

Roundtable Discussion

Which side are you on? The worlds of Grant Morrison

Thursday and Friday, 19 and 20 December 2013

Stockholm University

The roundtable took place on Friday 20 December 2013. It was organized by Francesco-Alessio Ursini, Adnan Mahmutovic, and Frank Bramlett. The organizers wish to thank the Department of English at Stockholm University for supporting the conference.

In the following excerpt from the roundtable, participants explain what their favorite Grant Morrison work is. The editors have tried to keep the oral nature of the discussion as much as possible in the transcription. This part of the roundtable lasted roughly 22 minutes.

The participants are: Kate Roddy, Keith Scott, Darragh Greene, Nick Galante, Tommi Kakko, David Coughlan, and Roy Cook. Although she gave a presentation on Thursday via Skype, Clare Pitkethly was unable to participate in the roundtable.

- Francesco First good morning. And thank you for being here and for being on time. And thank you in general for coming to our workshop. Again it's been a pleasure yesterday to have all of us here talking about Grant Morrison like women and men possessed. It was a pleasure to have so much energy in the room and so much intellectual interaction on Morrison's works.
- Today we are going to have a roundtable, in which we will try to flesh out some of the ideas that we brought to the discussion yesterday. And possibly we could actually discuss other ideas that would come out as well. I would like to ask my organizers if they would actually like to propose some topics to have the ball rolling because I do, but I don't want to have the fictional suit, or be the authoritative chair that decides everything.
- Adnan I thought that we would start with Roy's question: What's your favorite Grant Morrison book?
- Roy I think it was actually Kate's question. It came up in an earlier conversation but I brought it up at dinner last night.
- Adnan It was Kate's question.
- Kate Oh okay. What was I saying yesterday that was profound? I think *Animal Man*. And I was talking about this with Darragh a while back about how *Animal Man* is his most complete work. But maybe other people disagree with that. I think that although *The Invisibles* has these flashes of genius as we were just talking about, there's problems with it, there's inconsistency, or he's sort of writing it on the fly. Whereas *Animal Man* has this kind of vision that completes it.
[hands microphone to Darragh]

Darragh Clockwise. [roundtable laughs]

Kate [passes mic to David] Left to dealer. [roundtable laughs] You have the talking stick.

David Should I say what I said last night? My favorite for very very sentimental reasons is the *Zoids* strip from *Spider-Man and Zoids*. I got my first American comic in 1981. It was a *Peter Parker: Spider-Man* book. And then, a couple of years later, I saw *Spider-Man and Zoids* for sale in a shop. And as I said, I bought it for the *Spider-Man*. And Grant Morrison was writing *Zoids*. My first exposure to Grant Morrison. I also bought quite a lot of *Zoids*. And that was my entry into comic books.

From that point on, I was kind of hooked. So that was my first exposure to comics proper, the beginning of my love of Spider-Man, and also Grant Morrison. So for sentimental reasons that would be my choice. And it's not actually that bad. It's not the kind of thing you go back and re-read, but there were some memorable moments in it actually. He steals quite a lot from *Alien* and *Terminator*. One of the crew members turns out to be an android or robot and just like *Alien*. There's a very good issue where one of the Zoids—and they're mechanical fighting monsters—fights his way to Zoid heaven, because he's tired of fighting and he just wants to enjoy peace and quiet.

Kate What's Zoid heaven like?

David That's the problem. It turned out to be an eternal battle where you can't die or be killed.

Kate Oh, like *Valhalla*. Where it's endless violence.

Keith Asgard!

David There's this guy who wanted peace and quiet and ends up being embroiled in eternal battle. It's very very touching for a very brief story about a mechanical monster.

Kate So what would Zoid hell be, then? Or is there not one?

David Yeah, he should have gone to Zoid hell. Yeah.

Adnan Yeah, exactly. Zoid hell. Peace. Peace.

David I wonder what that says about Morrison's ideas of heaven and hell in general.

Frank I haven't read a lot of Grant Morrison. My complete Morrison library is right

here on the table in front of you. I think, though, that I have a special place in my heart for *All-Star Superman*. Partly because I have had very little love for a lot of Superman stories in the past. And this was the first Superman story that I felt was something that I could connect with in a substantial way. And I also believe that Frank Quitely's art is phenomenal. Part of the reading experience for me is how good Quitely's art is.

Adnan I want to repeat what you said because when we talked about this the other day, I had the exact same experience with Superman. It's not a character that I like a lot. But this is the one I do like. But that wouldn't be my favorite. I would say *Animal Man*, for similar reasons that Kate brought up. There's both this naiveté and seriousness in the series, and it's both within the genre and breaking the genres and all that. I like it a lot, these weird characters and all that stuff. What he's trying to do is trying really hard and you can tell that he's trying really hard, maybe not always successfully but there's something about that. There's a kind of creative energy that you feel is at work. So I like that.

