN THE BOXES HERE AND THERE AS IF THEY'D BEEN LETTERED BY A PEN WITH A SPLIT NIB OR SOMETHING. ANYWAY. THE OPTIONS ARE THERE, SO JUST DO WHAT YOU WANT. IN FACT, IF YOUR ANXIOUS TO SEE ANYTHING THAT EVEN SMACKS OF VISUAL FLUMMERY THEN PLEASE FEEL FREE TO MAKE RORSCHACH'S BOXES THE SAME AS EVERYONE ELSES AND RELY UPON THE TEXT IN THEM TO SET THEM APART FROM OTHER NARRATIVE WITHOUT IMPOSING ANY VISUAL GIMMICKS NEEDLESSLY. OKAY. THAT'S THE PRE-AMBLE OUT OF THE WAY. SO GIVE IT ALL YOU'VE GOT AND LETS SEE SOME GOOD DRAIN ART HERE.

CAP.: RORSCHACH'S JOURNAL. OCTOBER 12th, 1985 :

CAP.: "dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face.

© Alan Moore, 1986.

Fig. 2.3. Excerpt from Grant Morrison's script for *The Invisibles* #1 (122).

14. INTERIOR. COUNCIL FLAT. NIGHT.
A TV is showing news footage of a protest camp which has been set up in a woodland.

NEWSREADER (V.O): The news of Peter Barclay's murder had a different reception tonight in the 'Green Nation' protest camp. The camp, set up to oppose the building of the Ladyville road route through an area of historic woodland, has been registered as a so-called 'Free State' but protesters may still face prosecution under the Criminal Justice Act if they continue to obstruct the new motorway.

15. EXTERIOR. GREEN NATION CAMP. DAY.
Lots of young crusties, in heavy pullovers and tatty combat jackets - Earth First campaigner types. Some older New Age characters. Ex-Ban the Bombers. Carved totem poles. Huts. A fire (the camp, or 'Free State' has been set up in this woodland area to protest against and hopefully halt, a road-building project. The depiction here is based on the 'Pollok Free State' protest against the construction of the M77 link through Pollok Estate in Glasgow), there's a big significant looking oak tree somewhere in shot. Policemen stand around, looking wary. The leader of the protesters - MICHAEL WARREN - is talking. He has wild-looking thick hair and a beard. Around 27, 28, articulate with an accent which is man-of-the-people Northern.
WARREN: Peter Barclay wasn't our enemy. I'd be lying if I said I liked him and I'm certainly no big fan of the road he was building but right now, I'm sorry for his family.

16. INT. COUNCIL FLAT. NIGHT.
We're watching telly again and here's Warren talking. His name and the words 'Protest Camp Organiser' are on screen but everything else is subtly different. The real Michael Warren whom we just saw has now been replaced by a digitally-detourned propaganda image. Warren's words and image have been electronically doctored. His voice has been slightly slowed down and flattened out to give it the faintest slurred brutishness and lack of emotional tone. He seems slightly hesitant and unconfident. His words are a cut-up of various things he's said, seamlessly edited to make him sound heartless. His insistence that his protest is peaceful has been omitted. He's been made to blink too fast and looks slightly shifty. Subliminals - red field with white death's head are flashed on the perimeter of awareness.

WARREN: I'd be lying if I said I was sorry to hear the news about Peter Barclay. I'm sorry for his family but if this latest development helps slow down or put a halt to

© Grant Morrison, 2003.

Fig. 2.4. Chris Claremont's script for *Solo Avengers* #14*, She-Hulk: Court Costs*, as published by Alan Davis at http://www.alandavis-comicart.com/scripts.html (122).

SOLO AVENGERS / SHE-HULK / INVENTORY

NEED REFS FOR SUPREME COURT URGENT

COURT COSTS (11 PAGES)

Short and sweet.

It's the day of Jennifer Walters' admission to plead before the Supreme Court of the United States (big moment in any lawyer's life) and she's more nervous than a skittish cat. Seven-foot-six, with heroic physique and emerald skin, all dressed up in a stylishly elegant -- but appropriately conservative -- suit, drawing all manner of (proper and improper stares) as she waits for her case to be called. She'd rather fight super-villains with the Avengers any day.

Moment comes, and she's escorted forward to the podium, center-stage before the long bench and the eight male, one female, Justices. The accept her credentials (formal ceremony) and she starts to present her case. . .

. . .when a small, unassuming nebbish of a Fed sidles up beside her and in a most annoying way asks her to step outside. This interruption, she does not need. What's the problem? Justices fidget. Jennifer's making a poor impression. She's needed as She-Hulk. Mucho exasperation. Jen apologetically excuses herself, follows the grateful nebbish out of the courtroom, explains that she needs somewhere to change (carelessly -- because of nerves / stagefright -- she forgot to wear her costume under her suit, dumb dumb dumb.) Best nebbish can manage is an old style phone booth (wood to chest height, with frosted glass windows above.) Jennifer is not amused. Guard, assigned to keep the crowd at a discrete distance while she changes, indulges in some gawking of his own. Glare from our green gal prompts an immediate shift in his concentration to a more appropriate venue (what the hell are you staring at?!)

