



Which side are you on?

The worlds of Grant Morrison

Workshop: Thursday 19 December

Roundtable: Friday 20 December

2013

Department of English

0. Introduction and acknowledgements

This booklet contains the abstracts of the papers that will be presented at the workshop ‘Which side are you on? The worlds of Grant Morrison,’ held at the Department of English, Stockholm University, on the 19th and 20th of December, 2013. The 9 abstracts cover some, but certainly not all, of the themes and ideas found in Morrison’s vast body of work. This comes as no surprise, when one considers his prolific output. In his decades-long career, Morrison has created and/or worked on dozens of series, belonging to what could be called the ‘mainstream’ side of comics (*X-Men*, *Superman*), the ‘alternative’ side (*Zenith*, *The Invisibles*), and more or less anything in between (*Vimanarama*, *Doom Patrol*). Therefore, it is only natural that our workshop offered some prolegomena towards a growing line of research on the Morrisonian opus.

As it befits all workshops and collective works, this workshop and booklet would have not been possible without the support of our colleagues and the enthusiastic participation of our convenors. In particular, we wish to thank our head of department, for the extremely helpful financial support and her enthusiasm. *Prima inter pares*. We also wish to thank our other *pares*, as we felt that excitement that our work generated was a constant source of inspiration. Each of us felt an extra boost of confidence, each time a colleague would praise our workshop and commitment to such a challenging task. We thought that, in this case, the Scandinavian proverb *ingen nämnd och ingen glömd* perfectly fits the mood of this introduction, so we decided not to worry too much about making names (and surnames), and offer overarching thanks and virtual hugs to everyone.

Organized by
Francesco-Alessio Ursini, Adnan Mahmutovic, & Frank Bramlett

1. A rubble of dislocated fragments:

The fractured quality to the comic narrativized in the work of Grant Morrison

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'Can't they see I'm breaking in a thousand places?'

— *Arkham Asylum*

There is a fractured quality to the comic book, given the division of its pages into discrete panels and balloons; and it is by means of this fractured quality that there is a unique potential to produce an effect of decomposition, via an emphasis on dislocated fragments on the comic page. This potential is one that is illustrated in the comics of Grant Morrison, as the writer's characters rupture into pieces that cannot be synthesized. In works including *Zenith* (1987-1992), *Animal Man* (1988-1990), *Arkham Asylum* (1989), *Doom Patrol* (1989-1993), *Kid Eternity* (1991), *The Invisibles* (1994-2000), *Flex Mentallo* (1996), *The Filth* (2002-2003) and *Vimanarama* (2005), the fractured quality of the comic is narrativized as characters fracture into parts. With reference to the aforementioned works, in this paper I will identify the potential, in the comic, to illustrate a fractured quality to the comic book character, and in doing so, will demonstrate the following aspects to Morrison's work: an emphasis on discontinuous and unsynthesizable panels, as characters are pictured as disjointed pieces strewn across the comic page; an emphasis on splintered time, just as it is manifest on the pages of a comic, as characters confront themselves in adjacent panels as slices in time; an emphasis on fractured panels as shattered mirror images, and a consequential failure of completeness and consistency. To provide a context for this fracturing, as it can be illustrated on the pages of a comic, I will draw upon Jacques Lacan's theorization of the imaginary dimension to completeness and consistency, a dimension that is subject to decomposition in Morrison's work, as his characters dissolve into a rubble of dislocated fragments.

2. Eternal Superteens and Mutant Spermatozoa: Morrison and the Comic as *Porneau*

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'Who needs girls when you've got comics?' asks Wally Sage, the hallucinating protagonist of *Flex Mentallo*, and one of Grant Morrison's many author-avatars. Here he vocalises a neurosis that has been associated with comics writing and reading at least since the advent of Fredric Wertham: that comic books are titillating and pseudo-pornographic; and further, a crutch for for 'lonely wankers' otherwise incapable of seeking out romantic and erotic connections. This paper examines the ways in which Morrison's works negotiate and challenge the links between comics and pornography, and present judgements upon creators and consumers of the same.

Beginning with an examination of the recurring character-type of the consumer/fanboy, as embodied by those such as Wally Sage, Greg Feely (*The Filth*) and The Beard Hunter (*Doom Patrol*), the paper asks if reading comics can ever become more than a voyeuristic act. The following section deals with Morrison's attempts, through such figures as The Bulleteer (*Seven Soldiers*) and Catwoman (*Batman Inc*), to cultivate female subjectivity and respond to the comics genre's relentless promotion of the male gaze.

The paper closes with a reading of the author's most direct commentary on the two genres through the figure of pornographer-turned-supervillain Tex Porneau in *The Filth* #5. I here argue that the strongest link Morrison perceives between comics and pornography is in the potential for both genres to become expressions of an urge that is violent and destructive; *eros* corrupted into *thanatos*. In concluding, I consider whether Morrison offers answers to the problems he underscores, and the author's ideas for how comics might be rescued from the top shelf.