Francesco I'm actually undecided. I need to say that I'm not into superheroes because of several reasons. I don't like too much the general idea of the superhero for so many reasons that would lead us too far afield. I think that it is actually tied between *The Invisibles* and *The Filth*. And I really like Greg Feely because it's.... It feels like he's a normal guy leading a normal life and it gives me a sense of decorum even if it is shown that he does things that could be considered filthy. In practice it looks like the only normal person in the whole story. There's a sense of, there's a way in which Morrison portrays Greg Feely that is really nice, especially when compared to all the other characters, which makes me think that at some point Grant probably was a kind of bachelor, who stayed at home to work thirteen hours a day, as he always says, looking at porn, with a cat, and so on.

I also liked *The Invisibles* for very personal reasons because.... Let's put it this way. At some point, I started studying the things he talks about and I talked about in my talk: the mind control things and the weird reality and so on. And I felt, at that time my interests were converging into those topics, so I felt that there was in some sense the fiction was stimulating my real life interests. So I was feeling this kind of overlap between what I wanted to do here and what was portrayed in the books. It really stimulated me to keep going forward on things. At the same time, it is a spy story in a 60s or 70s style. Somehow I grew up with things like, not much James Bond but *The Hipcress File*—the good, let's say the good British stuff. So there was a lot of it in the comics; I really enjoyed it. So you need to picture an Italian teenager that could pick the references to Jason King and Michael Moorcock. Also, I enjoyed it because it was really a nerdy, geeky experience. I didn't feel ashamed about it in the least. For the other works, I don't know. But then it's Keith's turn.

Keith And unfortunately you've said exactly what I'm going to say. You are me! Stop it. [roundtable laughs]

All-Star Superman is the heart. It's the love letter to comics. It's... Superman is loving, caring Jesus who dies to redeem us all through the world of the imagination. It's his version of [*The Amazing Adventures of*] *Kavalier and Clay*. It's a perfect, integrated, self-contained work. But the one I love is *The Invisibles*. It's the one I read when it came out which got me back into comics. Because it was coming out at the same time as *Preacher*. It was just, whoa, dude. But *The Invisibles*, it's nerdy. It is adolescent in that centripetal enthusiasm. The joy of it is being an academic and reading what he's read. Then going beyond that to see what he should have read. Because all of his stuff about NLP, that leads to his interest in Deepak Choprah. But it plays with genre, it plays with ideas. It's messy, it's incoherent, it's baggy. The world didn't end in 2012.

Kate Is it a boy's book?

Keith Yes. I think possibly.... Talking about the gendering of texts. It's a boy's spy story. It's not just Bond or Jason King. It's *The Avengers*. I mean the proper *Avengers*. Bowler hats, leather boots. It's kinky, it's funny, it's stylish. It has got heart as well. It's got interesting things to say. He doesn't have an overall conclusion to it, and that's what makes it fun. Because it gives us something to do. *Invisibles* for me, *All-Star* for the heart. And *We3*, unless you find that too disturbing.

Tommi Okay it's another one for *The Invisibles*. I haven't read a lot of Morrison either. But I did.... When I was an undergraduate, I listened to McKenna's... Terence McKenna's talks on line, just for fun. His nasal voice going on about DMT and self-replicating machine elves that inhabit this weird place you get to when you just inhale enough of the smoke. And listening to that stuff and then finding *The Invisibles*, it's that same idiom in the work. McKenna said at some point that he was trying to do a kind of rock-n-roll philosophy thing, because he's an old hippy. He's doing some sort of Grateful Dead noodling with philosophical ideas. And I think there's a joy in that as Keith mentioned as well because.... It's philosophy that's not concerned with the truth that much, which is the thing that philosophers are worried about all the time, isn't it?

Roy Most of them. [roundtable laughs] Those who believe in truth.

Tommi It's unhinged from that. And you find the same language, the same imagery in *The Invisibles*, which gives you a nice place to dwell in because the structure of the story is such that it lulls you into this literary space which... It's trippy, which is what I think I'm trying to say, it's trippy. And of course it also has the drug literature thing in it as well. Most drug literature, the main character is the drug. Or speculative fiction. If we can just get the drugs right, everything will be fantastic. Plus I think that it's only in literature that we get the perfect

one. There's another question, whether comics are literature then. So yeah. *The Invisibles* it is for me.

Nick I think I have to go with *Arkham Asylum*. It was sort of, like David said, it was my first real exposure to Morrison. But beyond that I'm a sucker for a weird melding of stuff. I think *Arkham Asylum* is a very classic Batman text, but it's also got religious allegory with the harrowing of hell, and it's very psychological and twisted and messed up. It's got some great horror elements to it. It's a good haunted house story too, in the midst of everything else.

Kate [...] very comic booky.

Nick But I really like it and it works really well with the themes of *Arkham Asylum*.

Kate It's hard, I find.

Keith It's hard to read.

Kate I've taught it, but some people love the art work and then some people just go, 'I don't know what I'm looking at.'

Keith Where are the panels?

Kate What is this? Especially the way it does dialog. Dialog boxes. It's quite hard to see.

Keith The lettering is hideous.

Nick Yeah. It is very unusual. And that's probably one of the reasons that I really like it, is that it does so many different things but it does them really well.