In costume, Jen strides out of the court to behold Titania wreaking havoc in the immediate vicinity. So absorbed is the villainess in her villainy that she fails to notice Jen's approach until She-Hulk taps her on the shoulder. Titania turns, and Jen uncorks a terrific punch that sends

© Chris Claremont and Alan Davis, 1989.

Fig. 2.5. First page, full-page panel from *Solo Avengers* #14*, She-Hulk: Court Costs* (122).

© Marvel, 1989.

Fig. 2.6. *Doktor Sleepless*, the protagonist with the iconography of a villain (150).

© Avatar, 2008.

Fig 3.1. *Killing Joke*, Batman and Commissioner Gordon pass Two-Face on the way to interrogate The Joker. The vertical bar divides the two halves of Dent's face, a recurring motif (160).

© DC, 2008.

Fig. 3.2. *Killing Joke*, The Joker plays cards. Rotational symmetry and vertical division (160).

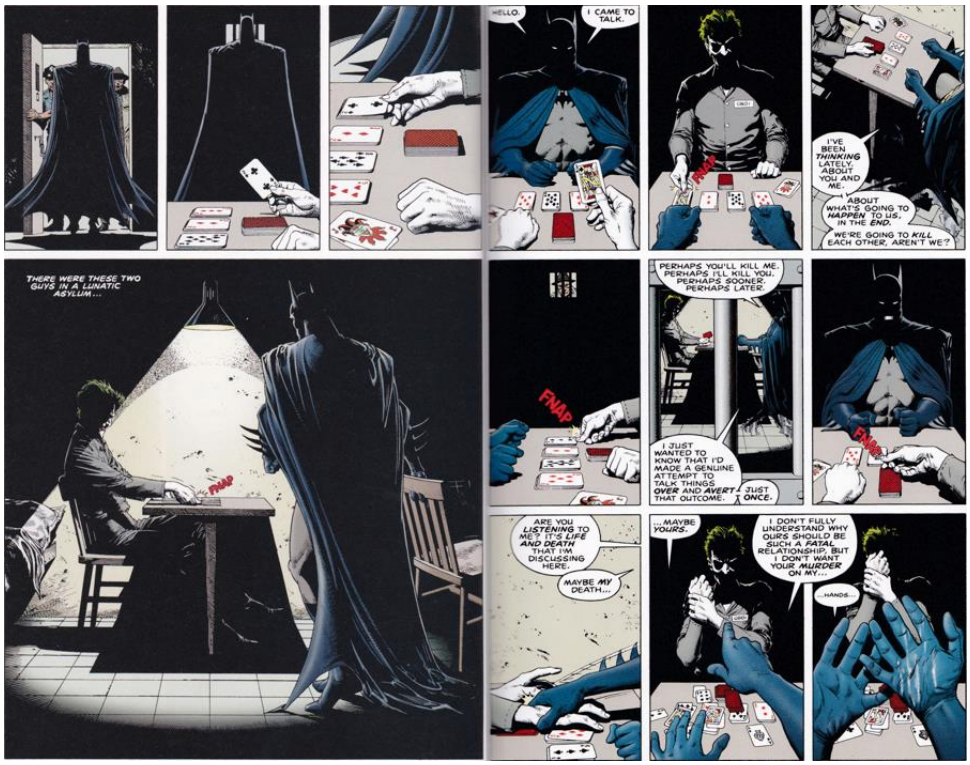


Fig. 3.3. *Killing Joke*, both Batman and The Joker engage in the showing of pictures. Faces split into two halves from Gordon's perspective by vertical dividing lines (161). Both © DC, 2008.

Fig 3.4. *Killing Joke*, the final (somewhat controversial) page. The collapse of the Batman/Joker binary signified by the disappearance of the vertical dividing line (163).

© DC, 2008.

Fig. 3.5. *Supergod*, the face of Morrigan Lugus as the face of empire (173).

© Avatar, 2011.

Fig. 3.6. *Ministry of Space*, the albedo of the cockpit glass initially obscures Lucy's skin colour (190).

© Image, 2004.

Fig. 3.7. *Ministry of Space*, the final page reveal of the true legacy of continued British imperial power (190).

© Image, 2004.

Fig. 4.1. *SVK*, a page as it normally appears, and the same page under UV light, revealing the secret dialogue (247).

© BERG, 2011.

Fig. 4.2. *Tree of Codes*, whose sentences run across dozens of pages (253).

© Visual Editions, 2010.