3. Apocalypse Not: Where next for the Morrison Multiverse?

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(or, Siegel, Shuster. Kane...Moore. Morrison...?)

'It's all about the dominant fucking paradigm, Shadow. Nothing else is important.'
—Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*

The publication in 1929 of *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* marked the effective beginning of Joycean studies; this workshop marks a similar phase in the absorption of Grant Morrison into the academic domain. In this paper I wish to argue that while such a process is inevitable and in many ways desirable, it should not be seen as the sole path down which study of Morrison could and should lead. My aim here is to lay out three possible directions of future travel (Morrison and Comics Studies, the Author as Cultural Phenomenon, and a study of Morrison's place in MIME-NET), and to argue that any attempt to arrive at a 'meaning of Morrison' must inevitably take account of his wilfully polymathic worldview. As someone who works in the apparently disparate fields of literary/cultural studies and cybersecurity, and who objects vigorously to the tunnel vision and silo thinking traditional academia has privileged, Morrison's work is of huge value; inherently and inescapably multidisciplinary and outward-looking, it serves as the entry point (or Zolaesque springboard) to an immensely wider potential span of intellectual endeavour. Memeticist, magician, and mythomane, his work blasts the doors of perception off their hinges, and while 2012 did *not* mark apocalypse and the birth of a new glam-rock, acid house Jerusalem, his work may yet lead to some entertaining cognitive catastrophes.

4. 'Here Comes Tomorrow': The Politics of Utopianism in Grant Morrison's *New X-Men*

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Terry Eagleton has suggested that all radical politics is 'other-worldly', not 'up there' but 'beyond here' (*The Task of the Critic*, 264). Whether it be in Plato's *Republic* or St Thomas More's *Utopia*, the utopian thinker analyses the present and identifies its deficiencies. He or she assesses the state of current social existence, viewing the present as a problem to be solved, and imagines a social transformation. Revolution, when it comes, is a sudden and terrible rupture in history, and the moment of social transformation involves personal conversion. Such rupture and conversion can be found mirrored in the striking transition from *X-Men* #113 to *New X-Men* #114. The X-Men, at one stroke, are transformed from passive responders, 'firefighters' and 'survivalists', to agents of social revolution and political transformation, the bold and busy architects of a future utopia. But in the series' final story arc, 'Here Comes Tomorrow', that future is shockingly revealed to be a dystopian, wasteland nightmare, and the only remaining recourse to the surviving X-Men is to cancel tomorrow. In this paper, I will explore how Morrison's *New X-Men* ambitiously tackles major interrelated ethical and political questions, concerning freedom and justice, truth and autonomy, in the context of various characters' different and competing attempts to engineer a new world. My central question concerns the nature of *New X-Men* as political act: should it be judged a utopian work, or does it adopt a critical and debunking stance towards the very project of utopia? Finally, I will consider how the historical moment of *New X-Men*'s composition and publication (May 2001–March 2004) coincides with the Age of Terror, and how the events and aftermath of 9/11, which pitted Western postmodern culture against an opposite culture of foundations and unquestioning faith, all impacted upon its treatment of the politics of utopianism.

5. World of My Own: Joe the Barbarian and the Cathartic Power of Fantasy

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Fantasy has often been cited as a method of examining, critiquing, or dealing with the real world. Numerous tales, such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Little Nemo* (to name just a few) feature a child leaving their mundane realities in favor of a fantastic otherworld. Though they always return home (often after some self-discovery and personal growth), readers cannot help but feel that the character was much better off in the otherworld than in reality. Indeed, these works are often described as 'escapist,' a term that was reviled by writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, but nonetheless persists to this day. Morrison's *Joe the Barbarian* falls neatly in line with this tradition, but does so in what I feel is a unique way: rather than becoming burdened with the nagging question of 'was it real or wasn't it?' that often plagues similar works, Morrison's creation and treatment of the hallucinatory world of Hypogea makes that question irrelevant. I will further argue that, through *Joe the Barbarian*, Grant Morrison lays to rest the derogatory notion of the term 'escapist.' Through the hallucinations that he experiences on the edge of his diabetic coma, Joe does not escape reality, but rather frames it in a light that allows him to cope with and ultimately accept the world in which he lives. By examining analyses of the genre of fantasy, as well as discussions of psychology and the nature of hallucinations, I intend to show that, through Joe's near-death experience, Morrison shows that labeling such fantasies as 'escapist' does not afford the tales the worth that they deserve, as escaping into one's own world can be cathartic, therapeutic, and ultimately regenerative.