Kate That version of the Joker with the Madonna boobs.

Nick He steals that....

Kate DC made him tone it down a bit. Yeah.

Roy Okay I'm going to mention two. This isn't quite my favorite but nobody else has mentioned it and I think it's worth mentioning, and that's *Doom Patrol*. [roundtable murmurs assent] And the way I look at *Doom Patrol*, one reason it may not have been mentioned, in terms of themes and ideas, it's almost a rough go at *The Invisibles*. A lot of what he's doing in *Doom Patrol*, he then gets to do in, and takes a little bit further, because *Doom Patrol* unlike *The Invisibles* is constrained by the fact that technically it's a part of...arguably technically it's a part of DC continuity. It's a DC version of *The X-Men*, weird

as it is. But *Doom Patrol* has some silly, playful, Dada, weird-ass stuff in it. Danny the Street, the painting that ate Paris. This wonderful—visually and story-wise—these wonderful things in it. It's brilliant.

But my absolute favorite is actually *Sebastian O*. Even though it's got some morally questionable things in it. I mean there are no sympathetic characters in there. This traces back to what David was saying. In middle-school and high-school, I collected *Spider-Man*. I was a Marvel kid. I collected comics; I had boxes of them. I went to college, and I was hanging out with all these punk rock kids, and there was this girl I was friends with who, by the same standards, she didn't read comics until *Sandman* came out. She read *Sandman*, and then she read everything that came out that had the word Vertigo on it. I was sitting in her apartment one day, and I picked up this weird looking comic, and it was the first issue of *Sebastian O*. I read it, and I read the rest of them. It really was my first exposure to non-superhero comics. It was my first exposure to all the weird, crazy, insane crap that people like Grant Morrison can do with comics. I think it's a really interesting comic, the proto-steam punk and the Oscar Wilde stuff in there. It's got all sorts of stuff smashed together. It's sort of Morrison at his mash-up best. I read it probably once a year at least. I just go back to that comic. And it's problematic in certain aspects, but it's just brilliant in others.

Darragh

Two words: *Spawn Escalation*. [roundtable laughs.] No. No. Exactly.

I think the first Morrison I read was *Kid Eternity*. I remember I really got into that, and I read it and reread it. But I haven't read it since the 90s, so I don't know what it would be like to return to it. But I at the time was fascinated by the heady material that was in it. And the art, of course, as well was wonderful too. So that was my first encounter with Morrison I'm pretty sure. But then in terms of favorite works, when I was an avid superhero reader, I really enjoyed his run on *JLA*. That for me was a kind of window into the DC Universe. Because at that point I had been a Marvel zombie. So that was my encounter with many DC superhero characters.

Then after that, I would say that *Animal Man* is a favorite work. I agree with Kate in terms of its being complete. I think when you read the last of Morrison's issues, you don't particularly feel inclined to carry on. Recently, I saw that Pete Milligan's continuation has been collected as *Animal Man* volume 4. I have no inclination to pick it up. I like Pete Milligan's work, I like his work, but I just don't feel the need. But then in terms of other favorites, I would say *New X-Men*. That was something I picked up from issue 114 on. I think in that case, what I enjoyed was seeing characters that I had made an investment in in the early 90s reinvented and freshened up. And I could see that he had done his homework in terms of reading Claremont and taking the best from Claremont, reconfiguring it intelligently and taking things forward. I enjoyed that.

But then if I had to say what my favorite work of Morrison's is, the one that I could take to the desert island, then it would be *All-Star Superman*. I think for me, what really makes Morrison shine is that collaboration with Frank Quitely. It's something special. It's their most perfect synergy to date, I think. So that's the one I take with me.

Keith *Zenith. Zenith.* The British Grant Morrison writing in *2000 AD*. Completely different form. It's weekly rather than monthly. And everything that's in these books is already in *Zenith*. It is still messy but there's a sensibility to it. There's a playing with pop culture. There's distinctively British comic book archetypes, which is powerful and effective and moving for someone who grew up with those archetypes. It's just great fun, the fact that you can't buy the damn book is a scandal.

Kate Is it a bit derivative, though, in terms of... It seems to me like that's the book where Morrison's going like, 'Look at all the romantics I've read.'

Keith There's a bit of it. But it has got one absolutely stunning moment, which is the guy who creates the meta-humans is cursed with aging backwards. It's the same as you get in one of the *Hyperion* books. The girl goes backward in time. And in the same issue you have his diary, and you see the language breaking down and decaying. It's a child writing. It's tremendously.... This is father figure speaking. [...] I'm too tired now. I don't care if they hit me. I'm just going to lie down and stop. That's it. Incredible stuff. It's not perfect, but even at that early stage, you've got [snaps fingers] that, 'I'm Grant Morrison, I can do eight million ideas in one page. I don't expect you to keep up. I expect you to have a go.' The generosity of imagination. Basically everything. Read everything Grant Morrison has ever done.

In the near future, Francesco, Adnan, and Frank will publish the rest of the roundtable discussion in a different venue.