6. 'The image rules the world': Hallucinatory Storytelling in *The Invisibles*

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The Invisibles is known for its wildly hallucinatory storylines and psychedelic subject matter. The story itself is presented in a form that is pleasantly disorienting and shows the characters struggling with questions concerning experience and representation that are not unlike the ones Morrison's reader must endure. In many regards, the story follows the conventions of previous drug literature, but the extent to which Morrison integrates these into his plot is exceptional. One of the more persistent tropes of the genre involves the reversal of linguistic description and experience. Simply put, the trope consists of the inversion of the rules of representation—linguistic signs become experiences or objects in the world instead of representations of the previously existing experiences of the subject. The disorienting trope, used in drug literature from Thomas De Quincey to William Burroughs, naturally acquires novel qualities through actual images in comics. As a visual medium, comics offer new possibilities for representing hallucinatory experiences and the representation of consciousness in fiction.

A second related feature that plays an important role in the story and bridges form and content is derived from the work of the psychedelic guru Terence McKenna. McKenna's bizarre fractal theory of time can be used to explain the fractured structure of the story where various events appear to take place all at once and at distinct points in time. In this temporal schema memories may originate from the future and language acts as the binding agent for time itself. The form of comics enables a narrative structure where these distinct points of time can be juxtaposed in sequence, demanding (and at times challenging) the reader's cognitive agency in wanting to create a coherent narrative structure out of a string of separate sequential time points.

7. Morrison's *Object Filth*

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The Filth, written by Grant Morrison, with art by Chris Weston and Gary Erskine, is about how 'the shabbiest, shittiest life you can live,' one defined and limited by shame, guilt, fear, hatred, and loneliness, 'can be redeemed into glory by the power of imagination,' says Morrison.

The comic's hero, seemingly, is Ned Slade, a high-ranking officer of the 'supercleansing' operation The Hand, who maintains an off-duty persona as Greg Feely, a single man addicted to pornography and accused of paedophilia. This paper reads the relationship between Slade and Feely in terms of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, as Greg is not a part of Ned, or not a part of what Kristeva terms the 'clean and proper' self, the 'I' that is constituted by an act of expulsion which establishes the border between inside and outside, between self and other. This process of abjection that Kristeva identifies as key to subject formation is also evident at the societal level, and is key also to the actions of The Hand, which aims to maintain a healthy social order exactly by excluding filth.

In *The Filth*, therefore, as the name suggests, Morrison places the reader in a world where they can no longer tell if they are on the side of the police or of the perverted. To read *The Filth* is to know abjection because, as Kristeva puts it, it is 'not lack of cleanliness or health that cause abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.' Exposing his readers in this way to the abject, Morrison subjects them to what he calls a 'healing inoculation of grime.' By requiring them to comprehend incompatible narrative possibilities which destabilise categories of hero and villain, male and female, or reality and fantasy, he seeks to provoke that leap of the imagination into glory.

8. The Reality of the Language of Thought of the *Invisibles*

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In Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles*, language and its relation with thought and reality represent a key plot device (Morrison *et al.* 1999). An implicit 'universal language' allows characters to access and use it to change how other characters cognize reality, by taking control of the victim's thoughts and actions. One case involves one of the Invisibles' cells employing this strategy to 'debug' Boy, one of the central characters belonging to King Mob's cell. A second case involves the breaking of gov'nor psyche, another member of the Invisibles. In these and other cases, the imperative use of this universal language seems to carry two narrative functions. A first is that of a 'mere' plot device; a second is that of source of meta-reflection on the tripartite relation among reality, truth and fiction within the fictional world itself.

The goal of this paper is to discuss more in detail this relation, and suggest that there are striking parallels between the fictional world of *The Invisibles* and our non-fictional world, with respect this tri-partite relation. For this purpose, I will offer an exaptation of classical and modern models of the architecture of mind and language (Fodor 1975; Rumerlhart & McClelland 1986; Metzinger 2003), as possible models for the imperative universal language. I will then discuss how this imperative language can be seen to operate on two levels: as a 'pure' control language and as device to induce *belief delusions* in the psyche of characters (Metzinger 2003: chs. 4–8). I will suggest that, if we take current models of mind, cognition and language as our starting point, it is possible to also offer an account of this tri-partite relation in *The Invisibles* world, and compare this relation to non-fictional accounts at our disposal.

9. Morrison, Magic, and Visualizing the Word: Text as Image in *Vimanarama*

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Magical transformation is represented within *Vimanarama* via the use of text to represent physical objects – in particular, characters undergoing magical experiences. In this talk I will examine this usage of text from the perspective of Kendall Walton's account of the nature of fiction. Walton argues that fictions are akin to games of make-believe, whereby we are (in typical fictions) prescribed to make-believe those claims put forth in the fiction. In addition, with pictorial representations, we are not only meant to pretend that what is depicted is in fact the case, but are also meant to imagine that these events appear to us as they appear in the representation. While this account works well for 'ordinary' comics, the account is complicated in instances, such as *Vimanarama*, where text plays two roles – both descriptive and as a part of the pictorial content of the panel image. After determining what, exactly, we are meant to imagine when interpreting these text/pictorial magical, the conclusions of this analysis will be compared to Morrison's own writings on magic, including his essay *Pop Mag!c*.



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